

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #13—Parshat Shoftim 5761

"You shall appoint judges and police in all your settlements that God your Lord gives you for your tribes; and they should administer honest judgment."
(*Deuteronomy* 16:18)

So begins the Torah reading for this week, Shoftim, which is always read on the first Shabbat during the month of Elul. A close look at the weekly reading tells us that quite a bit of its laws are related to the judicial branch of Torah: laws of judges, witnesses, monetary matters, the laws of the king, and the laws of battle (for the Jews would ask permission from the Sanhedrin, the High Court, prior to going out to battle). I think it's interesting to know that though Rosh Hashanah is still four weeks away, we are already taking a close look at the judicial process. And, of course, there are several laws in this week's Torah reading which apply directly to the Holy Land. This too, has an intimate connection to Rosh Hashanah, since it recalls the Act of Creation in which the Holy Land, as the heritage of the Jews, plays a major role (as discussed in the first essay and mentioned several times since). What is not as well known, is that Elul, too, is intimately bound with the Holy Land, as we shall see.

Well, what does this mean to me? And what does this have to do with "our Land?" Since we're approaching the Days of Awe, when God sits upon His Throne of Judgment, it would be nice to try to understand a little of His system (despite the fact that, in its true essence, God's system of justice is totally unfathomable to the human mind). After all, with all the terrorist murders going on, aren't we even a bit curious about how the wicked are allowed to flourish while the righteous suffer? How is it that we Jews get blown up and nothing happens to the killers? Where's justice?

The Talmud itself struggles with this. None other than Moshe (Moses) asked, "Why is it that some tzaddikim (righteous people) have it good and other tzaddikim suffer? Why is it that some wicked people flourish and prosper, while other wicked people suffer" (*Berakhot 7a*)? This is based upon the teachings that God rewards His followers with blessing in this world and the next, while the wicked are to be punished for their evil deeds. Yet, we find that there are righteous who suffer while there are wicked people who prosper?

The answer is that even righteous people sometimes (or often enough) do things wrong which demand punishment. On the other hand, there are plenty of wicked people who also perform good deeds, and these good deeds must be rewarded. So what happens? God grants the wicked in this world prosperity and good health, rewarding them for their good deeds in this temporary world. After they pass away, they are held accountable for all their sins. The righteous pay for their wrongful deeds in this temporary world, which is why we see them suffer. In the Future, however, they receive their full reward. This is the gist of the concept of reward and punishment, of prosperity and suffering, of flourishing in this world as opposed to experiencing pain.

It still doesn't make too much sense. Too often we see good, decent people suffering extreme poverty or

terminal illnesses, which consume the person and devastate their families. What are we to say about the likes of such evil despots as Saddam Hussein and Yasir Arafat? Despite their evil, have they performed so many good deeds that they can live like kings while they inflict such terrible suffering, even upon their own people? True, they live in constant fear of assassination, so it's not exactly like they're in "Wonderland," but Alice, too, kept her distance from the Queen of Hearts and kept her head intact. And despots don't exactly worry about their mortgages, children's education, or spouse's clothing and household budget either.

So, "is there justice in this world?" If there is, "where is it?" How can we get a glimpse of what's taking place? And more importantly, what about "me?" Will "I" ever know peace? Will there really come a time when God's promise of peace in our Land actually take place? How do we internalize that knowledge so that we can overcome our frustrations and experience the hope of a bright future, a future promised to us by God Himself, one in total accord with His system of Justice?

It's a pretty tall order, and we'll try to put things in perspective. What I ask of all of you is to have patience and bear with me through several weeks of essays, because, as you can already see, it's going to take a bit of time to put all these ideas down in a coherent manner. What we must do first is mention the topics to be discussed: (1) Justice, reward and punishment (including some of the ARI's teachings about reincarnation), (2) the month of Elul, (3) Rosh HaShanah/Judgment Day, (4) Yishmael (i.e., the Arabs) and their claim to the Holy Land and (5) morality. It is important to understand that we won't have all the answers (we've got to leave something for Mashiach to do!), but we will get a fairly good perspective of the long exile we've endured - it's historical and spiritual influence - and how our longing for the Land, as well as its longing for us, is certainly very close to reaching its climax. To keep things in chronological order, we will begin with Creation, the Flood, God's promise of the Holy Land to Avraham at the time He made the covenant of circumcision and Yishmael's claim to the Land. Let us begin.

"There was a stone in the Holy of Holies known as the *Even SheTiyah* (the Foundation Stone). It was so-called because from it, *huShTat* (was drawn forth), the entire world" (*Yoma* 53b). Right from the beginning of Creation God chose the Land of Israel to be His Palace, the place where His Presence would be revealed. In fact, He began all of Creation from that point, so that it would be possible to find the sanctity of the Holy Land in all parts of Creation. Thus the central point of Creation is the Foundation Stone, which is situated in the holiest part of the Temple.

The Midrash teaches that King Solomon knew each of the veins that went forth from the Stone. Thus, as a "master agronomist," he knew which fruit or vegetable could be planted in the various soils, so that the Holy Land was able to produce even fruits which are not native to it (*Kohelet Rabbah* 2:5). No wonder then that right from the beginning of Creation, battle formations were drawn to conquer the Holy Land. Who would not want to rule over the source of everything in this world - those veins which contain gold, oil, diamonds and other precious stones, as well as all the soy (and tofu!) and the other produce we eat. Imagine being able to wield total control over the Chicago Commodities Market, or the oil slopes of Prudhoe Bay, the North Sea and the Arabian Gulf! So, as mentioned in [Essay #1](#), God declared the Creation to be His Act, to inform the world and its entire populace that He created the Land and it is His, and that He gave it to the Jewish Nation. The purpose of it all, as mentioned throughout the Bible, is for the Jews to build a Temple for God and to serve Him in the manner He prescribed.

It is important to remember that the Jewish Nation began with Avraham some 2000 years after Creation. Until then, all peoples were exposed to God in the manner He was willing to be revealed to them.

However, very few people until Avraham took God up on His offer. Instead, they went the other way, serving idolatries and themselves in the most immoral ways possible, until God brought the Great Flood and destroyed them.

Interestingly enough, though the Flood wiped out mankind, save for Noah and his children, it had no effect on the Holy Land. As the Talmud teaches, "the Flood did not enter the Holy Land" (although some drops did get through; *Zevachim* 113a). (For those who have difficulty visualizing how the Flood could cover even the tallest mountains around the entire globe and yet not spill over into the Holy Land, simply think of the splitting of the Red Sea. Water, as everything else in nature, is controlled by God.) As is his wont, Rebbe Nachman speaks of the Flood, the *maBuL*, as *BiLbulim* - the doubts, confusions and frustrations faced by each person who wants to enter the service of God. The Flood not entering the Holy Land alludes to the person finding refuge from the various "floodwaters of the mind" through the sanctity of the Land (*Likutey Moharan* I, 44). But within the context of our essays, the Flood not entering the Land refers to the lack of confusion and troubles over the Land at that time. This was because the sanctity of the Land was dormant; there was no one then who was working to reveal Godliness. Therefore, there was no reason to Flood the Land and make a tumult over it.

All that changed with the advent of Avraham who searched for God until he found Him. With God's help, in the next essay we will continue from Avraham and discuss his efforts to find God; the covenant of circumcision, when God made His promise to Avraham that the Land will be for his descendents. We will also discuss why Yishmael considers himself a descendent and worthy of the Land. and, what Elul has to do with all this.

Thank you for your patience. So, have a good one and in the meantime, let's not have any more blowups or other tragedies, only joy and peace.

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