

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #63—Parshat Behar-Bechukotai 5762

Tuesday was LaG b'Omer, the *yortzeit* (anniversary of demise) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, best known as author of the holy Zohar. What the Zohar writes about "This Land," our Holy Land, could fill an entire book. For example, the relationships between Eretz Yisrael and the *sefirah* of Malkhut (Kingship) and the Malkhut of God, is first discussed in the Zohar. We will try to include a saying or so from Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, based on this week's Torah reading. Perhaps in his merit the Malkhut of God will be revealed and the Kingdom of Holiness, the Kingdom of King David, will return to rule the Holy Land once again, soon and forever, Amen.

The week's double-portion has much to do with the Holy Land. Behar begins with the laws of the Sabbatical Year, on to those of the Jubilee Year and continuing with the laws of buying and selling property in the Holy Land. In the midst of all these laws, God includes an advisory, "I am God your Lord Who took you out of Egypt, on condition to give you the Land of the Kanaanites in order to be your God" (*Leviticus* 25:38).

It's not a one-way street, where God demands our loyalty and gives nothing in return. It's most definitely a two-way street. God demands our loyalty, but He is loyal too. He promises, He delivers. The Talmud derives from the above verse, "A person should always live in the Holy land, even in a city with a gentile majority, rather than in a city in the Diaspora, even if it has a Jewish majority" (*Ketuvot* 110b). "To give you the Land of the Kanaanites in order to be your God"—that is, even if the majority of the dwellers are Kanaanites, be in the Holy Land, for there I will be your God. This same passage in *Ketuvot* also states, "Whoever dwells in the Holy Land, it is as if he has a God. Whoever dwells in the Diaspora, it is as if he has no God."

Those are fighting words, because in addition to demanding a lot, it also raises many questions. What about the nearly 2000 years of exile and exiles who couldn't, even if they wanted to, live in the Holy Land? Can one really say about Rashi, Rambam, the Baal Shem Tov, the Vilna Gaon, Rebbe Nachman and the Sages of the Talmud themselves (who were centered in Babylonia!), that it is as if they had no God?

The Toldot Yaakov Yosef (Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye [1710-1784]) was a leading disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. He explains as follows: The Talmud does not say "that he has no God," but specifically, "it is as if." This means that if a person lives in the Diaspora, but his mind is fully connected to the Holy Land—he yearns to be there, he yearns to fulfill the mitzvot connected with the Land, he yearns to be part of the holiness and sanctity offered by the Holy Land—then it only seems "as if he has no God," but he really does have One. This is due to his total connection in mind and body to the Holy Land, where God is our God.

On the other hand, if a person merits living in the Holy Land, is actually physically present in Eretz Yisrael, but has his mind and heart attached to the Diaspora—he seeks his livelihood from there, he

yearns for the greater physical comforts of the exile (corned-beef on club, a trip to Disney, etc.)—then it is only "as if he has a God," but in reality he doesn't, because his mind and heart attached to the exile, to the Diaspora.

Thus, attachment to the Holy Land, which ideally includes being (t)here, also has a "virtual" component. The latter is more crucial because sometimes one has legitimate reason to leave the Holy Land. So, we must work on our attitude. This is revealed in the second parshah, Bechukotai, which begins with our acceptance of the Torah, the Land and the values they represent. Then we will merit a multitude of blessings, the most important of which is peace. However, if we are wayward, then it's bad news for the Jews. The Torah gives us a warning that is ignored at our own peril—as the vehemence of the curses fulfilled bear witness. May God spare us from now on.

The Zohar (3:114b) teaches, "If you despise My laws..." (*Leviticus* 26:15). Rabbi Yosi opened his discourse on the passage with the following, "My son! Do not despise the rebuke of God" (Proverbs 3:11). How beloved and precious are the Jewish People before God. [We know this] because God chastises them in order to lead them on the proper path. Like a father who loves his son and therefore does not spare the rod in order not to spoil the child, so that the child learns to walk on the proper path, without straying right or left. "For whomever God loves He will chastise, and He will reprove him as a father does his child" (ibid. v. 12). One whom God does not love, He does not chastise him. Then God hates that person because of his evil deeds. God will thus not punish or reprove him... Therefore, do not despise the rebuke of God..." for if you accept the rebuke you will feel worthy of God's love.

The Zohar continues to explain the week's Torah reading about the punishments: "If you sin, then God will wreak vengeance sevenfold" (*Leviticus* 26:18). Could it be, asks the Zohar, that God would ever exact an unjust punishment, seven times more severe than the sin itself? It explains that the word, "sevenfold" refers to the seventh *sefirah*, Malkhut. For judgments and punishments are issued through Malkhut, which represents the kingship and authority of God. If one sins, one receives his punishment through Malkhut. However, the Zohar also speaks of Malkhut as the **SheKHiNah**, the Divine Presence which is *ShoKheiN* (dwells) with us (3:114a). The Shekhinah is a *maShKoN* (pledge), that God will never leave us! Thus, the purpose of all punishments is to exert God's Malkhut, with the intention that we accept that Malkhut. Then the decrees are mitigated and sweetened, and God will be revealed amongst us (see 13:113a-115b, for several discussions on these issues).

The upshot is that God loves us. If we suffer, it is because we do not feel His presence, His Malkhut, the sanctity offered to us by His Holy Land. So we do suffer, in the Diaspora, as well as in the Holy Land. It doesn't have to be that way. We can change the situation. We have to want to experience God even in an exiled state of mind. We must reattach ourselves to the Holy Land, to Malkhut. Then things will become right again.

As Rebbe Nachman once succinctly said: "If you believe you can damage, believe that you can repair" (*Likutey Moharan* II, Lesson #112)! Reb Noson explains, "If you believe that you've caused damage, then you've already attained a level of faith that you are an important person whose deeds have effect upon others and the world" (see previous essay). If you've got that faith, use it to repair the damage, use it to build and take your life forward. May we merit to this too. Amen.

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