

# And to Their Seed After Them

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Rosh Beit Midrash, Yeshiva University Torah MiTzion Beit Midrash Zichron Dov, Toronto

It was a mature, experienced, weary and wary nation that Moshe addressed on the edge of the Jordan River on the first day of the eleventh month in the last winter of their desert journey. He gazed upon faces that had witnessed war and death and the hopelessness of their fathers, and he spoke to them of an earlier time, when their world had been new.

Moshe quoted the Divine words that he had first delivered to the nation nearly 40 years earlier.

*Hashem, our G-d, spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have spent sufficient time surrounding this mountain. Turn and travel and come to the mountain of the Emorites and its neighbors, the plains, the mountain and the lowlands and the desert and the shore of the sea, the land of the Canaanites and Levanon, to the great river, the river Euphrates.*

**Devarim 1:6-7**

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ דָּבַר אֵלֵינוּ בְּהַרְבֵּי לְאֹמֶר  
רַב־לְכֶם שָׁבַת בְּהָר הַזֶּה. פָּנּוּ וְסַעוּ לְכֶם  
וּבֵאוּ הַר הָאֱמֹרִי וְאֶל־פְּלֵשְׁתֵּינֵי בְּעֶרְבָה  
בְּהָר וּבְשָׂפְלָה וּבְנֶגֶב וּבְחֹוֹף הַיָּם אֶרֶץ  
הַקִּנְעָנִי וְהַלְכָנוּן עַד־הַנָּהָר הַגָּדֹל  
נְהַר־פָּרָת:  
**דְּבָרִים א:ו-ז**

And then Moshe conveyed an ancient promise and a modern charge:

*See! I have placed the land before you. Come, conquer the land that G-d has sworn to your ancestors, to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, to give to them and to their seed after them.*

**Devarim 1:8**

רְאֵה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ בְּאוֹ וְרָשׁוּ  
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק  
לְיַעֲקֹב וְלִיעֲקֹב לְתַת לָהֶם וְלְיֶרֶעָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם:  
**דְּבָרִים א:ח**

## One Midrash

Our Sages were troubled by the wordiness of this sentence. Once the Jews are informed that G-d promised the land to "your ancestors," why is there any need to spell out, "to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov"?

*"That G-d has sworn to your ancestors." It need not have said, "to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov." What does "to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov" teach us?*

*Avraham is worthy on his own, Yitzchak is worthy on his own, Yaakov is worthy on his own.*

*This may be compared to a king who gave his servant a field as*

"אשר נשבע ה' לאבותיכם", שאין תלמוד  
לומר "לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב". ומה  
תלמוד לומר "לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב"?  
כדי אברהם בעצמו, כדי יצחק בעצמו,  
כדי יעקב בעצמו.  
משל למלך שנתן לעבדו שדה אחת במתנה

a gift, but he gave it to him only as it was. The servant rose and improved it and did not leave it as it was, and he planted a vineyard and bequeathed it to his son, and he [the son] did not leave it as it was, and he improved it and bequeathed it to his son, and he [the grandson] did not leave it as it was, and he improved it. So, too, when G-d gave the land to our ancestor Avraham He gave it to him only as it was, as Bereishit 13:17 says, "Rise, walk the land, its length and breadth, for to you I will give it." Avraham rose and improved it, as Bereishit 21:33 says, "And he planted an orchard<sup>1</sup> in Be'er Sheva." Yitzchak rose and improved it, as Bereishit 26:12 says, "And Yitzchak planted in that land, and that year he found one hundred-fold returns." And Yaakov rose and improved it, as Bereishit 33:19 says, "And he acquired the portion of the field where he had spread his tent."

**Sifri Devarim 8, per the edition of the Vilna Gaon**

ולא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא. עמד העבד והשביחה ולא הניחה כמות שהיא ונטעה כרם והוריש לבנו, ולא הניחה כמות שהיא והשביחה והוריש לבנו, ולא הניחה כמות שהיא והשביחה. כך כשנתן הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם אבינו את הארץ לא נתנה לו אלא כמות שהיא שנאמר (בראשית יג:יז) "קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה." עמד אברהם והשביחה שנאמר (בראשית כא:לג) "ויטע אשל בבאר שבע." עמד יצחק והשביחה שנאמר (בראשית כו:יב) "ויזרע יצחק בארץ ההיא וימצא בשנה ההיא מאה שערים." עמד יעקב והשביחה שנאמר (בראשית לג:יט) "ויקן את חלקת השדה אשר נטה שם אהלו."

**ספרי, דברים פר' ח' ע"פ גירסת הגר"א**

On first read, this midrash simply offers two explanations for the listing of each of our patriarchs:

- First: the merit of each ancestor, individually, would have sufficed to earn the land for his descendants.
- Second: each of these ancestors presented a model for his descendants; the new generation should be prepared to toil and improve the land, as had Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.<sup>2</sup>

## Two Visions

Our midrash does more than simply explain the biblical verse, though; it provides two fundamentally different views of the Jewish mission in this new land.

In the former vision, the land is a present handed to the Jews by the Master of the Universe in the merit of remembered ancestors. Not only are your collective ancestors the source of this birthright, but each patriarch, individually, could have been your sole benefactor and still you would have been gifted this remarkable land. Be grateful to those who walked before you, for by dint of their righteous path you will receive that for which other nations must sacrifice lives and treasure.

In the latter vision of our midrash, the land is a blank slate transferred by a king to his slave "as is", with the expectation that the slave will make of it whatever he can. You will receive that which you invest, and nothing more. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov made the most of their individual opportunities, and you are expected to emulate their industrious approach to their heritage.

Perhaps this double vision is inspired by Moshe's own words in that verse, presenting both of

<sup>1</sup> Sotah 10a.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the verses selected by the midrash show our ancestors doing more than planting and purchasing land; each of the cited examples of "improving the land" comes from a passage in which one of our ancestors was compelled to deal with a potential foe within the land. The first citation follows Avraham's summit with Avimelech regarding wells; the second citation is sandwiched by hostile encounters with Avimelech and his Philistines; the third citation is bracketed by his meeting with Esav and the kidnapping of Dinah.

these elements:

- "See! I have placed the land before you." It is a gift.
- "Come, conquer the land." You are responsible to conquer and develop the expanse awaiting you on the other side of the Jordan River.

Both visions may also be seen within the mitzvah of settling the land of Israel, as formulated by Ramban:

*We were instructed to settle the land which G-d gave to our ancestors, to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, and not to leave it in the hands of other nations or in desolation.*

**Hasagot haRamban l'Sefer haMitzvot, Aseh 4**

שנצטוינו לרשת הארץ אשר נתן הא-ל יתברך  
ויתעלה לאבותינו לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב ולא  
נעזבה ביד זולתינו מן האומות או לשממה.  
**השגות הרמב"ן לספר המצוות עשה ד'**

Ramban informs us that this is the land given by G-d to our ancestors, a present, but he then instructs us to build up the land, protecting it and nurturing it. The Jew who lives in Israel and does not contribute to its development is as deficient in his mitzvah as the Jew who contributes to the upkeep of the land from afar; we are instructed to live in the land, which is a gift to us, and to develop it as well.

## A Third Vision

The appropriateness of this message for each generation is clear. Whether the neophytes camped at Sinai, still blinking in the new sunlight of their freedom, or the grizzled desert wanderers gazing across the Jordan River, the Jew must always understand that the Land of Israel is both gift and expectation. It is a gift, handed to us in the merit of our ancestors, and it is an expectation, an anticipation that we will earn our keep.

However, our midrash presents a third vision as well, most appropriate for that mature, experienced, weary and wary nation waiting to cross the Jordan. The servant did not only plant a vineyard and work the land given to him; he also bequeathed the land to his child, who likewise improved the land and passed it along to the ensuing generation. Certainly, this is a message of responsibility, but it is also a message of hope, a pledge that if they work the land, there will rise a new generation to receive it. For those who had lost their fathers in the wilderness, this was no small thing.

Our midrash seizes upon the closing words of Devarim 1:8, promising "the land that G-d has sworn ... to give to them and to their seed after them." Avraham received the land, worked it, and passed it to Yitzchak, who did likewise and passed it to Yaakov. But move forward in history and watch the generation that leaves Egypt falter, and die in the wilderness. Their children may well wonder: what happens if we falter? Will there be another generation? To which Moshe pledges, in the words of our midrash, "The servant rose and improved it and did not leave it as it was, and he planted a vineyard and bequeathed it to his son, and he [the son] did not leave it as it was, and he improved it and bequeathed it to his son."

Live in the land that has been given to you in the merit of your ancestors. Work the land and build it up, following the model of your ancestors. Then your children will rise, a new generation, and you will pass a stronger land to them, for them to receive as a gift and for them to work.

As we celebrate another year of the State of Israel, may we commit ourselves to do likewise with this gift, building up the land and passing it to our children after us.