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Bechukotai 5782

On Keeping in a Dither

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered May 26, 1962)

It may seem unusual that, in an age of anxiety when people complain of the lack of peace and serenity, a congregation should be urged from the pulpit to keep in a constant dither. Yet, that is our message, for that is how Rashi interpreted the first verse of this morning's Sidra. Our portion opens with the words *im be'chukotai telekhu v'et mitzvotai tishmoru*, "if you will walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments," then blessing will follow. The word *telekhu*, which means "you will go" or "you will walk," captured the imagination of our rabbis. Would not "obey" or "follow" have been more appropriate? Therefore they explained, as quoted by Rashi, *She'tihyu amelim ba-Torah*, "you must toil, or labor, in Torah." The spirit of the Jew must never vegetate. It must always grow, advance. The Sidra presents a challenge to moral activism.

In World War II some British scientists were working on an anti-aircraft computing device. They included in it a small vibrating member which kept the whole mechanism in a constant state of minor but rapid vibration. This they called the "dither." The theory was simple enough: if the parts are constantly in slight motion, then the whole device is alert, is on the jump, is ready to respond promptly to the earliest beginnings of forces seeking to move the gun, and preventing any sluggish delay caused by static friction. (See editorial in *Science*, August 7, 1959.)

So that when the Jewish tradition bids us to be *amelim ba-Torah*, it is telling us that we need a certain amount of dither in our spiritual and mental mechanisms. It wants us not to become intellectually and religiously sluggish, to make sure that mental static friction does not dominate.

Here indeed is a valuable piece of advice indispensable for success in any field of endeavor. Whether in business or the professions, in intellectual efforts or social relations, great achievements are possible only when one is always on the alert, in a dither. What an old successful businessman once

told his young and ambitious employee is true not only for the world of business but for the life of the spirit as well: in order to succeed you must jump when opportunity knocks; but since you do not know when opportunity is knocking, you must always jump. So, Torah cannot be learned and the life of Torah cannot be established unless one advances every day. *Im yom ta'azvenu, yomayim ya'azveka* - if you ignore Torah for one day, you will lose two days' worth.

That is why, in Jewish literature, two terms are used to distinguish man from angel. Although on an absolute scale, the angel is a more spiritual and holier creature, nevertheless man is deemed superior, for man is a *mehalekh*, one who is constantly going, one who has the ability to progress and advance, whereas the angel is regarded as an *omed*, one who is stationary, and who because of a lack of free will can never go or advance beyond his set position. So that when man is a *mehalekh*, when he keeps in a dither, he rises higher than the angels; when he fails to advance and grow, he sinks to something less than human.

The founder of psychoanalysis expressed, in this sense, a fundamental Jewish viewpoint when he maintained that civilization is advanced by those who express its discontents, by those who are restless and dissatisfied and strive for new conquests and insights. At the same time, he pointed out that the desire for relief of tension, when driven to an extreme, can be unhealthy - for the ultimate release of all human tensions is death. *Mahalekh* stands for life and civilization, *omed* for their cessation.

Of course, this does not mean that one ought to multiply the trivial tensions and daily problems that plague us and disturb our peace. Anxieties over supporting your family and paying your bills, worries over market conditions and meeting payrolls, vague fears of ill health and the specter of dreaded disease, tenseness over unhappy

homes and wayward children — these are not the “dither” that the Torah recommends. These can shake a person to the core of his soul without making him grow at all; they distract his mind with fruitless agitation. But when someone complains to me because of the demands made upon his time and energy by charitable organizations, by working for a synagogue or yeshiva, for U.J.A. or a hospital, by books to be read and lectures to be attended — then I confess that I am without compassion, and I smile inwardly and say to myself, *biz hundert und tzvanzig yahr*. For such problems keep one alive; in fact, they make life worth living. This is what we were created for - to be a *mehalekh*. Only by being “on the go” will we “get places!”

This Jewish outlook is in direct contrast to that of the ancient Greek philosophers. For instance, Plato envisioned two worlds. One is the ordinary world in which we live and which he called “the world of becoming.” This is the world of activity, of change. He regarded this “world of becoming” as unreal, as only an inferior shadow of the higher, nobler, more permanent “world of being,” where there is no change and no movement. He regarded the ideal world as greater than the changing *mehalekh*. Our tradition, to the contrary, regarded the dynamic “world of becoming” as infinitely superior to the static “world of being.”

For example: in the fourth chapter of *Pirkei Abot*, we read a remarkable paradox. *Yafah sha'ah achat bi'teshuvah u-maasim tovim ba-olam ha-zeh mi-kol chaye ha-olam ha-ba*, “better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole life of the world to come”; and yet, *ve'yafah sha'ah achat shel korat ruach ba-olam ha-ba mi-kol chaye ha-olam ha-zeh*, “better is one hour of blissfulness of spirit in the world to come than the whole life of this world.” What does this mean? Is this world better, or the other world better? The author of *Midrash Shmuel* explains that the prefix *mi* in the word *mi-kol* in the first half of the passage is comparative, it means “better one hour of good deeds in this world than the whole life of the world to come.” But in the second half of the passage, the prefix *mi* is not comparative but derivative, it means not “than” but “from.” Thus: one hour of good deeds in this world is better than the whole life of the world to come, but one hour of joy in the world to come derives from this world.

Here indeed is a genuine Jewish doctrine! An hour of spiritual progress, of keeping in a dither, in this world, is more precious than the whole future existence of the soul. And all the joys of the world to come derive from this

human quality of *mehalekh*, from this capacity of man to constantly advance the cause of right, of justice, of nobility of soul in this, our active world of becoming.

This is an authentic insight into the Jewish soul. Growth, change, development, progress - but in the right direction! That is why Jewish law is called *Halakhah*, which means “going,” it is the way of the *mehalekh*. Of course, becoming and change can mean change in either one of two directions: up or down, good or bad. Our concept of *mehalekh* is, as our *Sidra* puts it, *im be-chukotai telekhu* - to go in the ways of G-d, to progress upward, towards G-d, towards the fulfillment of the ideals of Torah. *Halakhah* means the right way for man, the *mehalekh*.

This activist, dynamic conception of life and man's purpose in the universe bears close resemblance to the original American pioneer ethic: always new development, new frontiers, new horizons. If America today often seems to stagnate and vegetate, if the covered wagon and those who toiled to open the West have now been replaced, as models of American citizenship, by those who sit glued to their seats while they gaze at the T.V. sets, it becomes a duty of the American Jew, who is loyal both to his Americanism and to his Jewishness, to challenge all of America to return to its old dreams in new form. We must again become the leaders of the world in working and toiling towards a better life for all people throughout the world: *shetihyu amelim ba-Torah*, to toil and labor on behalf of the universal visions of the Bible and the Prophets of Israel.

Listen to how one perceptive writer recognized this trait of the collective character of our people: “Israel... is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it... Like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has no G-d.” These words come from the pen of the most illustrious Catholic theologian of our day, Jacques Maritain. (*A Christian Looks at the Jewish Problem*, 1939, Page 29.)

This afternoon we read the Fifth Chapter of *Pirkei Abot*. In the Munich manuscript of the Talmud, we discover an ending to this week's chapter not found in our usual printed edition. It reads, *R. Abba amar: ashrei mi she-gadel ba-torah va-amalo ba-Torah, v'oseh nachat ruach le'Yotzro*. “Rabbi Abba said, happy is he who has grown up in Torah, and whose labor is in Torah, and who provides peace of mind for his Maker.”

How noble is the dream of the teachers of the Talmud! It tells us not to desire a passive and stagnating life, day-dreaming of how we will effortlessly achieve our goals while G-d works and worries for us; rather, it challenges us to toil, labor, and grow in the life of Torah so that we may provide peace of mind for G-d! No wonder Prof. R. Travers Herford has called this “one of the most beautiful passages in the Talmudic literature.” G-d cannot have nachas, peace of mind, when man is slothful, spiritually indolent, religiously lazy. The true Jew knows that G-d cannot rest, and hence man ought not rest, as long as some child goes hungry, or some refugee is turned back to the Hell from which he escaped, or some child forced into ignorance, or as long as his own life barely balances on the precipice of hollowness and aimlessness. G-d cannot rest as long as

Desolation Road

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

This week’s parshas begins by saying that God will reward us if we walk in his statutes and observe his laws. Rashi explains that walking in His statutes refers to toiling in His Torah. We are later told, in the section of rebuke, or *tochcha*, that if we do not listen to God, we will be punished. Rashi explains this to mean that if we do not toil in the Torah, we will be punished. This warning raises a question, because after the punishments that will come are mentioned, we are told that the desolation of the land will come about as a result of not having the land rest during *shemittah*. What, then, is the cause the real cause of the punishment? One answer can be that since, as we mentioned last week, in the name of Rabbi Meir Juzint, the purpose of leaving the land fallow during *shemittah* is in order to spend the time toiling in Torah, then if we do not toil in Torah during that time, we will not be fulfilling the purpose behind the laws of *shemittah* observance, and will therefore be worthy of punishment. However, this answer requires more elaboration, because the Torah actually spells out that the punishment comes for not resting the land, so that if the land actually did rest, even though the purpose behind it resting was not fulfilled would seem incongruous to merit such a sever punishment as a result. Perhaps, however, we can understand this punishment by understanding the link between Torah study and *shemittah* observance, as we began to explain in last week’s message.

the cry of the wronged is heard any place in the world, as long as injustice prevails. And, therefore, man must toil in Torah, he must be a *mehalekh*, so that he may create the kind of world which will give peace of mind to our Creator.

May G-d grant that we learn this invaluable lesson of Judaism, that we be free from worries over health and sustenance so that we may toil in Torah for years without end. May we walk in the ways of G-d’s statutes and observe His commandments, so that the blessings of the Lord will come upon us and all of mankind, and reach their climax in the words of the Torah in today’s Sidra: “and I will walk among you, and will be your G-d, and you shall be My people.”

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

We pointed out last week that in order for the laws of *shemittah* to be observed properly, which entails declaring the land and its produce as being ownerless, canceling debts, and the like, there is a need for a sense of unity and mutual caring among the people. This approach to the *shemittah* comes from a recognition of the importance of the land to the nature of the Jewish people. The Maharal of Prague and others point to the sense of national unity that the land of Israel itself brings about, and, as we have mentioned often in the past, the Zohar in parshas Emor says that it is only in the Holy Land that we are one peel. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, in the beginning of his work *Orot*, writes that there is an intrinsic connection between the land of Israel and the essence of the Jewish people. This sense of the importance of the land to the Jewish people should generate the kind of national unity im observance of the *shemittah* laws, to preserve the national life of the Jewish people on its land.

Torah study, as well, is an intrinsic part of the nature of the Jewish people. The Talmud in *Nedarim*, citing a verse which says that the land lays desolate because the people abandoned the Torah, explains that the people did not recite the blessing over the Torah before learning it. Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook explained that in this blessing, we thank God for choosing us from among all the nations and giving us His Torah. Failure to recite this blessing before learning delivers the message one learns the Torah for his

own personal reasons, but not because it constitutes the spiritual core of the Jewish soul. Thus, the proper study of Torah, with its sense of its nature as Israel's collective soul in mind, will strengthen one's commitment to the Jewish nation as a whole, and reinforce his commitment to observing the laws of shemittah, as well. The loss of this

True Ameilus

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on May 11, 2018)

In the beginning of this week's Parsha, there is a celebrated peirush of Rashi, who brings down from Chazal an explanation of the pasuk: *Im bechukosai tei'leichu, ve-es mitzvosay tishmeru, ve-asisem osam*. When the Torah says *mitzvosay tishmeru*, it's referring to doing the mitzvos. And what's the meaning of *bechukosai tei'leichu*? *Havei ameilim ba-Torah*—work hard in Torah. And this peirush is based on the process of elimination: If *mitzvosay tishmoru* already covers the mitzvos, then what's left must be *ameilus ba-Torah*.

However, there must be a specific reason why Rashi found a hint in *bechukosai tei'leichu* for *ameilus ba-Torah*, as opposed to any other meeritorious practice. Maharal, in his sefer, *Gur Aryeh*, suggests here that *halicha* is exhausting—if you walk far. Therefore, if you do that in Torah—if you exhaust yourself in learning—that's *ameilus* in Torah. So it's a *remez* to the hard work in learning Torah. Alternatively, he suggests that *halicha* means to go from one place to another. And then, what does it mean to be *amel* ba-Torah? It doesn't just mean to stam be exhausted—it is not just quantitative but also qualitative. It means going to ever-deeper levels and never being satisfied with how you are learning Torah now. It's not enough for you to say I did the daf, and now I am good. You always want to understand it better. And that's the two perspectives on *ameilus*, says Maharal. One, *ameilus* is arduous work—you have to work hard if you want to succeed in Torah. But two, it's not just stam working hard—it's also working smart and never being satisfied. It's always wanting to achieve a deeper understanding and knowing that you can—there is always more wisdom in the Torah than you currently know.

The Klei Yakar suggests something from a completely different angle, where he doesn't focus on the word *tei'leichu*—the aspect of *halicha*. Instead, he asks on the first word—*bechukosai*. And he says: Clearly, we don't

commitment to the collective, through learning Torah for one's own purposes weakens commitment to the nation as a whole, and leads to a weakening of shemittah observance, which is the ultimate cause for the punishments mentioned in the section of rebuke.

think that *chukim* in this context has to do with whether you understand. But what are *chukim*? It comes from the verb *chokeik*—to engrave something. We all know a phrase in English—Set in stone. There is a substantial difference between engraving and writing. When you write, you write on something. When you engrave, you engrave in something. The word *chok* comes from a word that means engraved—something that can't be (easily) changed. Klei Yakar says: what is *ameilus ba-Torah* really? Of course, it's working hard and not being lazy. True. Of course, it means wanting to know Torah better and not being satisfied. True. But Klei Yakar says something more than that. He says: There are two ways one could fulfill the mitzvos and be a *frum Yid*—*shomer Torah u-Mitzvos*. You could do it externally—on you. You know, I learn texts. I fulfill certain obligations. But it doesn't change who I am. He says: That's not *ameilus ba-Torah*. That's being religious as opposed to being irreligious. *Yasher Koach*. Now you are *dati* and not a *chiloni* because you read the Torah and do the commandments... superficially. But *ameilus ba-Torah* is to internalize it—to bring it inside, to be *chokek* in the *luchos* of your heart. It shouldn't just be written externally, on you. No. It should be engraved in you. It means to refashion your personality, to become a different person because of the Torah you learn. In means to ask: What does the Torah I learn and fulfill mean for the nature of my existence? And that's the true *ameilus ba-Torah*. He points out that the Midrash Raba says, in the very first line on this week's Parsha, *Im bechukosai tei'leichu*. And here, it does focus on the word *halicha*. *Hada hu deteima*—the pasuk in Tehilim says: *Chishavti drachai ve-ashiva raglai el eidosecha*. And David ha-Melech says that wherever he goes, his legs take him to the Beis ha-Medrash. Wherever he goes, whatever he does or thinks—even when going to the makolet—he ends up in Beis ha-Medrash. Does

covenant will never be forgotten.

“When you reach the stage of: וְאֶכְלָהּ; וּבְגוֹזִים; וְאֶתְכֶם, אֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיכֶם, and the land of your enemies shall consume you (v.38); when you will be in turmoil, dumbfounded, afraid, when you no longer want to be recognized as Jewish, when you hide yourselves like Jonah in the bowels of the ship, when you will be frightened by the lot of Abraham the Hebrew, of the Patriarchal covenant - it will not avail you, in spite of all, to forget the ancient covenant. I will bring about you something new that will always remind you of your Jewishness, that will exemplify the fact that you are different though you are physically the same as other people. וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב; וְאֶת-בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶת-אֶת. וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם, אֶזְכֹּר. I, G-d, will remember the Patriarchal covenant so that you will be forced to remember it.

“The covenant of Abraham will boom forth from the radio, all the newspapers will point out the Jew, his particular problems, his stubbornness as well as his cast-iron determination. The shadow of Abraham our father will pursue you. Do you know how? By Eretz Yisrael. וְהָאֶרֶץ אֶזְכֹּר - and the Land I will remember! Do you know why I am determined to uphold the Patriarchal covenant, the paradoxical history of Jewry in all its tragedy and grandeur?

Ma'aser Shay'nee--The Second Tithe

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Toward the very end of this week's parasha, parashat Bechukotai, we learn the law of מַעְשֵׂר שְׁנִי - Ma'aser Shay'nee, the Second Tithe.

The Torah, in Leviticus 27:30, states: וְכָל מַעְשֵׂר הָאֶרֶץ וְכָל מִזְרַע הָאֶרֶץ מִפְּרֵי הָעֵץ לַהֵשֶׁם, הוּא קֹדֶשׁ לַהֵשֶׁם, *And any tithe of the seed of the land, of the fruit of the tree, belongs to G-d, it is holy to G-d.* Rashi explains that this verse refers to the giving of “Ma'aser Shay'nee”—the Second Tithe.

After the Terumah Gedolah (the heave offering of the grain, wine and oil) is given to the Cohen, and the “First Tithe” is separated and given to the Levite, a second tithe—10% of the remaining crop of grain, oil and wine, is separated during the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of the seven-year Sabbatical cycle. The Second Tithe must be eaten in Jerusalem or redeemed for money which is required to be used in Jerusalem to purchase either food or offerings. During the third and sixth years of the Sabbatical

וְאֶת-גַּם-זֹאת בְּהִיּוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיהֶם, לֹא-מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא- *“Because: - לא-מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא- But despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them nor will I reject them to annihilate them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am Hashem their G-d (v.44).*

“Because I want the continued existence of the people with Torah and mitzvot, with Shabbos, kashrus, tefillin and tzitzis; because I do not want you to thrust the covenant of Sinai aside - וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם, בְּרִית רֵאשֻׁנִים: אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ - *I will remember for them the covenant of the ancestors, whom I took out from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be a God to them. I am the Hashem (v.45).*

“To save the covenant of their ancestors at Sinai, I must realize the Patriarchal covenant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is, to be at one with the suffering and joy of Klal Yisrael” (The Rav Speaks, p.150-152).

As we celebrate Yom Yerushalayim (28 Iyar/Sunday May 29) once again, and give thanks to the RS”O for the privilege of our Medina, our mekomos ha'kedoshim liberated in our day and time, the zechus we have to walk, enjoy, benefit from, pray in and connect to our Land, let us pray for the day of the ultimate redemption, when our nation and our Land will be blessed with only brachos and everlasting shalom.

מַעְשֵׂר שְׁנִי— Ma'aser Ah'nee, the Tithe for the Poor, instead of being designated for Jerusalem.

The Sefer Ha'Chinuch and the Radbaz explain that most people's places of residence are usually determined by how they make a living. While it is always desirable for Jews to spend their entire lives in the proximity of great academies of learning, such as Jerusalem, where people could continually develop their spiritual and intellectual potential, it is not always practical or possible.

In an agricultural society, like ancient Israel, it often meant living away from the center of religious and intellectual activity, far from Jerusalem. As a result of the Jewish community being dispersed, many Jews had no direct access to intensive Jewish educational facilities, which, of course, could have dire implications. To remedy this situation, the Torah commanded that the Second

Tithe, as well as the tithe of the herd or the flock, and the fourth-year fruits of a new tree, must be brought to Jerusalem. These visits to Jerusalem made it likely that even farmers and members of their families who lived great distances from Jerusalem would spend significant amounts of time in Jerusalem, engaging in intensive study there and deriving much religious inspiration from their visits. They would then return to their communities and benefit their neighbors with their newly acquired Torah knowledge. (Based on *The Mitzvot—The Commandments and their Rationale*, by Abraham Chill.)

Clearly, Jerusalem was the religious citadel of the people of Israel and the seat of the most important religious and Jewish educational institutions. Because every Jew had to come to Jerusalem, not only on the three major pilgrim festivals each year, but also to redeem their second tithes and their new fruits, Jews not only spent considerable time in Jerusalem, but also expended significant amounts of money in the Holy City. Thus, in addition to exposing large numbers of Jews to the religious and educational environment of Jerusalem, the visits also provided significant economic resources for Jerusalem—economic

Spiritual Gravity

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Bechukosai begins with Hashem's promise of great reward *אם בחוקותי תלכו ואת מצוותי תשמרו* – literally, “If you follow My statutes and observe My commands.”

Rashi, noting the redundancy in this pasuk, explains (based on Chazal) that *אם בחוקותי תלכו* actually refers not to mitzva observance, but rather to hard work and exertion in Torah learning: *שתהיו עמלים בתורה*. These rewards are earned not through merely observing the mitzvos, but by also investing effort in Torah learning (“shtaygen”).

How did Chazal arrive at this reading of the phrase *אם בחוקותי תלכו*? How can these words be understood as a reference to *עמלות בתורה* – hard work and exertion in Torah learning?

Rav Shmuel Rozovsky, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh, explains that Chazal interpreted the term *תלכו* (“walk”) as an allusion to constant growth, advancement, journeying forward. *אם בחוקותי תלכו* means that we are always “walking,” progressing, and never standing still. And growth and progress require *עמלות*. Nothing of value can

contributions that also served to support Jewish education, and the clergy of Israel—the Cohanim, and the teachers.

It is quite remarkable that, already 3,000 years ago, the Torah recognized the primacy of Jewish education. Jerusalem, which served as the spiritual center and the educational hub of Israel, needed to be seen as the peoples' foremost charitable priority. Firmly establishing this priority in the earliest stages of the peoples' history, set the tone for the Jewish people's survival and success during the millennia to come. Jewish education was not to be seen as a luxury for only the children of the rich, or only for gifted children. From its earliest days of nationhood, the Jewish people were told that, but for issues of life and death, Jewish education was to be the Jewish peoples' foremost concern and the most important charitable priority of our people.

It is this simple, rather modest statute, to “bring the tithe of the land” to Jerusalem, that has guaranteed Jewish continuity and Jewish future.

It may sound like a simple verse, but it has truly proven to be the “elixir of life” for the Jewish people.

ever be attained without hard work and effort. If we want to achieve, we need to exert ourselves. And thus *אם בחוקותי תלכו* must refer to *עמלות בתורה*, because there is no *הליכה* – progress and advancement – without *עמלות*.

Anyone who has been to Yerushalayim knows that virtually the entire city is hills. There is hardly a block in Yerushalayim that is perfectly flat. If a person leaves his car in neutral in Yerushalayim, it will roll down the hill. In Yerushalayim, the city of kedusha, there is no “neutral.” One needs to “climb” at all times, for if he stops, he will roll down. When it comes to Torah, we cannot remain in neutral. We need constant *עמלות*, working and exerting effort on a consistent basis.

The Penei Menachem (the previous Gerrer Rebbe) was once asked why Hashem made gravity part of the natural order. Every time we want to lift something, we need to resist the force of gravity that pulls everything down to earth. Why did Hashem create the world this way?

The Penei Menachem explained that the physical realities of the world reflect the spiritual realities of the

world. And thus the force of physical gravity reflects the force of “spiritual gravity.” The force of worldliness, our physical nature, is constantly pulling us down. If we seek to grow and achieve, we need to resist that force. Just as it requires immense effort to lift a heavy object high off the ground, because one needs to oppose the strong

gravitational pull, so does it require immense effort to lift ourselves spiritually, because we need to resist the force that pulls us down.

Therefore, we are not worthy of the great rewards described in this parsha unless we are עמלים בתורה, exerting hard work and effort in our learning and our עבודת ה'.

Mark Twain Didn't Read Bechukotai

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

In 1867 Mark Twain visited Palestine in well documented journey. As he crisscrossed the barren landscape he offered the following description and observations:

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds- a silent mournful expanse- ... A degree of desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely ... We never saw a human being on the whole route ... We pressed on toward the goal of our crusade renowned Jerusalem. The further we went the hotter the sun got and the more rocky and bare ... the landscape became ... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil had almost deserted the country. Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its

This sterile and infertile condition, which Twain beheld in the 19th century, had been foreshadowed in the horrific accounts of parshat Bechukotai. Because we betrayed our divine warrant to Israel, we were exiled, and our cities were demolished. Following the description of the wreckage, the Torah announces: “I will destroy the land and it will remain desolate. Much of depressing narrative portrays the capture of the land of Israel and the defeat and expulsion of the Jews. This verse describes the state of the land in the period after exile. It will remain desolate.

Famously, the Ramban viewed this prophecy as a favorable announcement. During our extended centuries-long absence from the land no nation or culture will succeed in settling Israel. Their attempts to till the land will be fruitless and their efforts to inhabit its cities will be futile. The land will remain desolate, empty, and “available” for the return of her children.

For centuries, powerful empires endeavored in vain to conquer Israel and establish a lasting presence. However,

Israel didn't yield its fertility, nor did it invite long term human colonization. The land still carried a divine curse which could only be alleviated by our return and our rehabilitation of the land. We corrupted the integrity and honor of this land and only we can lift the curse.

Moreover, the land itself refused to embrace strangers. They were welcome to come and sojourn, but each settlement of this eternal land came with an expiry date. Those who tried to remain beyond “checkout” time were violently expelled. The land waited in animated suspension for the return of her children, who alone could unlock her full potential. Until we returned the land remained inactive and defiant.

The Ramban didn't just write about an abstract phenomenon- he lived this prophecy in a very personal fashion. In 1267, emigrating from Spain to Israel, he encountered a fledgling Jewish community in a land of ghosts. The city of Jerusalem could barely muster a minyan of ten men!

During the Ramban's era in particular, the land violently revolted against its would-be conquerors. Even short-term admittance to foreigners was denied. In the roughly 120 years between 1177 and 1291 numerous wars were waged over cities in Israel and particularly over Yerushalayim. Saladin falls to the Crusaders in 1177 only to defeat them ten years later. Just four years afterward, in 1191, he falls to the armies of the third Crusade. In the latter half of the next century Crusader armies would fall to invading Egyptian forces. The land was in outright convulsion and all human attempts to seize the land of G-d were thwarted. The Jews may have been long ago exiled, but their land remained lay in wait. The prophecy of Bechukotai, was in full display to the Ramban and his contemporaries.

Fast forward six centuries later and Twain witnesses the same prophecy- still alive and still resisting settlement of the land. Too bad he didn't study the Ramban! How long

would it take for this eternal curse to be lifted? Surprisingly, not long at all. It just took the return of the indigenous dwellers of Israel.

Less than fifteen years after Twain's visit through the wastelands of Palestine, history shifted and the land reawakened. Our motherland opened her arms to her lonely and long-lost children. Deserts and arid lands once again bloomed with lush verdant landscapes and sprouted fruits and crops which had been absent for two millennia. Malaria-infested swamplands were drained to forge modern cities such as Petach Tikva and Chadera. Through great devotion and sometimes, at the great cost of life, large dormant terrains were now teeming with Jewish life.

We haven't just restored the land's ancient fertility, we have innovated modern ways to preserve it. Facing the challenges of limited water supply in an urbanized modern world, we have learned to conserve our sweet water while sweetening our hard coastal water. While we continue to daven for Heavenly rain, we provide as much human water as possible to our land and her children.

Beyond the agricultural renaissance, we have managed to construct a modern democracy upon a land which witnessed the brutal force of totalitarian rule since Titus demolished the Temple. The combination of democratic freedom coupled with economic welfare are rare in the modern world, and even more so in our part of the world. Part of the resuscitation of Israel is not just the agricultural revival but the construction of a stable and sturdy modern state built upon the principles of freedom and human dignity.

We still yearn for an ultimate and final spiritual revival, the construction of a Temple and a state saturated with the presence of God. Until then, history remains imperfect and our accomplishments preliminary. Yet,

who can ignore the revival of our homeland, the restoration of its ancestral energy and the joy of children returning home.

Twain was correct: Palestine sits in sackcloth ! The state of Israel, however, is bedecked in a wedding dress and dances to the sweet music echoing its cities and the streets of Jerusalem. Just as we were promised, the land remained abandoned while we were absent. Our Mother waited for us, just as we waited for her. The reunion is sweet. Just as we were promised.