

Parashat Ekev

Rain

Our Parasha offers an enticing prospect of the land that lies beyond the River Jordan. It is

"a land of wheat and barley, vines, figs and pomegranates." (8:8)

It is a land in which,

"fresh water springs and pools emerge from the valleys and mountains." (8:7)

What are the purpose of these images and depictions? Is this the Jewish Agency offering unrealistic expectations of the country? Is this a PR campaign to "Make Aliya!"?

The Book of Devarim concerns itself with preparing the Jewish people to enter the Land of Israel. This national "orientation", parsha by parsha, is both religious and psychological. Moses warns, cautions, teaches, tries to allay fears and create realistic expectations. We shall suggest that these colourful images that the Torah presents of the land itself are more than simple descriptions of landscape and geographical phenomena. More than a part of Moses' PR campaign to endear the land to the nation, there is something deeply spiritual here.

THE EGYPT ISRAEL AXIS

Let us examine one of these passages and understand its spiritual ramifications.

"For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There, the grain you sowed had to be watered by your foot, like a vegetable garden, but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, is watered by the rains of the heaven. It is a land on which the Lord your God always keeps his eye, from year's beginning to year's end."(11:10-12)

The first thing that we might note in these few lines is that a comparison is being drawn between the lands of Egypt and Israel. Let us dwell upon this comparison. We should first note that in the Torah, Egypt is repeatedly offered as the contrasting opposite to Canaan. In the stories of our Avot, Egypt is the land that has food, and hence livelihood, while Canaan is ravaged by debilitating famine. It is the land from which the Israelites fled to choose a new land and seek a new future. When the Israelites express their disgruntled complaints in the wilderness, Egypt is always the alternative to Canaan:

"Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? ... It would be better for us to go back to Egypt! - And they said to one another - Let us head

back to Egypt" (The episode of the Spies. Numbers 14:3-4)

In Korach's rebellion, the disillusionment with Canaan reaches the point at which the rebels refer to Egypt as a "land of milk and honey":

"Is it not enough that you have brought us OUT FROM a land flowing with milk and honey..." (ibid. 16:13)

Indeed the framework, the entire axis, of the Exodus and the Israelites of that generation lies between the two poles: Egypt and Israel.

RAIN AND RIVER

In the passage quoted above, the Torah contrasts the water sources of Egypt and Israel. Egypt receives its water from the Nile. Israel has no natural river. It relies upon the "rain of the heavens." One phrase needs some elaboration. When the text tells us that in Egypt they watered their fields "with their foot", to what does it refer? The Bekhor Shor (12 Century - N. France) enlightens us. He relates to the ancient watering system in Egypt whereby farmers would dig irrigation channels connected to the Nile and when they wanted water for their field they would simply open the channel and water would flow directly to their crops.

"Egypt is a valley with the Nile flowing through it. When a person needs water for his field he goes to the riverbank adjacent to his field and makes an opening in the wall of the river using his foot and the water pours into his field. Then he closes the hole before the field is flooded..."

The "foot" referred to here is simply the method they would use to open the irrigation channel. They had some sort of barrier between the river and the channel that was strong enough to resist the waters but light enough to be kicked out of position. Then when the field was watered the barrier would simply be replaced.

But, does this not give an advantage to the river-lands over the hill-lands? In the river-lands, water and therefore crops are constantly abundant as opposed to the mountainous hilly lands of Canaan where the reliance on the rains is a rather risky and unpredictable venture. If anything, this passage would seem to endear us to Egypt rather than Canaan!

For this reason, some have suggested that the watering "by foot" refers to the act of carrying water from the Nile to one's field. This is contrasted with Canaan, where the rains bring the water directly into one's fields. The focus of this passage would then be on the effort required to irrigate fields. In Egypt it is heavy manual labour; in Canaan it can be performed without any effort whatsoever!

"In the Land of Egypt, if one does not work with spade and shovel, giving up his sleep for the water, then he will have nothing; but in the land of Israel it is different - they sleep in their beds and God makes the rain fall" (Yalkut Shimoni - Ekev)

But this reading - although at first glance highlighting the advantages of rain in Canaan, has its negative symptoms as well. After all, we are still left with a situation in which the supply of rain in Canaan is impossibly random as opposed to

the constant water supply of the Nile. In the heat of the Middle East, farmers will almost definitely prefer to work a little harder carrying water but have the security of the Nile, rather than the capricious rainfall of the land of Israel.

DIRECT CONTACT

So what is the advantage of the Israel system of irrigation? The verse gives us a clue in its final line: "It is a land on which the Lord your God always keeps his eye, from year's beginning to year's end." (11:12) The Midrash illustrates this idea with a parable:

"A king toured his kingdom. He came across a person of noble descent (who had fallen upon hard times) and he gave him a servant to assist him. Later he met another man of noble descent who (had come upon hard times) and was engaged in menial labour. This man was a personal friend and he knew his family well. He told him, 'I promise you that I will personally supply you with all your needs and you will have no need to work.' Likewise, all lands were given 'servants': Egypt drinks from the Nile, Babylon from the Euphrates. But the Land of Israel is different; they sleep in their beds and God makes the rain fall for them." (Sifrei, Ekev.)

In this Midrash, the rain of Eretz Yisrael is viewed as facilitating a direct God-Israel encounter. Egypt receives its supply indirectly. Israel gets its water straight from God in the form of rain. God delivers personally. The God-nation bond is strong in the land of Israel. In Israel we eat at God's table.

Of course, this is a good thing. Or is it? The advantage – the point of this Midrash – is the close contact with God. From a religious vantage perspective this is a wonderful blessing. But there are disadvantages. If Israel is a land of rain, then by the same token, it is also a land of famine. The Bible tells us that it is God who controls the water tap. As we read in the Shema: "If you listen to the Lord... I will give the rain in its correct season ... if your hearts are tempted, and you stray, serving other gods ... I will close the heavens and there will be no rain and the land will not give its produce..." (11:13-16) Our water supply is directly proportional to our religious conduct. Close contact with God might seem like a prize but it comes at a steep price – constant commitment to God.

A DEMANDING LAND

Here we reach the very essence of our topic. We have stated that **Eretz Yisrael is a demanding land**. This is the very definition of the Land of Israel. It is a land where life is anything but easy. It is a land that keeps those who live in it in a state of tense worry. The river-lands are given a constant flow of water, with massive, powerful rivers (the 'servants') providing the security and predictability that we all desire in our lives. Anyone who learns to exploit this river can take sustenance from them and secure his future. **But Israel is in the direct care of God and therefore does not allow a nation to relax**. "It is a land on which the Lord your God always keeps his eye, from year's beginning to year's end." This is a **wonderful gift to receive but a heavy burden to bear**.

A CULTURE OF DEPENDENCE

" ... it is clear that the riverlands more closely approximate the image of the Garden of Eden¹, which brings forth its fruits by itself. Even if irrigation

demands effort, the continual abundance of soil that is fertile and easy to work, and of water, gives man a feeling of complete security. It is as though he holds the guarantee of his future sustenance in his own hands. He can ensure himself against want. This is not so, however, of a land watered by rain. There nature gives no guarantees. All depends upon the grace of rain, over which man has no control. In the riverlands there can thus develop a culture based upon man's aspiration for complete mastery over the primary factors that condition his existence and his well-being. In the mountainous country, however, this is not so. There, even the illusion of mastery cannot survive. One who lives in that land knows that he is dependent upon a force over which he has no control ...

But is this not the very opposite of what we said above? The land of the mountains, it would seem, enslaves those who work in it, in contrast to the mastery and freedom of those who dwell in the riverlands. The Bible, however, sees things differently: **it is the very illusion of mastery, in contrast to the awareness of dependence that enslaves. It is precisely the desire for sovereignty over the conditions of human existence that produces an idolatrous culture, and the essence of such a culture is that ambition for complete human mastery which turns these lands into giant tyrannies and houses of bondage. On the other hand, awareness of the dependence that limits human sovereignty is the foundation for a culture of faith, the culture of free men.** It is precisely on this account that the land of Israel is appropriate to the chosen people which is subject to constant divine supervision and is always aware of being commanded by God."

(Professor Eliezer Schweid - The Land of Israel. National Home or Land of Destiny?)

Professor Schweid of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem raises a fascinating point here. He wishes to claim that the river-lands breed a power culture that stresses man's supremacy. In that culture man's energy is devoted to total control of his environment.

But how does Schweid see this as connected to slavery and idolatry?

Paganism is a system that uses religious ritual to exert influence on the gods. Man wishes to win a war, to have children, to be financially successful. In the idolatrous culture, man is not jolted by crisis into a state of introspection. Man feels little need to adjust his own conduct or repair his behaviour. In a system of paganism, one's fortune is not dependent upon one's moral state but rather on one's state of favour with the gods. Hence the pagan will engage in a ritual of sorts whose aim is to harness god desires to man's wishes. Through the gift that one bestows to god, one gains his favour. In this way, man has a controlling hand even in the area of the divine.

In a similar manner, it is slavery which ensures the elevated status of the inside few over the outsiders. Society's biggest fear is that some outside unknown element might destroy the artificial "secure" environment. Hence, mammoth energies are poured into securing the insecure and keeping any threat out of harm's reach. To this end, the river-land society knows only

of master and mastered, controller or controlled.²

The society that craves total control over its future is unwilling to tolerate feelings of insecurity and the existence of the unknown. But in the desire for security, this society is in its essence, insecure. This is a society of luxury and indulgence alongside fear, selfishness and exclusion.

It is interesting that Egypt comes up time after time in the Bible as a land which is viewed - from Abraham³ to Joseph⁴ to Pharaoh - as supporting slavery and oppression. It is a society which disregards rules of sexual chastity. Egypt is a society that represents an antithesis to the Jewish way of doing things. In a similar manner, Abraham leaves Mesopotamia, the other great river-land centre, to travel to the promised land of Canaan. The Torah consistently rejects the river-lands and adopts the hilly lands of Eretz Yisrael. The corrupt city of Sodom is described as "fully watered ... like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." However, at the same time, the Torah informs us that "the people of Sodom were very wicked sinners." (Genesis 13:10-13) There would seem to be a connection between the geographical information of a valley with a river running through it turning the entire area into a fertile land, and the spiritual level of its inhabitants. Is it surprising that the only story about Sodom is one in which strangers are lynched?

IN CONCLUSION

The dependency of the mountain-land makes it a difficult place to live. Throughout the book of Genesis we read of periodic famine in Canaan. Israel is destined to live a life of dependency on God. This is Israel's legacy, its historic challenge. **The land of Israel is naturally insecure and that is precisely the reason that it was destined for Israel.**

Interestingly enough, the rain issue is not the only way in which Israel experiences an existential feeling of instability. Israel is situated geo-politically, at the crossroads of continents. It is the land that lies between the two great river-land centres of ancient civilisation: Egypt and Mesopotamia. Thus from the perspective of national security, the land of Israel, by its very geographic location, is in a precarious and fragile position. Once again - and this is borne out throughout the Biblical history of Israel - the big issues are a direct outgrowth of this insecurity. Does Israel attempt to artificially secure its own lot in the volatile regional scene, or does Israel trust in God and follow its own unique way of living? And culturally, does Israel absorb the majority culture or will it retain its own slightly unusual way of looking at the world?

The Torah describes the maturation of the Jewish people from a slave people to an independent nation in their sovereign land. It is at this juncture that we are reminded to be wary of our priorities and our understanding of that which is the key to our national success. The Israelite is to realise that it is not "My own power and the might of my own hand who have won this wealth (lit. might) for me," but rather, "it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth." (8:17-18 but best to read chapter 8 in its entirety!) On this basis man will understand that the only assurance of national success is to be guided by the word of God.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Further Study

1. See the pesukim in Bereshit which describe the Jordan valley and compare it to:

- Egypt
- The Garden of Eden

What is the comparison here to the Garden of Eden? – see Bereshit 2:5-15.

What is the significance of the abundance of water in the Garden of Eden?

(It might be interesting to see Rashi's comments on Bereshit 2:5.

2. Lot and Bereshit:

Another connection between the two is the phrase used with Lot: "va'yisa Lot m'KEDEM". See Rashi there on Breishit 13:11. What leads Rashi to this conclusion?

Now see the Torah's use of the word "kedem" in Breishit 3:24, & 11:2.

3. See the following sources in Navi.

- Exekiel/Yechezkel .46:1-12
- Zakharia 14:1-12

They all refer to a future messianic-apocalyptic time in which waters will emerge from Jerusalem and actually flow to the Dead Sea (site of Sedom!) sweetening its bitter waters.

Let us note two things here:

- A reversal of the destruction of Sedom (esp. the source in Yechezkel)
- A situation in which Jerusalem becomes a water source for the region, "healing" the parch-ness of the surrounding lands and giving a constant supply of plenty to the region. Jerusalem is pictured as Eden!

In the light of our shiur and the position that we have taken of Eretz Yisrael = no fixed water supply = instability = God's direct contact and our dependence upon Him; then why is this to change in a future messianic age?

- Why was this (lots of water) the case in Eden?
- And why will it be the case in Yemot Hamashiach?

Any answers are welcome!

Footnotes

¹ See Genesis 2:8-17 and also see the equation of Egypt and Eden in Genesis 13:10.

² The Netziv has an incredible insight to this effect. See his commentary to Shemot 15:1 on the opening phrase of *Shirat Hayam*: "Horse and rider were both hurled into the sea." The Netziv comments that this is the essence of the *shira* (being mentioned by the women in their *shira* too!) and he tries to probe deeper to understand what is the uniqueness of this particular phrase. His answer: that "horse and rider" is the essence of Egyptian society. There is always someone controlling and someone else being controlled.

³ Genesis 12:10-20

⁴ Ch.39

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