

Parashat Toldot, 5772, 2011

The Uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The land of Egypt has always loomed large in the history of our nation. In fact, the word “*Mitzraim*” (“Egypt”) appears 680 times in *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible). In the main, our people’s relationship with this land has been a negative one. After all, this is the country wherein we were enslaved and tortured for 210 years. Moreover, this land has always been associated with some of the worst forms of depravity and perversion. Thus we read on Yom Kippur afternoon: “Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow their statutes.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 18:3) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on the *Torat Kohanim*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*, explains our verse in the following manner:

[This verse] informs [us] that the deeds of the Egyptians and the Canaanites were more corrupt than those of all other nations, and moreover, that the [Egyptians residing in that] region [of Egypt] in which the Israelites had dwelt, were the most corrupt of all. [*Torath Kohanim* 18:138] (All Tanach and Rashi translations are from *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*.)

Egypt, therefore, represented corruption, perversity, misery, slavery, and the moral nadir of mankind. Little wonder then, that when the *Avot* (Patriarchs) were faced with the possibility of going down to Egypt, they experienced fear and trembling. Each knew that their potential *y’ridah* (act of going down) from the Land of Israel contained the seeds of the spiritual and physical destruction of our people.

In all instances, the *Avot* were forced to consider going down to Egypt (Yitzhak), or actually went to Egypt (Avraham and Yaakov), because of an unrelenting famine:

And there was a famine in the land, and Abram descended to Egypt to sojourn there because the famine was severe in the land. (*Sefer Bereshit* 12:10)

And there was a famine in the land, aside from the first famine that had been in the days of Abraham, and Isaac went to Abimelech the king of the Philistines, to Gerar [in preparation for his journey to Egypt] (*Ibid.*, 26:1)

And the seven years of famine began, as Joseph had said, and there was famine in all the lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. And all [the inhabitants of] the land came to Egypt to Joseph to purchase, for the famine had intensified in the entire land. And to his father he sent the following: ten he donkeys carrying of the best of Egypt, and ten she donkeys carrying grain, bread, and [other] food, for his father for the way. And Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die." (*Ibid.*, 41:54, 57, 45:23 and 28)

The famine that Avraham was forced to face was one of his 10 trials (*Pirkei Avot* 5:3).

This was particularly the case since Hashem, unlike with Yitzhak and Yaakov, was silent in the face of Avraham's decision to go down to Egypt. No Divine Voice was heard to comfort him. In unremitting loneliness and concomitant fear, he descended to Egypt. In stark contrast, Hashem reassured Yaakov that his journey would not be a one-way one. Moreover, He promised Yaakov that He would stand by him through all of the misery of

Mitzraim:

And G-d said to Israel in visions of the night, and He said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "I am G-d, the G-d of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up, and Joseph will place his hand on your eyes." (*Ibid.*, 46:2-4)

Yitzhak's story differed quite markedly from that of his father and son. Although he had made full plans to go down to Egypt, Hashem did not allow him to do so. Moreover, Hashem used this exact moment to promise him that His Divine providence would

accompany him and bless him - in the Land of Israel. Additionally, Hashem promised Yitzhak that the assurances He had given his father Avraham would be fulfilled through him, and that He would increase Yitzhak's offspring beyond anyone's imagination. Thus we read:

And the L-rd appeared to him, and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land that I will tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you, for to you and to your seed will I give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham, your father. And I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and I will give your seed all these lands, and all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your seed, Because Abraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My instructions." And Isaac dwelt in Gerar. (Ibid., 26:2-6)

The *Meforshim* (Torah commentators) all wrestle with the obvious inconsistency with which we are presented. Why were Avraham and Yaakov allowed, if not outright encouraged, to go to Egypt, while Yitzhak was forbidden to do so? Why could Yitzhak's destiny only be realized in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), whereas the promises made to Avraham and Yaakov were universal in nature and not place-bound? It is to these questions we now turn.

The vast majority of commentators follow Rashi's position presented below. It is based upon two Midrashim, *Tanchumah Buber* and *Bereishit Rabbah*:

"Do not go down to Egypt" For he had in mind to go down to Egypt as his father had gone down in the days of the famine. He [G-d] said to him, "Do not go down to Egypt." You are [as] a perfect burnt offering, and being outside the Holy Land is not fitting for you. [*Tanchuma Buber*, *Toledoth* 6; *Gen. Rabbah* 64:3]

Although Midrashically inspired, Rashi deemed this interpretation to be the *p'shat* (the direct meaning) of this verse. Yitzhak, it appears, was simply too holy to leave the *kedushah* (holiness) of *Eretz Yisrael*. His near-death experience at the *Akeida* (Binding of

Isaac) had transformed him into all but an actual *korban* (sacrifice) within Hashem's perception. Just as sacrifices would one day be proscribed outside the Land of Israel (and eventually outside the Temple precincts), Yitzhak was prohibited from leaving the Land.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntchitz (1550-1619), known as the "Kli Yakar" after the title of his most famous work, adopted a very different approach from Rashi to explain Yitzhak's injunction from leaving *Eretz Yisrael*. While Rashi's emphasis was placed squarely upon the singular and holy nature of Yitzhak, the Kli Yakar focused upon Hashem's Divine Presence (*Shechinah*):

It appears likely to me that the reason why Hashem prevented him [Yitzhak] from leaving *Eretz Yisrael* was because *chutz l'aretz* (outside the Land of Israel) is no place for the Divine Presence to make itself manifest. If that is the case, Hashem would have been unable [so to speak] to utter His prophetic utterances to Yitzhak regarding pressing matters of the moment. Therefore, Hashem was really telling him: "Dwell in the land wherein I manifest My Divine Presence, for therein I will speak to you at any moment I so desire regarding any matter of Prophecy."

While these two approaches follow their own paths in explaining why Yitzhak was forbidden to leave *Eretz Yisrael*, they nonetheless share a common thread between them.

Both explanations squarely focus upon *kedushat ha'aretz*, the holiness of the land of Israel. Little wonder, then, that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) stated:

Our Rabbis taught: One should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a town where most of the inhabitants are idolaters, but let no one live outside the Land, even in a town where most of the inhabitants are Israelites; for whoever lives in the Land of Israel may be considered to have a G-d, but whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as if he has no G-d. For it is said in Scripture, "To give you the Land of Canaan, to be your G-d." [*Sefer Vayikra* 25:38] Has he, then, who does not live in the Land, no G-d? But [this is what the text intended] to tell you, that whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as if he worships idols. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud, Ketubot* 110b with my emendations)

In summary, dwelling in the Land of Israel means that, by definition, one has a close and special relationship with Hashem. It is this unique spiritual bond that enables us to feel

that we are “home” as soon as our plane lands at Ben Gurion airport. In stark contrast, one who lives outside *Eretz Yisrael* “may be regarded as if he has no G-d” and “as if he worships idols.” This is because, in a certain sense, one who lives outside of the Land is as if he is not living at all, since his life is devoid of the sparks of *kedushah* that the Land of Israel, itself, bestows upon us.

May *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah) joyfully bring all of us back from the four corners of the earth to our one and only true homeland, *Eretz Yisrael*. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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