



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Behar-Behukotai: The Loyalty of the Land

In our Parsha Discussions this year, we haven't yet spoken much about the special nature of the Land of Israel, a particular passion of mine. Behar and Behukotai have a strong focus upon the land of Israel. This seems an apt topic at this time of year, with Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim in the air.

Parshat Behar discusses the Shemitta (Sabbatical) and Yovel (Jubilee) years when farmers are meant to let the land rest, to abandon their control of the land. Although the people of Israel are granted sovereignty over the land, in a sense they remain "strangers resident with Me;" (Lev 25:23) in other words, ultimately the land is God's and we are merely its guardians, not its master.

And yet, the land is inexorably connected to the People of Israel. Behukotai describes how the land will give its extraordinary bounty - grant peace and security, and a sense of the divine presence (see Lev 26:1-10) - if Israel observe God's law. But an abandonment of the path of mitzvot will result in national ruin and exile. The land is spiritually sensitive and will not abide sin (see Lev 18:25, 20:22-4). Moreover Behukotai describes how the Jewish people may be exiled, but will always return. And Jewish history has shown that whereas the Jewish people have spent more of its history outside the land than residing in it, Israel has never had another land and never abandoned loyalty to the Land of Israel.

#### Loyalty of the Land

But the land has also been loyal to Israel. The verses that depict the national exile and ruin, state that:

I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. (26:32)

This translation indicates that conquering nations will be shocked at the extent of national ruin. But Rashi adopts a different reading. He suggests not that “your enemies will be appalled by it” but “your enemies will be desolate upon it.”

This is a good thing for Israel, namely, Israel’s enemies will not achieve a state of serenity in [Israel’s] land, and it will continue to be desolate and empty. (Rashi)

Ramban echoes this direction:

[This verse] comforts us with the realization that during all our exiles, our Land will not be hospitable to our enemies. This is another strong proof for eventual redemption, and a promise to us, that **no land on earth was as fertile and as welcoming as the Land of Israel, and yet, it has remained in a state of ruin. For since the time we left it, it has not accepted any other people. They have all tried to settle it, but to no avail.** (Comment to 26:15)

And throughout 1900 years of exile, the land of Israel was invaded and conquered time after time, but never flourished under foreign domination. In a famous passage in his journal, “Innocent’s Abroad,” Mark Twain reports of his visit to the Holy Land in 1867, and the desolation he witnessed:

A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds... a silent mournful expanse.... a desolation.... we never saw a human being on the whole route.... hardly a tree or shrub anywhere. Even the olive tree 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 energies... Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?

And so, although this seems to be quite a mystical phenomenon, the land retains its loyalty to the Jewish people! Maybe it is not surprising that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 97) discusses the advent of the Redemption, and depicts the re-flowering of the land of Israel as the clearest sign.

There is no clearer indication of the end than this -“And you, mountains of Israel, your branches will produce, and you will carry your fruit to My people Israel, for they will come soon.” [Ezekiel 36:8]

We live in an age in which the land of Israel has returned to fertility along with the return of her people. Jerusalem as a unified city is bustling with life, creativity and Torah. This week we will celebrate 50 years of Jerusalem’s reunification.

**So let's discuss:**

- A people can be loyal to a land, but can land be loyal to a people?
- We talk of Jewish rights to the land of Israel. The Torah promises the land to the Jewish people. And yet, Behar depicts how we should let go of the land once in seven years. Behukotai describes how the land can be taken from Israel if we fail to act in a holy and moral manner. This is a unique situation. To whom does the land belong?
- What hubris can ensue when we feel that we are masters of the land?
- The JNF set its task to plant trees in the land of Israel. Why are trees so important?
- Jews have always remembered Jerusalem. Why did Jews never move on and accept their exile? What has been the effect of having a homeland, even when we do not live there?

Shabbat Shalom!