

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat B'Chukotai* – The Desolate Land from Desert to Bloom

From my window I am greeted by blooming pea-flowers, roses and jasmines. Their pleasant scent enthralls me as I walk to my backyard to pick a full basket ripened loquats, the first fruits of the holy *shemitta* crop. I thank Hashem for the abundance on our land, which just 20 years ago before we settled here, was a dry disarray of thorns and prickles. It is amazing to have experienced this transformation from desolation to fruitfulness. As a teenager, surrounded by pro-Palestinian propaganda, I recall an exhibition at a hippy dippy café, called “The House,” which was the gathering place where my friends and I used to hang out. The exhibition was called, “The Desolate Land.” Its aim was to disprove the notion that ‘Palestine’ was desolate prior to Jewish settlement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I remember viewing walls lined with photos of nomads and other ‘Palestinians’ who were farming a fruitful land of ‘Palestine’ before the Jewish emigration and subsequent establishment of the State of Israel. At that time, I felt an identification with the poor ‘Palestinians’ – the true indigenous people who lived in harmony with nature for generations, cruelly expelled and made into miserable dejected refugees by self-absorbed Zionist imperialists. Until this day, many of my old friends in Denmark, even the Jewish ones still feel this way. But is it true that the land of Israel indeed was flourishing during the Islamic rule? The Torah teaches us otherwise. The fate and fruitfulness of the land of Israel is totally dependent on its relationship with the Jewish people. As part of the many curses enumerated in this week’s Torah reading, if we don’t follow Hashem’s directives, the Torah tells us that the land of Israel will lay completely fallow and desolated to the degree that people will be astounded by its desolation:

**פֶּר וּיקְרָא פֶּרֶק כּו פֶּסוּק לֵב וְהִשְׁמַתִּי אֶנִּי אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁמְמוּ עָלֶיהָ אִיבִיכֶם הַיְשָׁבִים בָּהּ:**

“I will make the land desolate and your foes who dwell upon it shall be astonished at it” (*Vayikra* 26:32).

### The Silver Lining in the Cloud of Desolation

Rashi explains that this curse is a blessing in disguise, “This is a kindly measure for Israel, that the enemies will find no satisfaction in their (the Israelites) land, and so it would become desolate of its inhabitants (the enemies) (Rashi, *Vayikra* 26:32). For centuries, the Christian church claimed that the desolation of the Land of Israel was proof that G-d had rejected the Jewish People. Ramban testifies to the contrary. He elaborates on the good tidings that Hashem is telling us that within all of our exiles, our land will not open herself to receive our enemies. This is a great proof and promise for us. “In the entire world you won’t find a land so good and so wide open, which had been settled from the beginning of time, but then became so desolate. Since we were exiled from it, it didn’t allow any other nation to settle within it, even though everyone kept trying unsuccessfully” (Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:16). Indeed, throughout the millennia – as numerous empires conquered the Land, and fought countless wars for its possession – astonishingly, no conqueror ever succeeded in permanently settling Israel or causing the desert to bloom. This made it easier for the Jewish people to return and resettle their homeland – what a hidden blessing.



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## From Fruitfulness to Wasteland Testimonials

Prior to the Roman exile, Josephus Flavius testified to the abundance in *Eretz Yisrael*: *“For it is an extremely fertile land, a land of pastures and many varieties of trees.... The entire land is planted by her inhabitants and not one stretch of earth is left uncared for. Because the Land is blessed with such goodness, the cities of the Galilee and numerous villages are densely populated. Even the smallest of villages boasts of at least 15,000 inhabitants”* (Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish Wars*). In 1260, the Ramban, writing to his son from *Eretz Yisrael*, gave a very different picture: *“What shall I tell you concerning the condition of the Land... She is greatly forsaken and her desolation is great... That of greater holiness is more desolate than that of lesser holiness. Jerusalem is most desolate and destroyed”* (Ramban, *Letter to his Son*).

Six centuries later, in 1867, Mark Twain found the Land in similar condition: *“A desolate land whose soil, though more than sufficiently rich, produces only thorn bush and thistle – a silent mourning expanse. There exists here a state of neglect that even the imagination is incapable of granting the possibility of beauty of life and productivity. We arrived in peace to Mount Tabor...we did not see a soul during the entire journey...everywhere we went there was no tree or shrub....The Land of Israel dwells in sackcloth and ashes. The spell of a curse hovers over her, which has blighted her fields and imprisoned the might of her power with shackles.”* Twain saw the desolation as so great that he wrote: *“The Land of Israel is a wasteland...The Land of Israel is no longer to be considered part of the actual world...”* (Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad or the New Pilgrim’s Progress* 1867). This statement by Mark Twain is a complete fulfillment of the astonishment over the desolation of the Land of Israel that our Torah verse predicted.

## Returning to Bloom – the Most Revealed Sign of Redemption

During all our exiles, our Land has never accepted our enemies. It has refused to be fertile, so that no other nation would settle in it permanently. An army may conquer territory, but to establish a permanent settlement requires the co-operation of the Land. This explains why Rabbi Abba said, there is no more revealed end [of days] than that which it states: *“But you, O mountains of Yisrael, you shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people of Israel....”* (Yechezkiel 36:8; *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 98a). Maharsha explains, “there is no more revealed end of days than this for as long as Israel does not dwell on its Land, the Land does not give her fruits as she is accustomed. However, when she will begin to flower again, and give of her fruits, this is a clear sign that the end – the time of the Redemption – is approaching, when all of Israel will return to its Land” (Maharsha, *Sanhedrin* 98a). We are fortunate to thank G-d, having experienced this return and this blossoming of the land in our recent time.

## Agricultural Paradise

I personally heard from a previous Gush Katif resident that when the first tomato plant sprouted forth in the desert of Aza, all the surrounding Arab farmers clapped their hands in praise and amazement. They had tried for decades, but were unable to grow even a mustard seed in these sand dunes. Gush Katif’s agriculture achieved international recognition and was a significant part

of Israel's export. The Gush Katif farmers were determined to make the desert blossom against all odds, in a desolate, bare and sandy place. The land of Israel responded to their efforts, the unique conditions, the challenging reality, and the connection between the farmers and the Rabbis brought about Halachic innovations, and the development of new agricultural methods which stood up to the highest standards – including Halachic ones. Unfortunately as soon as the Israeli army carried out the Cabinet's decision and forcibly remove the 8,600 residents of Gush Katif from their homes in August 2005, the blossoming agriculture of the area went down the drain. This is in spite of the fact that The Economic Cooperation Foundation, funded by the European Union purchased the greenhouses for \$14 million and transferred ownership to the Palestinian Authority, so that the 4,000 Arabs employed to work in them could keep their jobs ([http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/18/nyregion/18donate.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/18/nyregion/18donate.html?_r=1)).

### **Dramatic Downturn of Agriculture in Aza**

In spite of the efforts and donations to help the Arabs keep the successful agriculture going in Aza after Israel's withdrawal, fewer people are able to sustain their source of livelihoods from agriculture in the area. The percentage of Arab labor force working in agriculture went down from 12.7% ( 2007) to 7.4% (2009), (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PBCS). 2009). (I cannot find more current statistic about the agriculture in Aza but I am positive that it keeps declining after the Jewish people no longer live there). This stands in sharp contrast to the agricultural abundance prior to Israel's withdrawal, when the agricultural produce of Gush Katif represented some 10% of all agricultural produce raised in Israel; accounted for 65% of Israel's organic export industry; 90% of Israel's bug-free leafy vegetables; 45% of tomato exports and 95% of Israel's cherry tomato exports; 60% of Israel's herb exports; (<http://www.jewishagency.org/disengagement/content/26369>). Ironically the decision of the farmers of Gush Katif to leave their greenhouses intact in Gush Katif, was initially greatly opposed by agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz who argued that leaving the greenhouses to the Palestinians would lead to a tough competition between Palestinian and Israeli produce in Europe's markets. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel/gush-katif-s-farmers-to-leave-greenhouses-to-palestinians-1.164847>). It seems like Yisrael Katz could have saved his worry had he studied the Ramban on *Vayikra* 26:16 regarding the desolation of the land.

### **Sign of the Rightful Suitor of the Land**

*Eretz Yisrael* is compared to a faithful wife told that her husband suffers in a foreign jail from which he will never return. Nevertheless, she waits for him, accepting no suitor in his place, convinced that one day, he will return. The following metaphor also applies to the relationship of the Land of Israel with the people of Israel: Two different young suitors requested the hand of a young woman from her father. He told them to ask the young woman directly to make her choice. When one of them turned to her, he got a slap in the face, whereas the young woman responded with a smile to the other. Many nations came to the Land of Israel but she gave them the cold shoulder, yet she receives the Jewish people with the greatest smile. Is there a clearer sign who is her rightful suitor? (Rav Shlomo Aviner, *Planting in the Land of Israel, a Messianic Sign*, part of *Planting in the Land*, The Institute of the Torah and the Land, (Hebrew) p.122).