

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat V'Etchanan - Longing for the Land

Denied Entry

In this week's *parasha* Moshe is imploring Hashem with all His heart to be able to enter the Land of Israel. Moshe wanted nothing more than to be able to place his foot – just once – on the sacred soil of the Holy Land.

ספר דברים פרק ג (כג) וְאֶתְחַנֵּן אֶל יְהוָה בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר: (כה) אֶעֱבְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַהַר הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה וְהַלְבָּנוֹ:

"I pleaded with Hashem at that time, saying: ...Please let me cross over, and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill-country, and the Levanon" (*Devarim* 3:23-25).

Moshe prayed so much and so hard to enter the land of Israel that Hashem made him stop praying (*Devarim* 3:26). This is after Moshe had already prayed 515 prayers to enter the land (the numerical value of the word וְאֶתְחַנֵּן/*va'etchanan*); (*Midrash Devarim Rabbah* 11:10). In spite of his heartfelt prayers, Moshe was denied to even visit the land of Israel. How fortunate are we today that even without the slightest prayer, every Jew can claim his birthright to cross the threshold of the land of Israel. Growing up in Denmark without a vibrant Jewish community, our connection to the Land of Israel was naturally highlighted. In many similar dwindling European Jewish communities, you have the choice to either assimilate or make *aliyah*. I'm fortunate to have chosen the latter, thanks to my encouraging parents, may they live and be well. As a child, my parents would take my sisters and me on yearly visits to Israel. The scent of the orange groves in Hertzlia near my grandparents' OBM residence still lingers in my memory. The beach, the sun and the sand of the land attracted me with incomparable magnetic power.

Eternal Longing

Each of the *Avot*, (Patriarchs), are associated with a specific quality: Avraham with *chesed*, kindness; Yitchak with *gevurah*, self-control; etc. Moshe is associated with *netzach* – eternity. Everything that Moshe did was forever. Therefore, Moshe prayed, "to see the good land" in order to give it a 'good eye' for everlasting blessing for the land to be eternally good for Israel (*S'forno, Devarim* 3:25). Everything that Moshe did had the touch of eternity. Had Moshe entered the land of Israel, it would have been the eternal redemption. He would have instantly known the place of the Temple mount, which was hidden until the times of King David. This is the meaning of "the good mountain and the Levanon," which are metaphors for Jerusalem and the Temple (Rashi, *Devarim* 3:5). Moshe would then immediately build the Eternal Temple, which never would have been destroyed (Malbim, *Devarim* 3:25). However, due to Israel's lack of *emuna* when the report of the spies made them afraid to conquer the land, they caused the decree of the destruction of the Temples and exile. Therefore, Moshe was not permitted to

enter the Land of Israel. Otherwise, the Jewish People would have never again been able to leave the Land (*Malbim, Bamidbar 20:13*). Yet, G-d made Moshe's non-entry into the Land serve a positive purpose. Hashem wanted to ingrain the longing for the Land of Israel into the collective psyche of the Jewish People. By showing Moshe every blade of grass, by taking him and showing him every corner of the land he was never to enter, Hashem implanted within the heart of Moshe an eternal longing for the Land of Israel (Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair, www.seasonsofthemoon.com).

Recapturing Moshe's Longing for the Land

Moshe's yearning for the land of Israel reverberated throughout all generations and never left the Jewish people. Every Shabbat and holiday we recite "*Shir Hama'alot – A song of ascent, when Hashem brings about our return to Zion, we will be like dreamers...*" (*Tehillim 126:1*). Rabbi Yehuda Halevi who lived in Toledo, Spain during the middle ages is famous for his Zionistic outlook. He believed that the land of Israel is unique not only in a metaphysical sense, but also in a natural sense. The air is clearer and charged with *ruach hakodesh*, the divine spirit. Nature is more beautiful and magnificent in Zion than elsewhere. The rain, the soil, the stones, are all physically different in the land of Israel. When the Torah describes the land of Israel as "flowing with milk and honey" (*Devarim 26:9*), it implies that there is a unique quality in the nature of the land itself. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was in love with the land of Israel. While many pilgrims traveled to Israel, none expressed their love for Israel as passionately:

My heart is in the East but I'm furthest West,
 how shall I savor my food, how taste?
 How shall I honor vows and pledges while
 Zion is bound to Edom and I'm in Arab chains?
 Spain's bounty left behind would be a delight
 like the sight of the Holy of Holies' dust.

These moving words of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi resound in Rabbi Nachman of Breslau's proclamation, "My place is only in *Eretz Yisrael*, and wherever I go I'm going to *Eretz Yisrael*. It's just that, in the meanwhile, I'm stopping in Breslau" (*Chayei Moharon 156*). These sacred words are like a rope of rescue for anyone living in the Diaspora even temporarily.

Yearning for the Land from Afar

I held on to this rope of rescue during the four years when I followed my husband to the Diaspora. After having made Aliyah in 1980 and taken roots in Jerusalem where our first son was born and raised, my husband was called to fulfill his obligation to the United States of America. Way before having been enthralled with the magic of our spiritual homeland, while he attended New Jersey Medical School, my husband obligated himself to pay back his university loans by working in a physician shortage area. He was able to postpone his duty for more than seven years, but the day came when he would have to choose between being a doctor or an inmate in an US. correction center. I felt like I was mercilessly torn away from my beloved

homeland, the land of my soul, but I had no choice other than trotting along. I managed in USA and even learned how to drive, but not a day went by without missing the land of Israel. The pain of this yearning was like longing for a missing a part of myself, which is eternally linked with the Holy Land. My longing for the land was possibly an outgrowth of Moshe's desire for the land. He didn't desire the Promised Land in order to eat of her fruits, but only because the land of Israel is prepared for the uppermost holiness. In this land we can rise to a greater perfection, this is the meaning of "I will see the good land," as the land is good for the perfection of the soul, which is the only true good (Malbim, *Devarim* 3:25).

Chain-Reaction of Longing in the Soul-Pool of Israel

One of the Torah teachings that kept me going during the lows of my personal exile was a teaching by Rav Kook that when we yearn to return to the Land of Israel, it causes a mystical chain-reaction of longing in the soul-pool of *klal Yisrael* (The general community of Israel). The love and connection to *Eretz Yisrael*, like the longing of a lover far away from his beloved, awaken other Jews to return to Zion. This is because all Jewish souls are linked together. Therefore, the yearning and passionate desire for the land of Israel paves the way for redemption. As Rav Kook expressed it:

"...The depth of the holy yearning of the love of Zion acts like an overflowing spring to all of the klal, to the myriads of souls which are bound up with him. ...The hope of life for Israel sparkles; the planting of G-d develops and blooms; and the light of salvation and redemption spreads out like the dawn which stretches over the mountains" (Rav Kook, *Orot* 6).

Now that I have returned once again to the Holy Land, I treasure the memory of my past yearning, knowing that this empowered me to help others to return to the Promised Land. I like to share the following poem that I wrote soon after settling in Bat Ayin, Gush Etzion:

Sunset over the Judean Hills

As I stand on the foot of the rugged mountains, and let my gaze climb the rocky hills,
I think about how much this land means to me.

I have traveled the world, climbed the Alps of Switzerland,
ridden on the Skyline Drive in Virginia, and touched the stalagmites in its caverns.

My love for nature has been fostered since childhood.
I was practically born in a forest.
Two ancient beech trees graced my parent's garden in Denmark.
We used to climb the fence that separated our backyard and the forest.
At springtime we delighted in the blanket of pure white anemones,
which covered the ground.

When I stand here looking at the Judean hills, I must admit that others may not notice anything spectacular about the scenery which I face.

Its grass is not as green as the Danish forests.
Its mountains are not as marvelous as the Swiss Alps.

Yet, there is something else about this land that keeps me spellbound.
The blueness of the sky invokes a sincerity that I have never felt before.
The heavenly glow of the light is something that I have never seen in any other place.

As sunset is approaching this light draws me outside – outside of the shell of my house, and almost outside of myself.

As I gaze at the reflection of the bright light on the golden mountain cliffs, my whole being becomes one with the radiant atmosphere.

This is the land of our Fathers and Mothers.
Here, Avraham bought the holy soil as an abode for the souls of those selected to carry on his mission.

Close by, Sarah's tent was revived with the candlelight lasting from Shabbat to Shabbat, the blessing of the *challah*, and the cloud of glory as Rivkah carried on her spiritual genetics.

Not far from my view, Ya'acov had his prophetic dream.
When the last angel had climbed the ladder of heaven he exclaimed:
"Surely the Eternal is in this place; and I knew it not."
Now we know, because he has taught us how fearful this place is, it being the house of G-d and the gate of heaven.

Here, Rachel's soul bitterly weeps for her children in exile. But "there is hope for your future says Hashem, and your children shall come back again to their own border."

Yes, we have come back O Rachel, to the fields where you herded your flock, to the well where you kissed your beloved. To bring comfort to the ancient rocks of your tomb, to confide in you – our ageless mother. We pour out our pain mingled with hope as we kiss the soft velvet draping of your spirit.

Yes, we have returned to these barren hills who were yearning to yield their crops to Your children. This is the time to plant and the time to build up.

The vineyards of the Judean Mountains are bursting with ripe juicy grapes
 longing to be gobbled up by freckled golden haired children
 leisurely dangling their sunburned legs over the rosemary hedge.

These are the mountains that Moshe could see only from afar.
 His eyes straining to take in the entire view as he bemoaned,
 "I shall not come into that good land which the Eternal thy G-d gives you for an inheritance...
 but you shall pass over, and possess that good land."
 We are passing over and possessing the good land as we walk its length and breadth.

How the greatest among us throughout our past would have given, and
 gave their entire life in order just to kiss this holy soil once.
 They have rendered their blood to enable us
 to embrace the sacred ground with our eager steps.

As I look at the sun setting over the sea-like ridges of the Judean hills,
 I feel so privileged to be born in the era of return.
 I feel as if the Bible is opening up to me, and I walk right on its pages.