

**This shiur is dedicated in memory of
Dr. William Major z"l.**

PARASHAT EIKEV

**The Security of Canaan
By Rav Michael Hattin**

INTRODUCTION

Parashat Eikev is a continuation of Moshe's impassioned exhortations to Israel, the addresses that serve as the introduction to the explication of the laws that begins with next week's reading. In *Parashat Eikev*, Moshe again charges the people of Israel to remain loyal to God's teachings, spelling out the consequences of good and evil that will befall them as a direct result of their national choices. Once more, he offers them words of strength and encouragement indicating that if they merit God's assistance and help, then the daunting challenge of conquering and settling the land will be accomplished without mishap or setback. As always, but this time with unusual urgency, he cautions them not to fall prey to Canaan's fetishes of gold and silver, the alluring idolatrous images and their associated rites that if adopted by the people of Israel will quickly spell their doom.

Moshe reminds the people of the Exodus from Egypt, when God forcefully intervened to reduce the oppressive Pharaoh and his threatening minions to naught. He recalls the transformative experience of the wilderness wanderings, when steadfast trust in God's providence was acquired not in spite of but rather because of deprivation and want. How the people longed for immediate sustenance and how they anxiously thirsted for water! Only years later, with the hindsight afforded by a lifetime, came Israel's realization that what they truly lacked during that formative period was not food and drink, clothing and physical comfort, but rather a recognition of human dependence upon God and an unshakable faith in both His ability as well as in His interest to sustain and to preserve them:

He afflicted you and caused you to hunger, He fed you the manna that you did not know, neither you nor your ancestors, in order to inform you that not by bread alone does man live but rather by all of the words of God does man live! (*Devarim* 8:3).

Moshe, though painfully aware that he himself will not live to enter it, then embarks upon an extended praise of the land of Israel. Describing for his expectant listeners its fertility and its plenty in the most attractive terms, his hopeful words contrast forcefully with his earlier intimations of catastrophe:

You shall know in your heart that as a parent chastises his child, so too does God your Lord chastise you. You shall observe the commands of God your Lord, to walk in His ways and to revere Him. For God your Lord brings you to a good land, a land of water streams, of springs and deep pools, issuing forth in the valleys and from the hills. It is land of wheat and of barley, of grapes, figs and pomegranates; it is a land of olive oil and (date) honey. It is a land in which you shall eat bread without deficiency, you shall lack nothing in it; it is a land whose stones shall yield iron and from whose mountains you shall extract copper. You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless God your Lord concerning the good land that He has given you. Be on guard lest you forget God your Lord... (8:5-11).

As the commentaries perceptively point out, the noun “land” occurs in this brief series of seven verses a total of seven times, a sure indication that it is in fact the passage’s key expression. Here, Canaan’s bounty is tantalizingly spelled out – its abundant sources of water, its golden grains, redolent fruits and beneficial liquids, even the natural metallic resources embedded deep in its rocky hills. The land’s blessing will provide plenty of good bread and sweet water, precisely the staples for which the people hungered so mightily during the long period of aimless wandering through a parched and inhospitable wasteland. But Canaan’s rewards will not be extended to the people gratis, in fact quite the contrary. If the trying experience of the wilderness provided ample opportunity for the people to express discontent and rancor, unveiled resentment and exaggerated complaints, then the produce of the land’s fertile hills and valleys will surely demand of them another countervailing response: “You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless God your Lord concerning the good land that He has given you”. The text thus presents us with a glaring study in contrasts: the scorched and arid wilderness versus the well-watered slopes of the land, the people’s pained and impetuous outcries versus their measured and well-considered praises of the Provider.

EGYPT AND CANAAN

The uniqueness of the new land, beckoning just beyond the *Yarden* but forever beyond Moshe’s reach, is the theme that concludes this week’s reading as well, where yet another contrast is spelled out:

For the land that you now enter to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have gone forth, where you would plant your seeds and then irrigate them after the manner of the garden of vegetables. But the land which you go over to inherit is a land of hills and vales; from the rains of the heavens you shall drink water. It is a land that God your Lord seeks constantly, the eyes of God your Lord are upon it from the beginning of the year until its end (*Devarim* 11:10-12).

In the above passage, the Torah contrasts the new land that the people of Israel will soon enter with the land of Egypt that they had long ago left behind, but still remembered so fondly. The latter had to be cultivated through irrigation while the former depended upon the rains of the heavens. The reason for the startling difference between the two

landscapes is straightforward enough: rainfall in Egypt is quite rare. The valley, bounded on either side by the inhospitable sand and rock of the Sahara desert, is instead sustained by the life-giving waters of the Nile River.

This mighty river has its beginnings in the vast lakes of the African interior. Along its entire length, some 6000 kilometers until it disgorges as a delta into the Mediterranean Sea, many civilizations grew up. The river valley of Egypt that constitutes the final 1000 kilometer stretch of the Nile, is exceptionally fertile, for the winter and spring run-off of the river is full of nutrients supplied by organic detritus. The ancient Egyptians cultivated their narrow valley industriously, often coaxing two or three crops out of the black earth each growing season. But the work was intensive – the water of the river had to be directed into large irrigation channels and then brought to the fields at some distance from the water's edge. Water had to be also stored up in reservoirs, for with the onset of the autumn, the level of the river would begin to decline until the next inundation some eight months later. And of course, there was much ongoing maintenance involved in ensuring that all of the channels, ditches and water courses were in good shape, neither clogged by debris nor rendered inefficient through neglect and disrepair.

THE NILE AND THE SPRINGS

In the Canaanite hill country, by contrast, there were no major rivers, only small springs, often seasonal, that were fed by the sometimes intense winter rains. And while the Nile valley was a flat and long plain, the hill country of Canaan was not. The hills had to be terraced so that agriculture could be sustained along narrow strips of arable land while the Canaanite farmer depended upon the rainfall exclusively in order to cultivate his crops. It should come as no surprise, by way of digression, that the sun god was worshipped with special zeal during every period of ancient Egyptian history, while in Canaan the storm God Ba'al, ostensible master of the winds, the rains and the thunder bolt, was venerated with particular affection and fear. In any case, in our passage the Torah seems to be favorably contrasting the land of Egypt with the land of Canaan, as Moshe impresses upon his expectant listeners that life in Canaan will be less arduous, with the physical effort necessary for sustaining agriculture appreciably less due to the direct irrigation provided by the rainfall.

This is in fact Rashi's (11th century, France) reading of the passage, quoting an ancient Rabbinic opinion on the matter:

(The new land) is not like the land of Egypt (*Devarim* 11:10) – but rather better than it. This assurance was extended to the people of Israel when they left the land of Egypt, for they had said: “perhaps we will not come to a land as good and as beautiful as this one!”...for the land of Egypt is more praiseworthy than all of the other lands, as the verse states “it is like the garden of the Lord” (*Bereishit* 13:10), and...the land of Ra'amses where the Israelites dwelt is the choicest land in Egypt, as the verse states “Yosef settled his father and his brothers. He gave them a landed possession in Egypt in the choicest area of Ra'amses, just as Pharaoh had

commanded” (*Bereishit* 47:11). But even that land was not as good as the land of Israel. (For in Egypt) you irrigated the fields after the manner of a garden of vegetables – for which rainfall does not suffice and it must be watered by foot and shoulder, (holding the water and transporting it to the fields). In the land of Egypt one had to bring water from the Nile with one’s feet and then water the fields and one had to disturb one’s sleep and expend effort, for the low lands could be thereby irrigated but not the highlands, and one had to raise the water from the low lands to the high. But this land (the land of Israel) drinks water “from the rains of the heavens” (*Devarim* 11:11) – you may continue to sleep in your bed while the Holy One Blessed be He does the work for you, irrigating the low lands and the high lands, the exposed tracts and the unexposed tracts as one (commentary to *Devarim* 11:10).

RAMBAN’S OPPOSING VIEW

In glaring contrast to Rashi, the Ramban (13th century, Spain) provides an alternative and more sobering reading. After quoting Rashi at length, the Ramban retorts:

The straightforward reading of the passage is that it is stated as a warning, for God means to say to them that “if you observe all of the commandments then you shall possess a land flowing with milk and honey”, for God will grant the rains of your land in their due season and the land shall give forth its produce. But realize that this new land is not like the land of Egypt that can be irrigated from the water channels and reservoirs like a garden of vegetables, but it rather is a land of hills and valleys that gets its water from the rainfall and in no other way. It therefore always requires God’s sustaining hand to provide it with rain for it is a very arid land that needs rainfall all of the year. IF YOU ABROGATE THE WILL OF GOD SO THAT HE WILL NOT SUSTAIN IT WITH DESIRABLE RAINS THEN IT BECOMES A POOR LAND INDEED THAT CAN BE NEITHER PLANTED NOR CULTIVATED, AND NO CROPS SHALL GROW UPON ITS SLOPES.

All of this is reemphasized in the following section that “if you shall surely hearken to My commandments...then I shall grant the rains of your land in their proper season – the early rain and the late rain” (*Devarim* 11:13-15) – that is, always; but if you fail to hearken to My commandments, then God shall “stop up the heavens so that there will not be any rain, and you will be quickly lost – by famine – from upon the good land” (*Devarim* 11:17), for you will not be able to live in it when the rainfall fails.

This section therefore provides a warning in accordance with the laws of nature and from it we may learn that even though God is capable of all things and He could effortlessly destroy the inhabitants of Egypt and dry up their rivers and channels, nevertheless the land of Canaan could be more quickly lost should He withhold His powerful rains. The ill person requires more merit and prayer that God should heal him than the well person requires in order to preserve his healthy state. So too is

the Divine measure concerning the poor and the wealthy, though God illuminates the eyes of both... (commentary to *Devarim* 11:10-12).

For the Ramban, our section contrasts the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan but not, as Rashi maintains, in order to highlight the ease of living that awaits the Israelites on the other side of the *Yarden*. Quite the contrary. Life in Egypt is actually easier, for the river provides its people with a dependable source of water. The Egyptian farmer labors mightily in order to irrigate his tract of land, but he need rarely fear that his source of water will suddenly dry up. The Nile rises and falls according to a fairly predictable seasonal pattern but it seldom fails entirely. The situation of the farmer in Canaan, however, is many times more precarious. Because he depends upon the rainfall for his sustenance, his is a life of uncertainty and existential insecurity. He raises his eyes heavenwards in anticipation of the winter rains and if those rains fail to materialize, then he and his family are in acute danger. The issue for the Ramban, then, is not the PHYSICAL effort that must be expended in order to wring sustenance from the earth, but rather the EMOTIONAL and SPIRITUAL outlay that must accompany the process. Put differently, the Egyptian farmer can afford to be complacent for he knows that his source of water (and hence the sustenance that grants him life) is stable, sound, secure and steady. But the Israelite farmer must always be vigilant, for his agricultural successes are tenuous, tied as they are to the vagaries of the seasonal rains.

The interpretation of the Ramban goes a long way towards explaining the maddening stress that sometimes overwhelms those that dwell in the land of Israel, until this very day. Sometimes, the challenges seem so insurmountable and the state of stability and equilibrium an elusive and far-off dream. But this very quality of volatility, the shifting sands that seem to underlie so many of our accomplishments in the land, can yet be the source of our strength. For the Ramban, life in the land of Canaan is inherently tenuous for a profound but simple reason: how much harder it is to lose sight of Almighty God's ongoing involvement when life hangs in the proverbial balance! How much easier it is to reach out to God in supplication once the illusions of self-sustainability have been stripped away. For while the farmer in Egypt can yet mistakenly believe that his efforts will surely secure his survival, the farmer in Israel, and by extension all the inhabitants of the land that depend upon his successes, knows otherwise. He will labor mightily, for such is the lot of man, but it is merciful God alone who will bestow success. Put differently, the dweller in Canaan need never feel abandoned for dwelling in the land will ensure that he continually seek out God as his source of strength and comfort. And God will not disappoint: "It is a land that God your Lord seeks constantly, the eyes of God your Lord are upon it from the beginning of the year until its end" (*Devarim* 11:12).

Shabbat Shalom