

PARASHAT EKEV

In Praise of the Land

By Rav Elchanan Samet

In the portion of Moshe's speech contained in this week's parasha, there are two passages which praise the Promised Land. We shall examine each of them individually, as well as compare them in order to understand their similarities and differences.

I. THE DESERT VS. THE CHOSEN LAND

The land is first praised in chapter 8, verses 7-10:

"For Hashem your God is bringing you to a GOOD LAND,

A LAND with streams of water, with fountains and depths that flow from the valleys and the hills;

A LAND of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates,

A LAND of olive oil and honey;

A LAND in which you will eat bread without scarceness, in which you will lack nothing;

A LAND whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you will mine brass.

And you will eat and you will be satisfied and you will bless Hashem your God for the GOOD LAND which He has given you."

The significance of the word "land" in this excerpt is self-evident: it is repeated seven times as a leading word, and appears as the subject of five consecutive clauses. In this way it determines in the ears of the listener (or eyes of the reader) the subject of the entire excerpt, as well as its rhythm and internal structure.

Upon examination of the different contexts in which the leading word appears, the chiasmic structure of the excerpt becomes apparent, as follows:

1. a GOOD land (to which Hashem your God is bringing you)
2. a land of streams...
3. a land of wheat...
4. A land of olive oil and honey.
5. A land in which you will eat bread...
6. A land whose stones are iron...
7. The GOOD land (Hashem your God has given you, and you will bless Him for it)

In 1 and 7 the land is called "good," with no specification of any of its qualities. In both places the emphasis is on the fact that God has brought you to, or given you, the land. But in 1 the land is still a destination whose nature and quality is unknown, while in 7, following the list of its praises (2-6), the Torah concludes: after entering the land and eating of its goodness, you will bless God for "THE good land" (this time using the definite article) which He has given you.

In 2 and 6 we find a description of the natural resources with which the land is blessed: first of all there is water flowing from the valleys and the mountains, allowing for the possibility of agriculture - this is the most vital of all natural resources. At the same time there is iron and brass to be dug from the ground, facilitating industry and the creation of agricultural tools, for domestic use and for the creation of weapons.

Sections 3,4 and 5 form the heart of this excerpt. Here we find a list of the seven species for which the land is praised - these are the types of agricultural produce that characterize the land. In 3 we find mention of five types of produce necessary for human consumption, and correspondingly we are told in 5 that the "bread" (made from wheat or barley) will be abundant in the land, together with other types of food. In 4, the central section, we find mention of oil and honey (that is, date honey). Why are these two products so important that they are placed at the center of the list?

Let us examine once again the development that exists in each corresponding pair, and try to see whether it is based on some uniform system. We shall now work backwards: from the center outwards. The wheat and barley mentioned in 3 are separated from the bread in section 5 by a series of human activities which take the raw grains and make them fit for consumption. Bread is therefore a higher developmental level of good use of the land; an expression of cooperation between man and the land.

The water flowing through the streams in section 2 flow of their own accord from the valleys and mountains. Man can channel this water in such a way as to irrigate his fields. But the iron and brass contained within the earth and its rocks in section 6 require considerable and sophisticated human effort in order to become useful to man. A comparison of the verbs in these two sections illustrates the difference and development between them: the water "flows" (yotz'im) in the valleys and mountains, but "you shall mine (dig)" the brass from the mountains - you, man. Here, too, the mining of minerals is a higher developmental level of good use of the land - it is a realization of the potential which it hold, through human intelligence and diligent labor.

The development from section 1 to 7 is built on the same principle. In 1, man is passive: God "brings" him to a good land. But after he has extracted the good of the land by his efforts - by plowing, sowing and harvesting crops, planting and gathering fruit, baking his bread and drawing the minerals from the earth, and has merited to eat and be satisfied, he himself blesses God Who has brought him to the land and given it to him.

We may summarize by saying that the development from the section in the first half of the excerpt to the corresponding section in the second half is a development from the good that exists within the land - that which embedded within it or obtained from it in a raw state - to what man creates and changes, using that which exists in the land.

Now we come to the section that is located at the heart of this structure: "a land of olive oil and honey." On the one hand, this phrase is part of the list of the seven species that grow in the land, and in this respect it belongs to the first half of the excerpt. On the other hand, it also belongs partly to the second half because it does not mention the fruits in their raw state (olives and dates), but rather fruits from which man has extracted the best for his use, by means of his strength and wisdom: from the olive he has obtained oil, and from the dates he has produced honey. There is also a development within this pair itself: the origin of the oil is mentioned - it comes from the olive, but when it comes to the honey there is no mention of the fruit from which it is made. Only the final product is mentioned. Thus the oil and honey belong to both halves of the excerpt and serve as a connection between them. For this reason they are located at the center of the chiasmic structure.

Our discovery of the principle upon which this excerpt is built will clarify its continuation in verses 11-14. Here the Torah expresses concern lest man grow proud of the wealth and possessions that he has amassed in the land. This continuation is a sort of mirror-image of what preceded it, in terms of both structure and content:

Guard yourself lest you forget Hashem your God...

lest when you eat and be satisfied,

having built good houses and dwelled in them,

and your herds and flocks HAVE MULTIPLIED

and YOU SHALL HAVE MULTIPLIED your silver and gold

and all that you have IS MULTIPLIED

then your heart will be haughty and you will forget Hashem your God...

The root of faith is also the root of blasphemy. The crux of the praise of the land lies in the good qualities which it possesses in POTENTIAL, allowing a person who labors to realize all of it, with

considerable human effort. Man's part in the final product which he creates in partnership with the land increases and enhances the praise of the land.

But as man's part in the creation of his wealth grows, and as his actions distance themselves from that partnership with the land, the danger increases that he will say to himself (8:17), "My power and the strength of my hand have made this might for me," and that this pride will bring him to forget God and to neglect the observance of the mitzvot.

The starting point of this dangerous process is exactly at the point where the previous description ended off (8:10): "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied..." Here we continue (8:12): "LEST you eat and be satisfied..." But verse 12 lacks the continuation which is found in verse 10, the condition without which the deterioration is to be expected: "And you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land..."

The eating and satisfaction are the final stage in the connection between man and the land in the first passage, but they are only the beginning of the rapid process in the passage which follows: the continuation involves "good houses which you will build and in which you will dwell" - and these houses are still built on the ground, and are built from the stones and rocks of the ground. Thereafter "and your herds and your flocks will multiply" - cattle and sheep roam around on the land, and the purpose of raising them is to eat meat. The next stage is that "you will multiply your silver and gold" - there will be a wild increase of wealth which is disconnected from the land and its goodness. All this wealth has been created and achieved by man, apparently, by his own strength and power. It begins in cooperation with the land, but ends disconnected from it. And here, the same human act and effort which constituted praise for the land and praise for man, may turn man away from recognition of his Creator and increase his pride to the point where he forgets God and neglects to observe the mitzvot: "And Yeshurun grew fat and kicked." There is no remedy but to remember where we come from and Who has given us all this good, and Who gives us the strength and power to achieve all of this might.

The description of the land's goodness in verses 7-10 is surrounded with descriptions of the desert period as the antithesis to living in the land. The desert, after all, is (Bamidbar 20:5) "this evil place, not a place of seed or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." Prior to the praise of the land, we are told in verses 2-3:

"And you shall remember all the way that Hashem your God led you these forty years in the desert... and He humbled you and made you hungry, and fed you manna which you had never known and which your fathers had never known... in order to make you know that it is not by bread alone that man lives..."

Following the praise of the land, we read something similar in verses 15-16:

"...Who leads you in the great and terrible desert, with poisonous snakes and scorpions and thirst for there is no water, Who brought forth water for you from

the rock of flint, Who fed you manna, which your fathers had never known, in the desert, in order to afflict you..."

The life of the nation in the desert was a necessary stage in their history. This period was meant to educate Am Yisrael towards the idea that "it is not by bread alone that man lives, but by every word that comes from God's mouth a person lives." The remembrance of the wandering in the desert is the remedy for the possible danger that awaits Israel specifically because of the good of the land and the wealth that they are destined to amass there.

Nevertheless, the desired goal for national life is in the good land: in working the earth and eating of its goodness – eating which is accompanied by blessing God and by observing the mitzvot. It is only within the land that God's mercy towards Am Yisrael will be revealed in its fullness.

II. THE LAND OF THE RIVER VS. THE CHOSEN LAND

The next place in parashat Ekev where we find praise of the land is in chapter 11, verses 8-12.

"And you shall observe all of the mitzvot which I command you today, in order that you may be strong, and come and possess THE LAND to which you are passing over, to possess it.

And in order that you may prolong your days upon the land which God promised to your fathers, to give it to them and their seed, A LAND flowing with milk and honey.

For THE LAND to which you are coming, to possess it - it not LIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT, from which you came out, where you sowed your seeds and watered with your foot, like a vegetable garden.

THE LAND to which you are passing over to inherit it is A LAND of mountains and valleys; it drinks the water of the rain from heaven.

It is a LAND which Hashem your God cares for; the eyes of Hashem your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year."

As in the previous passage, "land" is clearly the leading word here, and is repeated seven times. But there are some differences between the two passage:

i. Here not all appearances of the word "land" refer to the land of Israel. In verse 10, where it appears for the fourth time – the central section – this word refers to Egypt.

ii. While in the previous excerpt the principle praise of the land lay in its seven special species, here the main praise of the land rests on the fact that it is a "land flowing with milk and honey."

iii. While in the previous passage (8:7) "fountains and depths flow from the valleys and the mountains" and join the streams, here it is (11) "a land of mountains and valleys which drinks the water OF THE RAIN OF THE HEAVENS." (It is specifically the similarity between the two verses in their description of the land as one of mountains and valleys that emphasizes the difference.)

iv. The most obvious difference is God's constant care and concern for the land, mentioned at the end of the present passage (12), but not mentioned at all in the previous one.

The key to understanding this passage and its differences from the previous passage lies in the fact that here, THE PRAISE OF ERETZ YISRAEL IS CONTRASTED IN ITS ENTIRETY WITH DISDAIN FOR THE LAND OF EGYPT. Since this contrast between the two lands forms the crux of the excerpt, the central appearance of the leading word "land" refers specifically to the land of Egypt: "It is not like the land of Egypt." The praise of Eretz Yisrael is arranged around this verse which serves as a central axis. Again, we have a chiasmic structure based on the leading word, "land." The first obvious contrast between Eretz Yisrael and Egypt – located at the heart of the excerpt – is in the sphere of the historical connection of Am Yisrael to the two lands:

3. For THE LAND to which you are coming TO POSSESS

4. IS NOT LIKE THE LAND of Egypt, from WHERE YOU CAME OUT

5. ...THE LAND to which you are PASSING OVER TO POSSESS IT

Canaan is the destined and promised land – THE LAND OF THE FUTURE, while the land of Egypt is the one "from where you came out" – it is the LAND OF THE PAST, and everyone knows what we went through there.

The second contrast between these two lands is the NATURE of each of them, in the geographical, agricultural and climatic spheres. This contrast is described in the next most outward circle:

2. A LAND flowing with milk and honey

4. It is NOT LIKE THE LAND of Egypt... where you sowed your seeds and watered it with your foot like a vegetable garden

6. It is A LAND of mountains and valleys which drinks water of the rain of heaven.

What is the meaning of "a land flowing with milk and honey"? Here the reference is not to the honey of fruits (dates), as in the previous passage. The honey here, like the milk, is a product that is obtained from animals, i.e. bees. Honey is evidence of fields that have many flowers, while an abundance of milk testifies to good pasture ground. This description therefore indicates that the land has these natural attributes, such that even in the absence of agricultural processing (when the land is still sparsely settled, as in the early generations after the conquest), it provides an abundance of honey and milk for the inhabitants who dwell in its green areas and let their flocks roam there.

The fact that Canaan is a land "flowing with milk and honey" stems from the fact that it is a "land of mountains and valleys" which are fed by the rain of the heavens, as explained in the corresponding section 6. The arid and flat land of Egypt, which is irrigated only by the waters of the Nile and all of which is simply one long valley around this river, is indeed a land of intensive and developed agriculture – "and which you water with your foot, like a vegetable garden," but it is not by nature a "land flowing with milk and honey."

The third contrast between the two lands, located in the outermost circle, refers to the connection between the land on one hand and God and His mitzvot on the other – a connection which determines the fate of the inhabitants of the l:

1. "And you shall observe all the mitzvot... in order that you may be strong, and come and possess THE LAND... and in order that you lengthen your days upon the land which God promised to your forefathers to give to them and to their seed

4. Not LIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT...

7. A LAND which Hashem your God cares for; the eyes of Hashem your God are constantly upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year."

The possession of the land, and the lengthening of Israel's days upon it (section 1) are dependent on observance of God's mitzvot. This dependence is unique to this land, and does not exist in Egypt. This is explained by God's selection of the land and His special attitude towards it, as described in the corresponding section 7. This outermost circle contains the starting point of the entire excerpt – a demand for observance of the mitzvot in the land, as well as the climax and conclusion of the description of the land's praises – God's care and concern for the land from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.

There is a clear connection between this outermost circle and the more inner one: the land's requirement of rain and dependence upon it are the tangible expression of God's unique care for this land. Therefore life in this land is not something that can be taken for granted, as is possible in Egypt. Rather, life is dependent on the behavior of the nation resident in the land, and whether this nation will observe the mitzvot of God, Who cares for this land constantly.

III. THE CHOSEN LAND VS. THE DESERT AND THE LAND OF THE RIVER

We are now in a position to explain the differences between the two descriptions of the land in our parasha: in the latter passage (11:8-12), in which the land is presented in contrast to Egypt, it would not be appropriate to praise the land for its agricultural abundance, as we found in the earlier passage, for in this respect Egypt surpasses Eretz Yisrael, for it has a great river and highly developed agriculture, including most of the seven species. Likewise it would not be appropriate to praise the land here for the streams and rivers that run through it, as we found in the earlier passage, for none of these rivers can be compared with the Nile or Egypt – one of the greatest rivers in the world. On the other hand, the rains which revive the mountains and valleys of Eretz Yisrael do not descend in Egypt, and it is these rains which make Eretz Yisrael into a "land flowing with milk and honey," unlike Egypt.

In the first passage, in chapter 8, the Torah contrasts life in Israel with life in the desert. Here it would not be appropriate to praise the land for "flowing with milk and honey" (which are something of a free gift to the inhabitants of the land, for they do not need to work the ground in order to obtain them), nor for its being under God's constant care. The life of the nation during the desert journeys was under God's constant care and supervision, even more overtly than in the land, and the manna which they ate in the desert – bread from the heavens – is preferable to honey and milk. But what was lacking in the desert was a normal, natural lifestyle of a nation living in its land, deriving from it an abundance of fruits and produce – the seven species. Such a life is more ideal than a life dependent on constant miracles, as was the case in the desert, and so the Torah emphasizes here this aspect of life in the land.

Thus we find that in each excerpt the Torah's language is adapted to the framework and purpose of that particular description of the praise of the land. But here the following question arises: isn't there a contradiction between these two descriptions? There is a vast difference and polar contrast between Egypt and the desert; how can Eretz Yisrael be praised in contrast with both of them simultaneously?

The praise of the land does indeed lie in the fact that it allows for human and national existence in the ideal "golden mean," in between two negative extremes. The one negative extreme is the way of existence in Egypt, where none of God's concern is felt: God gives the inhabitants of that land all of their requirements – abundant water and fertile land – and then cuts off all contact with them, as it were. Thus they are able to wallow in their abominations, for their existence is in no way dependent on or connected with their actions.

But life on the other extreme, in the desert, is also not ideal. The life of the nation in the desert depended on revealed miracles that repeated themselves day after day. Water was provided for them from a rock, while their food came from heaven – the opposite of the natural course of events. This dependence on miracles is termed by the Torah "affliction" and "testing" (8:2-3, 15). Such a life was proper as preparation for their entry into the land, as a foundational experience which would accompany them for all generations and protect them from the moral corruption which would threaten them as a nation living in its land, satiated and blessed with plenty.

An ideal life is one in which the individual and the nation are living a natural life, toiling and eating of the fruits of their toil with joy, without being dependent on miracles and changes in the natural order, while still managing to perceive God's concern and care within the framework of nature itself. The value of their actions in the moral-religious sphere is what determines their success in the material, tangible sphere. This way of life includes natural agricultural elements – like in Egypt, the land of the river – as well as elements reflecting life under constant Divine supervision – like in the desert. Their proper combination is what characterizes life in the chosen land.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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