

Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim: Everywhere I go... Rabbanit Michal Kohane Class of 2020

This week, I remember an insightful conversation with my fourth grade students, back when I was teaching in California. We talked about the unique connection between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, and about how this land was described in Torah times as a “land of milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8), while the settlers of the late 19th century found mostly swamps and robbers.

Mark Twain, who traveled the land in 1867, writes a sorrowful description in his book “The Innocent Abroad or the New Pilgrim’s Progress”. He tells of the endless rocky terrain, the rarity of agricultural growth, the painful blasting sun which “almost fried us”, coupled with the lack of shade as well as absence of trees and clean water. A traveler, he shares, can never find both (shelter and water) in the same place: “We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds – a silent mournful expanse...even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country...Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless...(it) is hopeless, heartbroken...desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise?”...

Another traveler, Alfon de Lamartine, in his “Recollections of the East” from 1845, adds: “...Outside the walls of Jerusalem, however, we saw no living voice. We encountered that desolation and that deadly silence which we would expect to find at the ruins of Pompeii... the burial ground of an entire people...”

Nachmonides of the 12th century writes of his visit to the Holy Land. Though it took place centuries earlier, it’s pretty much the same: “What shall I tell you about the land? There are so many forsaken places and the desolation is great. It comes down to this: the more sacred the place, the more it has suffered – Jerusalem is the most desolate”...

And yet, that was not always the case. Josephus, in his noted “the Jewish Wars”, from around the first century, shares a completely different scene: “... For the whole area is excellent for crops or pasture and rich in trees of every kind... it is thickly covered with towns and thanks to the natural abundance of the soil, the many villages are so densely populated....”

Botanists and researchers agree with Josephus and confirm that up until about 1800 years ago, there were forests in the Galilee. Indeed, according to this week’s Torah portion so we are commanded (Leviticus 19:23):

וְכִי-תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, וְנִטְעַתֶם כָּל-עֵץ
23 And when ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all
מֵאֲכָל... manner of trees for food...

This verse - partially – might be familiar from Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet LeYisrael*) publications. In this week’s Parashat *Kedoshim*, it is part of a number of agricultural mitzvot. We are commanded against different kinds of mixings: not to tether mismatched animals together; not to wear wool and linen, and not to sow a field with an inappropriate mixture of seeds (kil’ayim). We might derive from this that it is better to not plant at all, so we will not come to mix anything. That’s when the Torah says: “When you come to the Land, you WILL plant”.

The midrash in Vayikra Rabba 25:3 picks up on the word “etz”, tree, and connects us to the first tree and the first planting act in the Torah, back in Genesis:

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן רַבִּי שִׁמּוֹן פָּתַח (דברים יג, ה) רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן רַבִּי שִׁמּוֹן פָּתַח (דברים יג, ה) רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן רַבִּי שִׁמּוֹן פָּתַח (דברים יג, ה)
אָחֳרַי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ. וְכִי אָפְשֶׁר לְבָשָׂר וְדָם
לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרֵי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא? וְאֵתָּה אוֹמֵר
וְבו תִדְבָּקוּן! אֲלֵא מִתְחַלֵּת בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם לֹא
Rabbi Yochanan ben Shimon began, "After the Lord your God shall
you walk' (Deuteronomy 12:5). But is it possible for a human being
of flesh and blood to walk after the Holy One, blessed be He?... And
you say, 'And (not only you should walk after Him but also) to Him

תַּעֲסֵק הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶלָּא בְּמִטֵּע תְּחִלָּה,
 הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב (בראשית ב, ח): "וַיִּטֵּע ה'
 אֱלֹהִים גֶּן בְּעֵדֶן", אִף אַתֶּם קִשְׁנִנְסִין לְאֶרֶץ לֹא
 תַּתְּעִסְקוּ אֶלָּא בְּמִטֵּע תְּחִלָּה, הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב:
 כִּי תִבְאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ וְנִטְעַתֶּם.

shall you cling?' But rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, from the very beginning of the creation of the world, occupied Himself with planting first. Hence it is written (Genesis 2:8), 'And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden.' You also, when you enter into the land, only occupy yourselves with plantation first. Hence it is written, 'When you shall come to the land.'

For our sages, planting trees in the Land of Israel was directly connected to being in G-d's image and following in His footsteps. We are told that Rav Kook was invited to participate in a festive tree planting. Everything was prepared in advance, to show respect to the great rabbi: the sapling was in plastic wrap, there was a new shovel, the hole already dug in the ground. Instead, Rav Kook set the shovel aside and started digging by hand, kissing each clump of dirt. Rav Kook exemplified in his actions something about the unusual relationship we have with the Land, a place that is part of our relationship with G-d.

Rabbi Yoel Moshe Solomon, one of Petach Tikva's first settlers in 1878, describes it in his writings: "... In all the days passed, from the time her sons left her, she had covered herself with sack cloth, shed tears and withdrew her light and hid in haze... she did not give her strength to strangers not her produce to aliens. Like her son's destiny, who cannot find rest among the nations, so is hers..."

Similar to Rav Kook who lovingly kissed the earth, the Land for Rabbi Yoel Moshe Solomon, is not merely "dirt" in a coincidental geographical spot, but rather, a living woman, pained and bereaved over her missing beloved. As such, she can't "grow" anything. She does not give herself to anyone else, until her one and only comes back. This sentiment repeats in other writings as well.

We didn't go into quite this much depth back in fourth grade, but the idea of this unusual connection, between a People and a Land, slowly became clear to the children. That's when one of my students raised his hand: "Is that why there's trouble there now, because the Land is still in pain, over us not being with her? Should we go?"

Rabbi Nachman coined my favorite saying: Everywhere I go, I go to the Land of Israel.

The Land has the potential of giving our meandering journey in this world a purpose and direction. It could be only a metaphor. Or a very real thing. Both. The place at our People's core is a place where the explainable and that which is not – meet; where heavens and earth - kiss. Sometimes we miss it; sometimes we argue, disagree, revolt, then long to visit again. How we are able to participate in its making is a personal quest, but at least we can appreciate – and celebrate - how lucky we are to live at a time when we can witness its renewed awakening; the beginning of its redemption.



Rabbanit Michal Kohane was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director and more. Most recently she was the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and holds a PsyD in organizational psychology. Rabbanit Michal's first novel, Hachug ("Extracurricular") was published in Israel by Steimatzky and she writes a weekly Torah blog. Now back in Israel where she grew up, she continues to be a scholar in residence in Israel and abroad