

PARASHAS BECHUKOSAI

Remember the Land

One could not say that the Jewish people had not been adequately forewarned. The fearsome prophecies of the Tochachah, the Divine Rebuke, in this week's Torah portion depict in chilling detail the immense tragedies that would punctuate and characterize Jewish history during the periods of spiritual decline. But there would always be hope. No matter how bleak and dark their circumstances in the land of their foes, God has promised to "remember the covenant" binding Him to the Jewish people and redeem them.

And then, almost as an afterthought, God adds, "And I will remember the land." What is the meaning of this phrase? It is the suffering of the people that we want Him to remember. Why does He promise us that He will remember the land? How is that a consolation for us? In what way will He remember it?

If we take a closer look at the dark prophecies of the Tochachah, we find an earlier reference to the land. "I will lay waste the land and your enemies who dwell in it will be wretched." As part of the retribution for the infidelity of the Jewish people, God promises to exile them and also to devastate the land and turn it into a virtually uninhabitable wasteland. What is the point of this promise? Isn't enough to scatter the Jewish people among the hostile nations of the world? Why must the soil of the land also be grievously afflicted?

The commentators explain that this verse is actually meant to offer a glimmer of hope to the Jewish people in their darkest hours. No matter how bleak and desperate the exile may become, the Jewish people will always comfort themselves by dreaming of an eventual return to their ancestral lands, to the homes in which they had experienced such joy and inspiration. But if their homes should seem forever out of their reach, their hopes and dreams would be dashed on the hard rocks of reality, and they would succumb to despair.

Therefore, God promised them that the land would be devastated, that no great nations would take root in the ancestral Jewish lands, that no prosperous cities and flourishing economies would arise their during their absence—even if it lasts for thousands of years.

Looking back on history, we have seen the fulfillment of this prophecy. For nearly two thousand years, while our people suffered exile, pogroms, massacres, oppression and all sorts of other persecution, the land of Israel, situated at the crossroads of the world,

has lain desolate and virtually depopulated. Clearly, it has not allowed any other culture to sink deep roots there. Clearly, the land awaits our return from the land of our enemies.

“One day this war will come to an end,” one refugee said to the other, “and we will go home and resume our lives. I have a photograph of my house that I look at from time to time. It brings me comfort.”

He drew out a crumpled photograph from his pocket and showed it to his companion.

His companion nodded. “Nice. But mine is even more comforting.” He drew out his own photograph and handed it over.

“But this is a picture of a bombed-out house!” exclaimed the first man. “How can this be comforting to you?”

“This war has gone on for a long time. It is caused a lot of chaos. Who knows what we will find when we return? Who knows how hard it will be to recover our property? My house is devastated, and I don’t think anyone will bother to rebuild it and move in as long as this war is raging. I will reclaim it when I return and take the greatest pleasure in rebuilding it.”

In our own lives, we have seen the connection of the Jewish people to the prosperity of the land. Until the last century, Israel was a dusty backwater, sparsely populated and extremely poor. But with the return of our people to the land in significant numbers, it is no longer a wasteland. The desert blooms. The cities sprout and flourish. Multi-lane highways crisscross the land. We see the fulfillment of God’s promise to reserve the land for the Jewish people. Let us pray that the ultimate redemption will follow speedily in our times.