



*Parashah Insights*  
by  
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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

*Parashat Ahare Mot*  
*The Challenge of Eretz Yisrael*

*Their Deeds*

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, I am Hashem your G-d. Like the deeds of the Land of Egypt where you lived, do not do, and like the deeds of the Land of Canaan to which I bring you, do not do, and do not follow their practices. Keep My laws and observe My decrees to follow them, I am Hashem your G-d. And you will observe My decrees and My laws, which a man will fulfill and live with them. I am G-d” (*Vayikra* 18:1-5).

Rashi explains the Torah’s commandment (18:3).

“Like the deeds of the Land of Egypt: This tells us that the deeds of the Egyptians and of the Canaanites were more corrupt than all the other nations, and the land where the Jewish people lived was the most corrupt of all.

“To which I bring you: This tells us that those nations whom the Jewish people conquered were the most corrupt of all.

“Do not follow their practices: What did the Torah leave out that it did not already say? Rather, this refers to their customs which are established practice with them, such as circuses and stadiums.”



Rashi's explanation still leaves us with some questions. Why does the Torah specify both "the deeds of the Land of Egypt" and "the deeds of the Land of Canaan"? And why was it necessary to add, "where you lived" and "to which I bring you"?

### *Safe?*

We may say that with this commandment, the Torah warns us against the wiles of the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and shows us how to overcome it. The *yetzer hara* is sophisticated indeed, and it knows us well. It convinces us that in our current location and present circumstances, we are safe and protected from temptation. Maybe at one time we were at risk, it says, but our situation is different now. There is not a chance in the world that we might stumble into sin, so there really is no need to be careful – it is just not going to happen. This is why the Torah tells us, "like the deeds of the Land of Egypt, do not do." Unfortunately, there can be negative influences in Canaan as well.

What was so very evil about Egypt and its deeds?

Egypt is called *ervat ha'aaretz*, literally "the nakedness of the land," or as Rashi explains, its weakest spot (*Bereshit* 42:9). It was the land where immorality reigned: Our Sages teach that there are ten measures of immorality in the world; nine in [the Egyptian city of] Alexandria, and one [spread out over] the rest of the world (*Esther Rabbah* 1:17).

Egyptian immorality stemmed from their ancient progenitor Ham, the son of Noah (see *Bereshit* 10:1,6); Egypt is in fact known as "the Land of Ham" (*Tehillim* 105:23,27; 106:22). Ham himself was utterly lewd and immoral, as evidenced by his depraved act against his own father Noah, perpetrated while Noah was in a drunken stupor (*Bereshit* 9:20-25, *Sanhedrin* 70a). Our Sages teach that Ham was the only person to engage in marital relations while in the Ark. In punishment, he emerged with black skin. (The only other creatures to do so were the dog and the raven, who were also punished; *ibid.* 108b).

This evil root was the factor which caused Egypt of all countries to be the scene of Yosef's great trial. Their "nine measures of immorality" resulted in the utter moral decadence prevalent in Egypt. The Arizal teaches that Egypt is the direct opposite of *Eretz Yisrael*. Just as *Eretz Yisrael* is on the highest level of sanctity, Egypt is on the lowest level of impurity (*Etz Hayyim, Shaar Mem Gimel*, Chapter One).

The Sages tell us that no nation sank as low as Egypt (*Eliyahu Rabbah* 7, "u'mah nishtanet Mitzrayim"). They describe the utter moral degradation prevalent



in this degenerate land: “men would marry men, women would marry women, a man would marry both a woman and her daughter [at the same time], and a woman would marry two men” (*Torat Kohanim, Ahare Mot 8*). This is why the Torah tells us, “Like the deeds of the Land of Egypt where you lived, do not do.”

We can understand that when we reside in a totally immoral environment, we must indeed be on our guard against the evil inclination. But we may be tempted to assume that when we live in the holiest land on earth, the dangers are not that great, so that we no longer need to worry. However, the Torah teaches us that we can never drop our guard. As we learn from our Sages, the corruption of the Canaanites was on par with that of the Egyptians. “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe, go tell [the people of] Israel, when you were in Egypt, you were like a rose among the thorns. Now that you are entering the Land of Canaan, [you must continue to] be like a rose among the thorns, and take care not to imitate the deeds of either nation” (*Vayikra Rabbah 23:7*)

The Torah forbids us to imitate the behavior of the Egyptians among whom we lived in the past, and also of the Canaanites whom we will encounter in the Holy Land. Both these nations were steeped in immorality and witchcraft, and their evil ways should never be allowed to make inroads among the Jewish people. Wherever we are, no matter how sanctified the location, we must be alert to the dangers around us.

### ***Slaves No Longer***

There is another factor to consider. During our nation’s servitude in Egypt we were open to wrongdoing, because a slave, by his very nature, is lowly and likely to sin. Our Sages tell us that a slave is content to live a loose life, free of obligation and responsibility (*Gittin 13a*). We find this concept in the *halachot* concerning an *eved ivri* (Hebrew servant). An *eved ivri* who chooses to remain with his master after his initial six years of bondage undergoes a rather demeaning ceremony in which a hole is bored in his ear and he becomes the master’s permanent acquisition. He is his master’s property, in the same sense that the master’s donkey and ox are his property. The master can give him a maidservant, and the children they bear are also the master’s property. This woman is not his wife – she belongs to the master. These children are not his children – they too belong to the master (*Shmot 21:2-6*).

Is this a life of dignity and self-respect? Surely not. But despite the degradation involved the servant declares, “I love my master and my wife and my children. I will not go free” (21:5). He throws off his innate sanctity as a Jew, who is above all a servant of G-d, and of his own volition, subjugates himself to a human master. Why



does he do it? Because a slave is a lowly being. This is why the Torah mentions the Land of Egypt in particular: as slaves in Egypt, we, too were lowly, and liable to sin.

But not any more, the evil inclination tells us. We are out of Egypt and up from bondage, free men in our own land. We are no longer on the inferior level of mere slaves, and are surely immune to the madness of the peoples around us. The Torah goes on to warn us that this is not so: “And like the deeds of the Land of Canaan to which I bring you, do not do.” The Canaanites were an exceptionally sinful, corrupt nation, and close contact with them carried risks. Wherever we are and whatever our status, we are always vulnerable and liable to fall. It follows that we must always be vigilant against sin and temptation, in *Eretz Yisrael* no less than elsewhere.

### *Learning from the Neighbors*

With this in mind, we can understand an interesting insight from the Ohr HaHayyim concerning the obligation to bring First Fruits to the Temple (*Devarim* 26:1). He writes that the wording of this commandment teaches us three additional points, beyond the commandment itself:

- To realize that we have only acquired *Eretz Yisrael* as a gift from the Al-mighty and not through our own military prowess, and that it was given to us on the condition that we accept the Al-mighty as G-d.
- To expel the non-Jewish nations residing in the land.
- To live in *Eretz Yisrael*, in order to fulfill the commandment of dwelling in the Holy Land.

If we understand that living in the Holy Land means obeying Hashem’s instructions, our lives there will be blessed.

As we see from the second point listed by the Ohr HaHayyim, Hashem instructed our people to drive the non-Jewish nations out of the Holy Land. This was a necessity, because there was a real danger that the Jews might learn from their negative example and adopt their corrupt behavior. This is also the reason behind our Sages’ decree against the consumption of non-Jewish bread and wine. The interaction and intimacy of sharing food and drink brings people together, not always with positive results (*Shabbat* 17b).

As we learn from Rashi (cited above), the Torah’s commandment includes not only an admonition against obviously sinful acts – “the deeds of the Lands of Canaan” – but also against “their practices.” These practices are not blatant sins; they are Canaanite cultural mores which, at least at first glance, seem harmless enough. These too are to be strictly avoided, because embracing non-Jewish music,



fashions, and the like will lead us to embrace overtly sinful non-Jewish behavior, eventually leading to even the most immoral of acts.

## *Lingering Influence*

We know that there are no random or extra words in the Torah. Why does the verse specifically say, “like the deeds of the **land** of Egypt, do not do” and “like the deeds of the **land** of Canaan, do not do?” Why did the Torah not just say, “like the deeds of the people of Egypt do not do” and “like the deeds of the people of Canaan do not do,” or even more simply, “do not do like the deeds of Egypt and of Canaan?”

We can understand this by studying a teaching of our Sages in *Pirke Avot*: “Two who sit together with no words of Torah between them are considered a gathering of scoffers” (*Avot* 3:2). The commentaries explain that “a gathering of scoffers” refers to the actual location where the scoffers assembled. Even after they depart, their wickedness continues to exert a bad influence on those who sit there, causing them to neglect Torah study.

We find the same idea in the first verse of *Tehillim*: “Fortunate is the man who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of the sinners he did not stand, and in an assembly of scoffers he did not sit” (*Tehillim* 1:1). As we said, a wicked individual influences his physical surroundings, and the impression remains behind even after he leaves. King David praises the righteous man who does not sit where the wicked sat, even when they are no longer present.

Not only the residents of Egypt and Canaan were impure, but the actual “Land of Egypt” itself was impure. *Eretz Yisrael*, in contrast, is innately and inherently pure and holy. The whole world was founded on the Rock of *Shetiyyah*, at the heart of the Temple (*Yoma* 54b, *Bereshit* 28:22, commentary of *Ohr HaHayyim*). This site is the gateway to Heaven; Heavenly influx descends from there to earth, as our Forefather Yaakov saw in his prophetic dream (*Bereshit* 28:17). Rabbi Avraham Azulai, author of *Hesed L’Avraham*, explains at length that the Holy Land is the first location to receive Divine bounty (*Hesed L’Avraham, Maayan Gimel, Nahar Gimel*). And yet, this sacred land as well can be defiled with sins, as happened with the Canaanites. Even after the wicked are gone their influence can linger on, and caution is always in order.

Our Sages teach that inanimate objects can also retain and transmit impure influences. This is how the *Zohar* explains the Torah’s commandment concerning *nige batim*, a special form of leprosy which afflicted the houses in the Holy Land which had been built and inhabited by Canaanites. The stones infected with this type



of plague were examined by a *Kohen*, and if declared impure, were removed from the walls. The *Zohar* writes that the purpose of this process was to uproot the idolatrous influence embedded in houses which had formerly been dedicated to idol worship. When names of impure forces are mentioned in structures built for idolatry, impure spirits are granted a hold there. The commandment to remove the impurity from these houses as part of their purification uprooted any entrenched defilement from those houses which had become Jewish dwellings (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 50a).

### *The Greater Challenge*

*Eretz Yisrael* is imbued with great sanctity (*Kelim* 1:6); it is the ideal setting for spiritual growth and elevation. Our Sages tell us that its very air has the capacity to impart wisdom (*Baba Batra* 158b). At the same time, however, the evil inclination also has greater power in *Eretz Yisrael*. It battles mightily against the Land's innate holiness, and is especially eager to trip us up precisely in this most sacred of locations (see *Sukkah* 52a). This is why the Torah says, "and like the deeds of the Land of Canaan to which I bring you, do not do." We should not imagine that the very fact of living in the Holy Land suffices to protect us against temptation. If anything, the *yetzer hara* redoubles its efforts to persuade us to imitate the wicked ways of the non-Jewish nations, right here in Hashem's Own Palace.

Rabbi Yaakov She'altiel Ninyo writes in *Emet L'Yaakov* that just as Jerusalem is the center of the Holy Land, and the Holy Land is the center of the universe, the Forces of Evil present there also hold this same central position, and are especially powerful there (*Emet L'Yaakov, Maarechet HaKuf, Ot Lamed-het*).

Both Rabbi Yediyah Rephael Abulaffiah (*Kinayn Perot, Maarechet HaKuf*, p.187) and Rabbi Eiyahu Mani (*Mazkir Shalom, Maarechet HaKuf, Ot Yud*) strongly opposed the *Emet L'Yaakov's* opinion. However, Rabbi Eliyahu Mani, citing a letter by Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, author of *Pri HaAretz*, writes that those who live in Jerusalem and in *Eretz Yisrael* as a whole do seem to suffer greatly. At times, we find that newcomers to the Land experience both spiritual difficulties and trials as well as material hardship, because the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* makes great spiritual demands upon those who live there.

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk discusses this phenomenon. He cites the *Midrash Shohar Tov* on *Tehillim* (85:2): "You favored, Hashem, Your land.' The Holy One, blessed be He, watches and observes and has His Eye on the Holy Land, until its deeds become favorable." It takes time, sometimes even years, for one who comes to *Eretz Yisrael* to adjust and become fully settled there, to the point where he prefers its austere and holy lifestyle to the comfortable material lifestyle of the Diaspora.



King David said of *Eretz Yisrael*, "Man after man was born there" (*Tehillim* 87:5). One who comes to *Eretz Yisrael* must undergo a renewed process of gestation, infancy, childhood, and maturity in order to become an integral part of the Holy Land. Torah scholars who came to *Eretz Yisrael* with a lifetime of piety and Torah study behind them have often been frustrated and disappointed – they felt that they had lost everything. What had happened to all their earlier efforts? Where were the Torah and *mitzvot* they had labored so long and hard to acquire? They found their new life almost unbearably difficult at first. With time, however, the situation began to improve. They became sincerely attached to the Holy Land, enjoying all the spiritual advantages it has to offer, and grew there beyond limits.

This process has no uniform timetable, and there is no way to predict how long it will take. It depends on the unique makeup of the individual, his deeds, and the root of his soul. One who plans to settle in *Eretz Yisrael* should be prepared for this challenge, and consider whether he is on the level to cope with the hardships he will encounter. If for the most part, at least, his character is good and he has consulted with Torah scholars who can advise him, he will eventually be blessed with success (letter at the end of *Pri HaAretz*).

We find this principle in the saintly Arizal's own experience when he settled in *Eretz Yisrael*. During his years in Egypt he had merited the very lofty level of *giluy Eliyahu*: the Prophet Eliyahu had revealed himself to him and instructed him in the Torah's esoteric secrets. Much to his shock, when he arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* he discovered that he had forgotten all that he had learned! His anguish was enormous, until he was informed in a dream that whatever he had studied and acquired in Egypt was no longer relevant. *Eretz Yisrael* is on a vastly higher spiritual plane, and he would have to begin his intensive efforts for spiritual growth anew. The Arizal took the message to heart. With time, he achieved even more exalted levels of sanctity and Torah knowledge than he had ever attained in Egypt (*Shivhe HaArizal*, Chapter 2, p. 6)

Apparently, the move to a land of greater sanctity requires renewed personal sanctification; we cannot rely on past spiritual achievements. We are moving on to a higher level, and should expect that this will involve new trials, on a correspondingly higher level. To be equal to the challenge, we must be prepared to build our spiritual selves anew.

In our times we often encounter this phenomenon in the lives of *baale teshuvah* (newcomers to observant Judaism), who frequently experience setbacks much like newcomers to the Holy Land. In their former secular lifestyle, they did very well in business, employment, and more. After they repent and are committed to Torah,



they begin to suffer problems and hardships. In the case of *baale teshuvah*, this can happen not only in *Eretz Yisrael* but anywhere in the world. This does not mean that they have made the wrong decision; it is an indication of spiritual growth. Before they were religious, the evil inclination had little reason to bother them – they were sinning without any special efforts on his part. Now that they are on a higher spiritual plane he is determined to drag them down, and battles their accomplishments tooth and nail. If a *baal teshuvah* remains strong and holds his ground despite the difficulties, Hashem will help him, blessing him with happiness, success, and good health.

The Torah commands us, “and like the deeds of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, do not do.” *Eretz Yisrael* is a land which is holy and sanctified. It is also a land which brings with it trials, hardships, and temptations which do not exist in other lands. If we wish to benefit from the Holy Land’s enormous potential for spiritual growth, we need to make ourselves worthy of the privilege of residing there. If we can do so, we will gain advantages which are unavailable anywhere else on earth.

*This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.*

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