

MISSION UNFULFILLED

by Rabbi David Algaze

“Hashem said to Abraham, ‘Go away from your land, from your relatives and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Beresheet 12:1)

Abraham’s revolutionary spirit is most evident in this incredible journey. He is asked what appears to be a mission impossible: to abandon his homeland, his family and all that was familiar to him and journey to a land unknown, which G-d simply calls, “the land which I will show you.” Without a doubt and apparently without delay, Abraham undertakes this difficult journey with his wife, his nephew Lot and all the acolytes they had acquired in Babylonia. His sacrifice and profound faith in G-d transformed him into a model for generations. The image of an old man traveling to the land of Israel is an icon for later generations of our commitment to the land of Israel and the unbreakable bond between our people and the Land.

However, many Rabbis have demurred on Abraham’s commitment to fulfill the mitzvah of inheriting the Land. The Rosh says that Abraham delayed his journey and he did not go immediately to the land and for this act he was punished. Nachmanides goes even further, “Know that Abraham sinned greatly by abandoning the land at the time of the famine and because of this it was decreed that his descendants would live in exile under the Pharaohs in Egypt.” The source for this interpretation is found in the Zohar, “R. Yehuda says, ‘Because Abraham went down to Egypt without permission his children were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years.’” (Lech Lecha 81b) The punishment of Exile is a fitting retribution for the refusal to accept the land with a full heart.

The same phenomenon we see in the forefathers is repeated in the lives of their children: the same weakness and vacillation regarding our rights to the land of Israel that rears its head at the time of our Fathers, is repeated again and again throughout our history. Regarding this sin Hashem does not forgive or ignore. On the contrary, in the case of any vacillation in the matter of our possessing of the land, G-d sends out His punishment immediately. When Abraham tarried and did not immediately fulfill G-d’s command to leave, he is thrown into the fiery furnace. As the Shelah (R. Yeshayahu Horowitz, Poland and Frankfurt, 1560-1630) comments that the actions of Abraham are presaging the future generations of Jews to teach us--with uncanny prophetic accuracy-- that whenever Jews become too enamored of their stay in Exile, G-d will throw us into the ovens.

The first time Hashem speaks to Abraham in the land of Israel He promises to him, “To your offspring I will give this land.” (v. 7) This is more than a promise; it is a command to us that applies at all times and under all circumstances. The centrality of the land of Israel for our identity as Jews is evident in the emphasis that inheriting the land occupies in the narrative about our first Father and the founder of our people. Our Rabbis teach us that the people of Israel was chosen as a nation and not as individuals. Even a single soul of Israel exists only by virtue of its connection to the soul of the na-

tion. The Torah itself was given to us as a nation and not as individuals. (Maharal, R. Yehuda Loewe, Prague 1526-1616, Netzach Israel 11 and other places). Israel can live as a nation only in the land of Israel. As soon as we enter foreign lands, the nation dies, as it says in Ezekiel 37:11, “Our bones are dried and our hope is lost” because leaving the land is for the nation akin to entering a grave and in Exile we succumb to the gentiles’ persecutions and exterminations. (The Gra, R. Eliahu of Vilna, 1720-1797, at the end of his commentary on the Sifra-Di-Tzni’uta)

Israel as a community can exist only in the land. Hence Maimonides explains that the calendar can only be established by a Court in the land of Israel because only in Israel a community of Jews is called a nation and not outside of the land. Thus, if there would have been no Jews left in the land of Israel, no other court outside of the land would have the authority to determine the calendar. Thankfully, there has never been a generation in which Jews were absent from her land, due to G-d’s promise that the signs of a nation would never be erased. Thus, there was a Jewish presence in the land from the time of Abraham to our own days, a period of uninterrupted settlement in the land for almost 4,000 years. The Chatam Sofer (Pressburg, 1762-1839) writes that if no Jews had been left in the land, even if there were Jews outside of Israel, this would be considered the death of the Jewish people.

Since the land of Israel constitutes the basis for the observance of Torah, the sin of not residing in the land of Israel is very severe: “Whoever lives outside of Israel it is as if he has no G-d.” (Ketubot 110b) The Shechina protects us while we live in the land but not outside of it. The Community of Israel can only exist in the land; outside of the land we cannot gather as a people but only as an aggregate of individuals.

Successive generations throughout history have failed to understand this fundamental principle and because of this misapprehension we have stumbled and fallen. From the days of the Spies, who were severely punished for their sin of speaking ill of the land and the people who heeded their panic with sobs and tears of despair all through the time of Ezra who tried to inspire the Jews of Babylonia to return to their land, we have failed to comprehend the meaning of the Land for our people. We have been content to integrate our lives to the Exile and have resisted the notion of abandoning our homes and our ancestral territory. As the Kli Yakar comments regarding the Jews of Egypt, “The Torah condemns them for opting to become full residents in a land not their own and they so much became assimilated there that they did not want to leave and had to be taken from there by force.” (ad Beresheet 47:27)

The commandment of “Lech Lecha” -go inherit the land--is an everlasting commandment and the Voice of Hashem should be heard by everyone in every generation because without the Land there is no Community of Israel (Klal Israel) and without Community there is no Torah. We must remember this as the signs of Redemption approach. We will not be outside of the land forever, and it will be good for us to remember this as many Jews refuse to comprehend the Redemption that is coming for G-d will reign over us “with a mighty Hand” and He will lead us to the land even against our will (Natziv, R. Berlin, 1817-1893) The Land still awaits her children—the mission is yet unfulfilled.