

Mark Twain and the divine curse of Palestine

Moshe Taragin

In 1867 Mark Twain visited Palestine in well documented journey. As he crisscrossed the barren landscape he offered the following description and observations:

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds- a silent mournful expanse- ...A degree of desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely ...We never saw a human being on the whole route....We pressed on toward the goal of our crusade renowned Jerusalem. The further we went the hotter the sun got and the more rocky and bare...the landscape became...There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil had almost deserted the country. Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its

This sterile and infertile condition, which Twain beheld in the 19th century, had been foreshadowed in the horrific accounts of parshat Bechukotai. Because we betrayed our divine warrant to Israel, we were exiled, and our cities were demolished. Following the description of the wreckage, the Torah announces: "I will destroy the land and it will *remain desolate*. Much of depressing narrative portrays the capture of the land of Israel and the defeat and expulsion of the Jews. This verse describes the state of the land in the period *after* exile. It will remain desolate.

Famously, the Ramban viewed this prophecy as a favorable announcement. During our extended centuries-long absence from the land no nation or culture will succeed in settling Israel. Their attempts to till the land will be fruitless and their efforts to inhabit its cities will be

futile. The land will remain desolate, empty, and "available" for the return of her children.

For centuries, powerful empires endeavored in vain to conquer Israel and establish a lasting presence. However, Israel didn't yield its fertility, nor did it invite long term human colonization. The land still carried a divine curse which could only be alleviated by *our* return and *our* rehabilitation of the land. We corrupted the integrity and honor of this land and only we can lift the curse.

Moreover, the land *itself* refused to embrace strangers. They were welcome to come and sojourn, but each settlement of this eternal land came with an expiry date. Those who tried to remain beyond "checkout" time were violently expelled. The land waited in animated suspension for the return of her children, who alone could unlock her full potential. Until we returned the land remained inactive and defiant.

The Ramban didn't just write about an abstract phenomenon— he lived this prophecy in a very personal fashion. In 1267, emigrating from Spain to Israel, he encountered a fledgling Jewish community in a land of ghosts. The city of Jerusalem could barely muster a minyan of ten men!

During the Ramban's era in particular, the land violently revolted against its would-be conquerors. Even short-term admittance to foreigners was denied. In the roughly 120 years between 1177 and 1291 numerous wars were waged over cities in Israel and particularly over Yerushalayim. Saladin falls to the Crusaders in 1177 only to defeat them ten years later. Just four years afterward, in 1191, he falls to the armies of the third Crusade. In the latter half of the next century Crusader armies would fall to invading Egyptian forces. The land was in outright convulsion and all human attempts to seize the land of G-d were thwarted. The Jews may have been long ago exiled, but their land remained lay in wait. The prophecy of Bechukotai, was in full display to the Ramban and his contemporaries.

Fast forward six centuries later and Twain witnesses the same prophecy-still alive and still resisting settlement of the land. Too bad he didn't study the Ramban! How long would it take for this eternal curse to be lifted? Surprisingly, not long at all. It just took the return of the indigenous dwellers of Israel.

Less than fifteen years after Twain's visit through the wastelands of Palestine, history shifted and the land reawakened. Our motherland opened her arms to her lonely and long-lost children. Deserts and arid lands once again bloomed with lush verdant landscapes and sprouted fruits and crops which had been absent for two millennia. Malaria-infested swamplands were drained to forge modern cities such as Petach Tikva and Chadera. Through great devotion and sometimes, at the great cost of life, large dormant terrains were now teeming with Jewish life.

We haven't just restored the land's ancient fertility, we have innovated modern ways to preserve it. Facing the challenges of limited water supply in an urbanized modern world, we have learned to conserve our sweet water while sweetening our hard coastal water. While we continue to daven for Heavenly rain, we provide as much human water as possible to our land and her children.

Beyond the agricultural renaissance, we have managed to construct a modern democracy upon a land which witnessed the brutal force of totalitarian rule since Titus demolished the Temple. The combination of democratic freedom coupled with economic welfare are rare in the modern world, and even more so in our part of the world. Part of the resuscitation of Israel is not just the agricultural revival but the construction of a stable and sturdy modern state built upon the principles of freedom and human dignity.

We still yearn for an ultimate and final spiritual revival, the construction of a Temple and a state saturated with the presence of God. Until then, history remains imperfect and our accomplishments preliminary. Yet,

who can ignore the revival of our homeland, the restoration of its ancestral energy and the joy of children returning home.

Twain was correct: Palestine sits in sackcloth ! The state of Israel, however, is bedecked in a wedding dress and dances to the sweet music echoing its cities and the streets of Jerusalem. Just as we were promised, the land remained abandoned while we were absent. Our Mother waited for us, just as we waited for her. The reunion is sweet. Just as we were promised.