

5778 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vaera / פרשת וארא

Leaving the City

In the midst of the supernatural hailstorm, Pharaoh once again declares defeat, tells Moshe that God is righteous, and that Moshe should pray on his behalf. Moshe informs Pharaoh that he will indeed acquiesce to his request and pray for the welfare of Egypt, but only upon leaving the city. Indeed, a few verses later we read that Moshe leaves the city and successfully beseeches God to cease the hail.¹

Why did Moshe need to leave the city in order to pray? Commentators offer different suggestions. Ramban² notes that the city was filled with idolatry and was therefore unfit for prayer. Da'at Zekeinim³ adds a wrinkle to Ramban's thesis and notes that specifically for the plague of hail many Egyptians brought their animals into their homes for protection. As the Egyptians worshipped their sheep, this influx of animals into the city filled the city with even more pagan deities than usual, forcing Moshe to depart in order to pray.

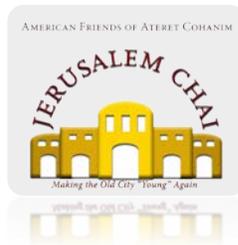
Perhaps we can build on this theme and suggest that the idolatry within the city is symptomatic of systemic spiritual and moral problems that were the woof and the warp of Egyptian society. Egypt was the greatest civilization of its day and its capital city surely boasted of the newest technology, culture and architecture. However, unfortunately, this very same city – the seat of civilization of its day – was spiritually decadent enough to be filled with idols and morally corrupt enough to oppressively enslave an entire people.

Thus, Moshe's tactic was to leave the city and go out into the uninhabited fields, far from human society. There, in nature, he would be able to commune with God, far from the affairs of

¹ Shemot 9:23.

² Ramban, *ibid.*

³ Da'at Zekienim, *ibid.*



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man. In doing so, his actions are reminiscent of Rambam's advice to those who live in a corrupt town – to leave the town and live an isolated life as a hermit in the wilderness.⁴ Only such natural territory, untainted by day to day human life, can be a proper place for the righteous to pursue their spiritual aspirations.

With this in mind it is striking that God decided that the holiest spot on earth – the Beit HaMikdash – should be in the midst of a bustling city. It might have been more natural to choose a location in the midst of nature and have the central meeting point between God and man be tucked away in the middle of a forest. However, despite the frailties of human society and the corruption that often characterizes capital cities, God wanted the most sanctified spot to be specifically in the heart of Yerushalayim, the metropolis and political capital of Israel.

The sanctity of the Torah and Yerushalayim is so great that it can transform the very fabric of society and create a this-worldly city with an other-worldly character. Let us aspire to create this environment in the midst of our capital city – Yerushalyim.

⁴ Rambam, Hilchot De'ot, 6:2.