



5779 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Eikev / פרשת עקב

God as the Landlord of Yerushalayim

We normally think of ourselves as having rights to the Land of Israel. According to one midrashic line of thought, the Land of Israel was destined to be given to the Jewish people from the point of creation. This understandably often leads to a certain sense of entitlement – that we are the true owners of the Land.

This week's parsha offers an important counter. Moshe relays to the Jewish people that on their own accord they would have never merited the holy Land:¹

Do not say to yourself, when the Lord, your God, has repelled [the seven nations] from before you, saying, "Because of my righteousness, the Lord has brought me to possess this land," and [that] because of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord drives them out from before you. Not because of your righteousness or because of the honesty of your heart, do you come to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God drives them out from before you, and in order to establish the matter that the Lord swore to your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You shall know that, not because of your righteousness, the Lord, your God, gives you this land to possess it; for you are a stiff-necked people.

The Jewish people are stiff-necked and have a long history of sin. God's gifting of the Land to them was due to a combination of God's love for the forefathers and the wickedness of the indigenous people.

On one level this might weaken our consciousness of connection to the Land. However, from a different perspective, this is in line with a theme that the Torah emphasizes time and time again. The Land of Israel belongs solely to God and He alone has rights to it. He freely gave it to the Jewish people, but still retains true ownership over the Land. In this sense, the Jewish people's lack of inherent rights to the Land highlights the fact that the true owner of the Land is God alone and we are really residents in God's country.

¹ Devarim 9:5-7



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This theme is most explicit in the laws of shemittah and yoveil. The Jewish farmer must interrupt his regular work schedule and even at times give up what he “rightfully” bought. The reason for this is encapsulated in the following verse: “for the land belongs to Me, for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me.”²

As with every characteristic of the Land, this theme is most acutely found regarding Yerushalayim. The fact that the city was, is, and always will be God’s city is evident. The city was not allocated to a specific tribe, highlighting its inherent human-ownerlessness. The Gemara connects this idea with another law that one cannot rent out homes in Yerushalayim as “[the homes] are not their own.”³ When we dwell in Yerushalayim, we are living in God’s land – with all the trepidation and thrill that accompanies this fact.

² Vayikra 25:23.

³ Yoma 12b.