

Re'eh September 3, 2016

שְׁלוֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יִרְאֶה כָּל-זְכוּרְךָ אֶת-פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר--בְּחַג
הַמִּצּוֹת וּבְחַג הַשְּׁבִיעוֹת, וּבְחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת; וְלֹא יִרְאֶה אֶת-פְּנֵי יְהוָה, רֵיקָם.

Deuteronomy 16:1-17 *Three times a year all your men must appear before Adonai your G-d at the place G-d will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before Adonai empty-handed.*



This week's Torah reading emphasizes three major Jewish festivals and their proper rituals. In ancient times, in order to fulfil the obligations of these festivals, all males traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem with their offerings. And though the understanding of these holidays of Unleavened Bread (Passover), Festival of Weeks (Shavuot), and Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot) has evolved over the centuries, they have always held profound significance for Jewish people in and outside of Israel.

Scholars date this biblical text to the mid-7th century BCE. From earliest Jewish writings Jews from the region made these sacred pilgrimages. Exodus 23:14 mentions the three pilgrimages. The book of Luke in the Christian Bible, tells of Jesus, a member of an observant Jewish family, ascending to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover (Luke 2:41-42). These acts of devotion served as more than religious rituals. By taking the fruits of the very land on and by which they lived and trekking to the Temple to offer them to God in thanksgiving, the Jewish people made agricultural, economic, and political statements about their individual and communal belonging to the land.

The Temple and the Temple Mount despite renovations and restoration have remained the center of Jewish pilgrimage since 500 BCE. The retaining walls erected by King Herod in 35 BCE served to "section off" this designated Divine property. The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, marking

the end of Jewish autonomy in Jerusalem and surrounding areas, expelled most inhabitants of the nation into other areas to live amongst local cultures and people who were often inhospitable at best and hostile at worst. Perhaps this hostility served to intensify the supremacy of the area and longing for reconnection and reunification of the Jewish people — in Jerusalem specifically and in Israel in general.

Over the centuries, the city of Jerusalem, and in particular the Western Wall (the support wall built during the widening of the Temple Mount plaza by King Herod circa 37 BCE), has retained its central importance to Jews everywhere. Those willing and able continue to make this sacred journey. Furthermore, as Jewish sages and leaders from inside the Land of Israel and throughout the diaspora were buried in Israel, additional “holy places” emerged. Since 500 CE, Jews have embarked on pilgrimages to Mount Meron (see above photo from 1920) in the Galilee to visit the final resting place of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who rebelled against Roman oppressors and whose teachings are considered to be the source of Jewish mystical books. Tiberias has been yet another pilgrimage site for the past 800 years as people visit the grave of Maimonides, considered among the greatest sages of the Jewish people. So, while Zionism may seem like a secular-modern ideology, Jerusalem and the Land of Israel have continually been on the Jewish spiritual map as a place for sacred and national gathering.

Aliyah LaRegel, the “going up on foot” for pilgrimage festivals has, since biblical times, restored and reinforced the Jewish people’s link to the past, the present and to a shared future. One can only imagine the conflict and turmoil experienced by Jews these past 70 plus years who, familiar with these texts, encounter individuals, groups, and even some governments who question the legitimacy of Jewish connection to Israel and even Israel’s right to exist. For over 2,500 years the Jewish people have, during the most sacred days of the year, read a narrative that emphasizes the importance of Jerusalem as the center of their annual religious and cultural connection to one another and to G-d. And, at times when it was permitted, numerous individuals and communities have made pilgrimages to Jerusalem as commanded in this week’s Torah portion.

Discussion Questions:

How does knowing the history of the Jewish connection to Israel help to contextualize the struggles experienced by modern Israel?

Do you think it weakens the connection of contemporary Israelis to the State of Israel if the majority consists of secular Jews uninterested in observing the three pilgrimage festivals as commanded in the Torah?

Additional References:

Ahuva Balofsky, [Israel Returns to its Roots with Sukkot Pilgrimage to Jerusalem](#), Breaking Israel News, October 10, 2014.