

Going Up To Zion

I recently read an article by Mark Batterson that described the behavior of birds when removed from their mother's nest on Skokholm Island off the coast of Wales. They were tagged and transported to distant locations, in some cases, thousands of miles away. In spite of their young age and the far-off place, each bird found its way back by a path unknown, over unfamiliar terrain, in as few as 12 days and as long as 14 days! Ornithologists, Batterson explained, call this inbuilt capability the homing instinct. He went on to use this illustration as being similar to the instinct hardwired into the human soul—the longing to be blessed by G-d.

As I thought about this, I couldn't help relating this principle to the longing of the Jewish people to return to the homeland of their ancestors, Israel, as is expressed each year at Passover when they exclaim, "Next year in Jerusalem!" It is more than just a festival chant; for many, it is not only a longing and deep desire to be there, but also a life-giving vision for their future. So many scriptures reflect that longing to return to Zion, which has become a word encompassing the Temple Mount, Jerusalem, and indeed all of Israel. It is easy to believe that G-d has put that homing instinct in every Jew to 'return' to Israel, a/k/a Zion at this time in response to His call.

"Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west; I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 43:5-6)

Just as Batterson inferred, it is a longing to be blessed by G-d. To be in exile (away from Israel) is, in fact, one of the curses outlined in Deuteronomy 28 for not having obeyed the L-rd's Commandments and Statutes.

"Then the L-rd will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other...And among those nations you shall find no rest...but there the L-rd will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life..." (Deut. 28:64-67)

To be in the L-rd's favor is to be in Israel, the Land of His Blessing:

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the L-rd is G-d in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the L-rd your G-d gives you for all time. (Deut. 4:39-40)

The origin of the word Zion is still a mystery. It may have originally meant “a rock”; “a stronghold” as it was first used for the Jebusite fortress, “the stronghold of Zion”. It is believed that Zion is the very center of the world, the place of G-d’s creation, where G-d’s presence still dwells and from where the world is sustained by His power. It became identified as the spiritual center of Judaism, *“For out of Zion shall go forth Torah and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).* It was originally used as the place of the location of the Temple of G-d and then for the city of Jerusalem, and then to describe all of Israel. It was used to express the longing to return to Israel, *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1).*

Jewish daily prayers, while facing Jerusalem, perpetuated this desire, keeping that longing to return to Zion fresh in the minds of even the young, creating an almost built-in homesickness for Israel. And despite the exile by the Roman Empire almost 2000 years ago, the Jewish people never stopped viewing the Land of Israel as their ancestral home. They maintained a continual presence in the Holy Land, although the majority of Jews were scattered to ‘every island and nation’ of the world because they did not obey His Word.

The longing for Jerusalem (and all for which it stands) is even expressed in the traditions of the Jewish wedding. In Jewish thought, a man’s “chiefest joy” is marriage. Therefore, at every Jewish wedding, the groom crushes a glass under his foot as he recites the words of Psalm 137:5-6 below. The implication of this ritual is that the breaking of the glass, symbolic of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem 2000 years ago, serves to keep the most holy place in all of Jewish history on one’s mind, even during the most joyful time.

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember thee not, if I set not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy.”

As the time of the L-rd’s return approaches, the scriptures that promise the return of His people to the Land of Israel are stirring the hearts of Jews around the world to make Aliyah. In Hebrew, to make Aliyah is to go up toward G-d, toward His dwelling place, to rise or ascend. Aliyah is the

basic principle of Zionism and refers to the return of the Jewish people to the Promised Land that the Bible says will take place in the end of days.

Although most Jews do not see Aliyah as “returning from captivity”, being in any land other than Israel is being in exile, i.e. captive in a foreign land, a land called the Diaspora. ‘Exile’ is listed as one of the curses that would befall the Israelites for disobedience to the Word of G-d as above stated (Deuteronomy 28:64-67). But G-d’s promise is to return His people from captivity (Exile, the Diaspora).

“...the L-rd your G-d will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the L-rd your G-d has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the L-rd your G-d will gather you, and from there He will bring you. Then the L-rd your G-d will bring you to the land, which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. And the L-rd your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (Deut. 30:3-6)

The Promise, given by G-d to the Patriarch Abraham: *“Unto thy seed will I give this land”* (Genesis 12:7) is cemented in Jewish prayers. Abba Eban writes in *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*: “The effect of these myriad repetitions day by day over the centuries was to infuse Jewish life with a peculiar nostalgia, strong enough to prevent any sentiment of finality or permanence in any other land. But it was not only a matter of prayer and hope. The physical link was never broken...Palestine never became the birthplace of any other nation. Every one of its conquerors had his original home elsewhere. Thus the idea of Palestine as the Jewish land had never been obscured or superseded.”

A young college woman in America, Rivka Cohen, expresses this longing for Israel in a poem from her website. https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/diaspora_a_poem/

Sometimes exile cuts like a knife

Away from my home is just a half life

Aliyah

Written by Victoria Radin

Don't know if feeling this lost is worth the cost

How long can my soul stand to be away from the Holy land?

From Boston I can clearly see, it's Am Yisrael that calls to me

After reminiscing about her life in college in America, she concludes her poem with the understanding that exile is captivity in a foreign land.

□ I come to terms with reality

Exile means I am not yet free.

As a bird returns to the place of its nest, may the Jewish people all find their way home to Zion and bask in the blessings of the Almighty.

Psalm 84

How lovely is Your tabernacle, O L-rd of hosts!□ My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the L-rd;□

My heart and my flesh cry out for the living G-d.

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young— Even Your altars, O L-rd of hosts, my King and my G-d.

Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You. Selah

Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a spring; the rain also covers it with pools.

They go from strength to strength; each one appears before G-d in Zion.

O L-rd G-d of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O G-d of Jacob! Selah

O G-d, behold our shield, and look upon the face of Your anointed.

For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my G-d than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

For the L-rd G-d is a sun and shield; the L-rd will give grace and glory;

Aliyah

Written by Victoria Radin

No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

O L-rd of hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in You!

Barukh HaShem (Blessed is the Name of the L-rd)