

# The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Miketz Which are the Plants that Praise the Land of Israel?

### The Carefree Evergreen Rockrose with Spring Petals in White and Pink

One of our favorite classes at B'erot is Herbal Workshop as no such class exists in any other women's midrasha or seminary. We integrate the learning of herbal and Torah teachings about the plants that grow in our vicinity when they're at their peak. Then we go out into nature and pick enough of the particular plant for tea, medicated oil, or tincture. Not all the wonderful plants that grow in our surrounding area can be traced back to the Torah, but it is very exciting when we do find plants - mentioned in the Bible - growing right near our doorstep. I really enjoy relating the spiritual significance of various plants that grow here in Israel to their context in the Torah. Rockroses grace the bare land here in Bat Ayin around Pesach time. Large drifts of pink and white ephemeral flowers fill our edges and meadows. Two rockrose varieties are growing in our area. One has white petals with butter-yellow centers and is smaller than the pink variety with wrinkled petals. These hardy evergreen shrubs native to the Land of Israel hardly need any caretaking. They are very common in the Mediterranean including in the Judean Hills where we live. Rockroses are great edging plants with their low maintenance needs and rough, gray leaves. Rockroses grow in the back of my flower garden towering over the pansies, snapdragons, and daisy bushes. Hailing back from Biblical times, rockroses are also mentioned in the Mishna, where the Rabbis discuss whether or not the laws of *Shemitta* (the Sabbatical year) apply to them (*Mishna Shevi'it*, Chapter 7, Mishna 6). Although rockroses are very adaptable, they are not for everyone. They only grow in climates with relatively mild winters. I've never met a rockrose anywhere but in Israel. Usually, each flower lasts only until mid-afternoon before gently falling to the ground. The bush is part of the Rockrose charm. Blooming for only a few weeks each spring, the shrub's characteristic as a carefree evergreen is endearing too. Yet, when the few weeks of early spring finally arrive and the melding of the millions of pastel flowers becomes a daily experience, we truly appreciate the rockrose. There are so many flowers on a mature rockrose that it is hard to see the bush.

### The Choicest Products of the Land Accompanying the Exiled Yosef

From Biblical times, rockrose has been popular as a perfume and aromatic. When Yosef's brothers decided to sell him as a slave, they grabbed the opportunity to have him sent down to Egypt with a company of spice-selling Arabs:

**סַפֵּר בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרַק לֹז פֶּסוּק כֹּה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וְגַמְלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נְכֹאת וְצִרֵי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם:**

“They sat down to eat bread, then they lifted their eyes and saw, and behold, a caravan of Yishmaelites was coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spices, balm, and lotus (labdanum), going to bring it down to Egypt” (*Bereishit* 37:25).

All the plants mentioned here served both as remedies and for embalming the dead (*Da'at Mikra*). One of the aromatics mentioned in our Torah verse is **לֹט/lot**, which Targum Onkelus translates as **לוט/lotum** - the Hebrew word for rockrose, or more specifically, for the resin - labdanum - produced from it. Although it is generally challenging to identify most plants mentioned in the Bible, most commentaries and botanists have little doubt that the biblical **לֹט/lot** refers to rockrose. Thus, **לוט/lotem** - labdanum mentioned in the Mishna is identified with **לֹט/lot** in Scripture (*Bereishit* 37:25). “There are those who

identify it with the native bush with large, pretty flowers in the colors of white-yellowish or pink (Cistus). It grows mainly in the mountains of the Land of Israel” (Kehati, *Mishna Shevi'it*, Chapter 7, Mishna 6). **לט/Lot** – labdanum is a perfume produced from rockrose plants (Rabbi Ya'acov, Fliks, *The Plant World of Scripture*, p. 272-273). The very same labdanum that accompanied Yosef down to Egypt is what Ya'acov intuitively chose to give as “a gift to the man” – second in charge to Pharaoh, who was no other than Yosef in disguise.

### The Choice Products of the Land Reminding Yosef of his Connection to Israel's Land

**ספר בראשית פרק מג פסוק יא ויאמר אלהם ישראל אביהם אם כן אפוא זאת עשו קחו מזמרת הארץ בכליכם והורידו לאיש מנהה מעט צרי ומעט דבש נכאת ולט בטנים ושקדים:**

“So, Israel, their father said to them, ‘If it must be so, then do this: take from **זמרת הארץ /Zimrat Ha'aretz** – ‘the choicest products of the land’ in your vessels and carry down to the man as a present, a little balm, and a little (date) honey, a spice mixture, **לט/lot** – ‘labdanum,’ pistachios and almonds” (*Bereishit* 43:11).

Rashi explains that **זמרת הארץ /Zimrat Ha'aretz** refers to “that which is praised in the Land, about which people sing praise when it comes into existence.” Despite the severe famine, that gripped the land of Israel at the time, Ya'acov had various choice products on hand to send to Egypt. These choice products represent the bounty of the land of Israel, similar to the Seven Species through which the Land of Israel is praised. Nevertheless, in contrast with the Seven Fruits of the Land, these crops can survive even during drought years, since they require relatively small amounts of rain. Balm, gum, and labdanum are products of the sap dripping from the bark and leaves of various plants. Pistachio and almond trees flower early, fruiting before olive, grapes, and pomegranate trees have even blossomed. Most plants in Israel including the Seven Fruits of the Land depend on specific weather conditions that determine the fate of their crops. This applies especially during the sensitive period between Pesach and Shavuot distinguished by multiple climatic changes and contrasts. For the Israelite farmer, whose sustenance depended on the success of his crop, the drastic shifts between the southern and northern winds could easily tempt him to regard them as battles between various deities. This poses a danger of “being enticed to serve the other gods” (*Devarim* 11:16), of the local Canaanites. Yet, the plants that Ya'acov chose to send as a gift to the ‘Egyptian ruler’ aren’t dependent on the weather conditions. They grow even during a severe famine. Therefore, they do not present the worrisome agricultural problems that could lure people away to serve other gods. (Noga Reuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage* pp. 35-28). It is interesting that the ‘Choice Products of the Land’ include three kinds of produce: 1. **לט ונכאת וצרי/tzori, n'chot v'lot** – ‘balm, gum and labdanum’ – plants used for their perfume. 2. **דבש/devash** – ‘honey’ – liquid foods. 3. **שקדים וטנים/botnim u'shekdim** – ‘pistachios and almonds’ – solids (*Da'at Mikra*). Perhaps these choice products of the land allude respectively to the three garments of the soul: Thought, speech, and action. The **לט ונכאת וצרי/tzori, n'chot v'lot** – balm, gum, and labdanum that may represent the aspect of thought, reminded Yosef about his connection to Israel, as they were identical with the merchandise carried by the caravan that brought him down to Egypt from Israel.

### Uniting Together to Become Vessels for the Sefirot of the Upper Land

The choice products of the land that Ya'acov sent to Yosef were called “*Zimrat Ha'aretz*” – the strengths and praise of Hashem because they were drawn from the upper world and had the power to transform ‘*din*’ (judgment) into ‘*rachamim*’ (mercy). Moreover, these species, including rockrose, represent the unity of the sefirot. Before Israel went down into the Egyptian exile, they had to be completely united. Through the power of this unity, Israel would survive the exile and emerge as a complete nation during the Exodus. When the sefirot are united in the Infinite (*Ein Sof*) good influences are drawn down from the upper worlds into the lower world. Of all the sefirot two specific sefirot (on the middle axis) unite and connect the rest of the sefirot: *Tiferet* and *Yesod*. Ya'acov, who represents *Tiferet*, draws down the influences of the upper worlds to

Yosef. Yosef, the embodiment of *Yesod*, then divides these influences into the lower world. This is the secret of Ya'acov's *Zimrat Ha'aretz* gift, which he sent to Yosef (Maor V'Shemesh, *Parashat Miketz*). The *Zimrat Ha'aretz* embodied the sefirot, which must be united. When the brothers sold Yosef into slavery, the sefirot went down into exile. This is symbolized by the fact that the *Zimrat Ha'aretz* accompanied Yosef down to Egypt. Ya'acov sent Yosef the gift of *Zimrat Ha'aretz* with his brothers because he understood that it was time to rectify the blemish in the unity of the sefirot caused by the sale of Yosef. By bringing the *Zimrat Ha'aretz* to Yosef, the brothers became vessels for the sefirot from the upper land that united them all together.

### **The Rockrose Helped Yosef to Overcome His Trauma and Forgive his Brothers**

Rockrose is a medicinal herb for the body, mind, and soul. I find it interesting that the spiritual properties of rockrose are synchronized with the emotional needs of Yosef when he as a tender youth of 17 was harshly ousted by his brothers and sold into slavery to the most spiritually decadent society of Egypt. We can imagine how Yosef's reaction to his abusive treatment by his own brothers may have elicited the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response. Yet, he couldn't run away or fight against his stronger and older brothers, the only response available to him was 'freeze.' By divine providence, Hashem brought it about that the rockrose – a remedy for alleviating suffering from coldness and feelings of internal numbness – accompanied Yosef down to exile. Specifically, these properties of the rockrose had the ability to thaw Yosef's frozen heart. Rockrose is furthermore the chief ingredient in Rescue Remedy, recommended for panic, shock, and fears caused by trauma that Yosef had just suffered. It helps those who experience fear to think clearly. People take rockrose to treat panic attacks, anxiety, stress, extreme fright, or fear; and for promoting calmness and relaxation. The lightly creased, rockrose thus became the antidote to Yosef's delicate and beautiful feelings that otherwise may have dried up or been destroyed due to the possible unmastered experiences and emotions of the trauma Yosef suffered. Rockrose brings about expansion, especially in the heart, lungs, gut, and womb, and creates deep relaxation. It is a nourishing and softening herb enabling hope and ease, as we surrender to our truth. How amazing that Hashem had prepared the healing to Yosef's wound and imparted within him the remedy that kept his flame burning and prevented him from despair. The rockrose, the brothers brought Yosef years later, as a gift, also releases old hurts and buried memories. This was exactly the remedy Yosef needed when he prepared to face his brothers anew and completely forgive them. The spiritual properties of rockrose explain how the choice products of Eretz Yisrael "are praised in the Land, about which people sing praise when they come into existence" (Rashi). זִמְרַת הָאֶרֶץ/*Zimrat Ha'aretz* with their ability to form the holy emotions of the Children of Israel indeed embody the praises of the Land of Israel.