

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Vayechi

What Do Ya'acov's Blessings on His Deathbed Teach Us About the Land of Israel?

Why is the Tiny Land of Israel so Diverse from Snowy Mountains to Hot Springs?

Isn't it fascinating how the nature of the tiny Land of Israel is so diverse? From the stunning fertile Golan Heights with its viticulture traditions to the Salt Sea famed as the Earth's lowest point; the rich olive groves of the Galilee; not to forget the enchanted Sea of Galilee (Kineret); the moist coastland sparkling with citrus fruit; the cool summer nights in the pomegranate land of the Judean Hills; the date palms of the Judean desert and the Negev; the winter warming oasis of Ein Gedi featuring wild and rare flora and more. Oh, and I forgot the famous ski resort of the desired Mount Chermon, now since December 9, 2024, Israel has taken over the Syrian peak, and the Ski resort's CEO dreams of expanding the Chermon site including as he calls it 'The New Chermon.' For nature lovers living in Israel, there, certainly, is no need to go abroad for vacation, Israel has it all! From its first conquest by Yehoshua, the Land of Israel was divided according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Each tribe has its own distinct features, personality, tendencies, and talents reflected in the corresponding topography of its allotted land. I recall more than two decades ago when my friend Nechama wrote her book *The Twelve Dimensions of Israel*. She requested to stay with us, here in the Judean Hills when she was writing about the Tribe of Yehuda. She disclosed that she wrote about each tribe while residing in its allotted territory. This way she could best tune into the vibe of the respective tribes. The distinct features of the tribes of Israel and their allotted land are quite intriguing. Whenever I visit a new place in Israel, I familiarize myself with the tribe of the place to tune into its personality and thus get more out of the experience of the visit. I'm always happy to return to the Judean hills, where I feel at home, and enjoy the mountain air, the rich herbage, and bird song.

How is Yehuda's Blessing Synchronized with the Features of His Land to This Day?

Parashat Vayechi recounts the blessings Ya'acov imparted to his sons on his deathbed. Each blessing teaches us about each son's individuality, strength, and pitfalls, which would be bequeathed to its respective tribe. More than the rest of the tribes, Ya'acov's blessings for the tribes of Yehuda, Zebulun, and Asher include a description of praise of their corresponding lands. Although the wine of the Golan Heights is internationally known as one of the best in the world, it is Yehuda's land (which includes Chevron) that Ya'acov praises for its abundant vines:

סַפֵּר בְּרֵאשִׁית פֶּרֶק מִט פֶּסוּק ו' לֹא יִסּוּר שִׁבְט מִיְהוּדָה וּמַחֲקֶק מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו עַד כִּי יבֹא שִׁילֹה וְלוֹ יִקְהַת עַמִּים: (יא) אֲסִרִי לִגְפֹן עֵירָה וְלִשְׂרָקָה בְּנֵי אֶתְנֹו כַּבֵּס בֵּינָם לְבָשׁוּ וּבָדָם עַנְבִּים סוּתָה: (יב) חֲכָלִילִי עֵינַיִם מִיַּיִן וּלְבָן שִׁנַּיִם מִחֶלֶב:

“The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and the obedience of his people be his. Binding his foal to the vine, and his ass's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes. [He is] red-eyed from wine and white toothed from milk” (*Bereishit* 49:10-12).

Ya'acov prophesied that the land of Yehuda would run with wine like a fountain. The vines will be so productive that a man of Yehuda will bind one foal to a vine, and fully load it with grapes of only one grapevine. From the produce of only one branch, he will load one ass's colt (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:11). Yehuda's land, also called Judea, is an area characterized by warm days and cool nighttime temperatures – indeed the perfect climate for growing grapes. Even today the Chevron grapes of Yehuda are famous for

being the sweetest with the most incredible taste. According to Onkelos, גֶּפֶן/gefen - “the grapevine” is a metaphor for Israel, as it states, “You plucked a vine out of Egypt” (*Tehillim* 80:9); and “I have planted you a noble wine” (*Yirmeyahu* 2:21). Being “red-eyed with wine” appears to be the opposite of a blessing. Yet Onkelos helps us understand the imagery in a positive light. The word עֵינַיִם/einayim means both ‘eyes’ and ‘fountains.’ They refer to the mountains, from where one can see far away how the Judean hills are red with wine. Rashi adds that eyes refer to the fountains - the continuous flow of the wine press. Alternatively, wine is a metaphor for Torah. When it states “He washes... in wine” it refers to Israel’s purification process through Torah immersion. However, if the time of redemption comes while Israel still lacks Torah, then the redemption will come through the suffering of the nations, as Chazal said, (as we have experienced during the Holocaust) he will allow a king as cruel as Haman to rise (*Yerushalmi Ta’anit* 3a). This is the meaning of “With blood of grapes” - through suffering their preparation for redemption will be completed, like the ripening of grapes. The nations will only be able to pick a few grapes, but they won’t have the power to cut down a tree, even a branch, or a cluster (*Ohr HaChayim, Bereishit* 49:11).

What will be the Fate of the Biblical City of Tzidon (Sidon) After Israel’s Conquest?

The partnership between Yissachar and Zevulun is well known. Yissachar would learn Torah and share his reward with Zevulun, who, in return, would work in import and export providing for both tribes. His land on the seacoast allowed him to travel overseas for his business. What is less known is that the city of Tzidon was originally included in the Promised Land within Zevulun’s portion as *Parashat Vayechi* testifies:

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Zevulun will dwell on the coast of the seas; he [will be] at the harbor of the ships, and his boundary will be at Tzidon (*Bereishit* 49:13).

Although Tzidon (Sidon) is within the borders of the Biblical Land, it has been located in Lebanon, 25 miles south of Beirut until October 8, 2024, when the IDF raised the Israeli flag in Southern Lebanon. According to Arab news sources, Lebanese fishermen were forced to keep their boats ashore after Israel warned that it would expand its operations against Hezbollah to coastal areas south of Sidon (*Al-Monitor*, 8 October 2024). The Bat Ayin resident and American-Israeli journalist, Shai ben-Tekoa, demonstrates that the territory intended for the Jewish state by the British politicians when issuing the Balfour Declaration extended north through Tzidon (Sidon). Nevertheless, Tzidon has been the third-largest city in Lebanon since the 1920 Arab attack on the northern settlement of Tel Chai. In his book *Phantom Nation*, Shai ben-Tekoa compares several contemporary maps produced in Europe to determine the boundaries of the Jewish state intended by the British. He writes: The Britannica map and all others in circulation at the time of the Balfour Declaration were based on the Biblical descriptions of the Land... maps of Palestine from France (1907), Spain (1907) and Sweden (1914) in use during the First World War... are pretty much the same, all of them based, and not surprisingly, on the Bible, the borders of the Promised Land as described in several word-maps found in the Five Books of Moses/Pentateuch. (Shai Ben-Tekoa, *Phantom Nation: Inventing the Palestinians as the Obstacle to Peace*). For decades, the area north of Tzidon has been used by terrorists to attack the State of Israel. The IDF has fought two wars (in 1982 and 2006) against the terrorists in Southern Lebanon. Though Israel had managed to clear the area of terrorists, after Israeli withdrawals, the terrorists eventually returned (<https://aish.com/a-history-of-southern-lebanon/>). Now that Israel has recaptured Southern Lebanon let us hope that it will remain terrorist-free within the rightful borders of the land of Israel!

The Fertile Olive Groves of Asher’s Land

The land of the tribe of Asher was especially rich with olive orchards, as it is today. Both Ya’acov and Moshe

blessed Asher with an abundance of olive oil. The Midrash describes the flag of Asher with a picture of an olive tree (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:7). Asher's land encompasses Western Galilee, and stretches over the northwestern part of Israel, bordering the Mediterranean Sea to the west. This coastal region has comparatively low temperatures and much rainfall, making it some of the most fertile land of Israel, with rich pasture, wooded hills, and orchards; as such Asher became particularly prosperous, and known for its olive oil. His territory includes Mount Carmel, an especially fertile and bountiful mountain. It produced such large amounts of olive oil in biblical times that Asher became exceedingly wealthy, as the leader in the olive oil trade. The kings of all the neighboring nations would pay a special tribute to Asher to have the right to anoint themselves with their oil. Ya'acov's blessing to Asher, which testifies that Asher's wealth both spiritually and materially arose to the tables of kings, hints at this:

ספר בראשית פרק מט פסוק כ מאשר שֶׁמֶנֶה לְחֵמוֹ וְהוּא יִתֵּן מִעֲדָנָי מֶלֶךְ:

“From Asher will come rich food, and he will yield regal delicacies” (*Bereishit* 49:20).

Ya'acov prophesized that the food from Asher's territory would be rich, for there would be many olive trees in his territory so that oil would flow like a fountain. Likewise, Moshe blessed him, “...and dip his foot in oil” (*Devarim* 33:24). The Talmud tells a tale of a Gentile official charged with the mission of bringing olive oil worth a million coins. The official went to a town in the territory of Asher and found a man who worked his olive grove and dipped his hands and feet in a golden cup full of oil, to fulfill what is stated: “and dip his foot in oil.” After providing oil worth a million coins, the man measured additional oil for one hundred eighty thousand coins (*Babylonian Talmud, Menachot* 85b). Olive oil is associated with wisdom as it states “Rabbi Yochanan said, because they are accustomed to olive oil; wisdom is found in them. The Rabbis taught, HIS FOOT IS DIPPED IN OIL - This is Asher's portion, which draws oil like a wellspring (*Babylonian Talmud, Menachot* 85b).

The Spiritual Eternal Message of Olives – A Metaphor for Israel

The Children of Israel are compared to olives, our spiritual work is transforming the bitter, useless, or even negative, to become good, useful, and positive. “Hashem called your name a leafy olive tree, fair with goodly fruit” (*Yirmeyahu* 11:16). Israel is compared to the olive tree because it is a perpetually fresh evergreen with leaves that remain moist the entire year. The fact that the olive leaves never wither symbolizes Israel's perpetual success. The fruits of the olive, as its oil are for the honor of G-d and people, therefore the righteous who take refuge in the protection of G-d are compared to the evergreen olive tree (*Tehillim* 52:10). Just as olive leaves do not fall from the tree neither summer nor winter, so can Israel never be completely nullified neither in this world nor in the coming world. However, as we are experiencing today, just as the olive only brings forth its oil when beaten, so does Israel only return to good through difficulties and hardships (*Babylonian Talmud, Menachot* 53b). Just as olive oil does not mix with other liquids, Israel does not mix with Gentiles. Moreover, even if you put this oil into several liquids it remains on top of them all. Likewise, Israel is on top of all the nations as it states, “Hashem your G-d placed you uplifted on all the nations of the earth” (*Devarim* 28:1; *Midrash Devarim Rabbah* 7:3).

Olive Oil – Representing the Inner Essence of Israel

Pure olive oil is used for the Menorah in the Holy Temple, and it was with olive oil that the Chanukah miracle occurred. It is also with Divine Inspiration that the Menorah with its olive-oil-lights became the emblem of Israel. Olive oil comprises the inner essence of olives. The Greeks and the Western World in its wake worship the external appearance. However, the Torah outlook – as represented by the Menorah – teaches us to appreciate that which is inwardly good is beautiful. Our victory – with Hashem's help – in the

current war is the triumph of the inner essence over external appearance – of light over darkness. May blessed Asher with an abundance of olive oil. The Midrash describes the flag of Asher with a picture of an olive tree (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:7). Asher's land encompasses Western Galilee, and stretches over the northwestern part of Israel, bordering the Mediterranean Sea to the west. This coastal region has comparatively low temperatures and much rainfall, making it some of the most fertile land of Israel, with rich pasture, wooded hills, and orchards; as such Asher became particularly prosperous, and known for its olive oil. His territory includes Mount Carmel, an especially fertile and bountiful mountain. It produced such large amounts of olive oil in biblical times that Asher became exceedingly wealthy, as the leader in the olive oil trade. The kings of all the neighboring nations would pay a special tribute to Asher to have the right to anoint themselves with their oil. Ya'acov's blessing to Asher, which testifies that Asher's wealth both spiritually and materially arose to the tables of kings, hints at this:

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teaches us to appreciate that which is inwardly good is beautiful. Our victory – with Hashem’s help – in the current war is the triumph of the inner essence over external appearance – of light over darkness. May Hashem empower our brave, dear soldiers to eradicate all the darkness, bring home all the hostages, and liberate the Land of Israel, so that it can once again reflect the various characters of the holy tribes of Israel!