

# The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Ki Tisa What Can We Learn from Parashat Ki Tisa About Israel's Current War?

### What Does it Mean that Jews are Called "A Stiff-Necked People"?

This week, in Kuzari class, we discussed proof for the authenticity of the Torah. I asked my students to imagine the possibility that Moshe came to his people and told them that 500 years ago everyone in the world spoke only one language – the language of Ever. In one day – when they built the Tower of Babylon – the whole of humanity became separated into different peoples, each one with his own individual language. In the same breath, Moshe spoke in detail about the relationship of each nation with its forefather, whether Shem, Cham, or Yafet. Would the people, known for being stiff-necked, critical, and skeptical, accept such revolutionary claims about human history if they had never heard of them before? I have personally experienced this difference between Jews and gentiles. For example, when a Jew from a secular home decides to embrace a Torah-observant lifestyle, they often encounter strong resistance from family members. Arguments like "Why would G-d care about all these nitty-gritty details of observance?" or "Why are you regressing to a medieval lifestyle?" have been hurled at many a good ba'al teshuva (newcomer to Judaism) by his or her family. In contrast, I recently interviewed a potential conversion student whose parents, though atheists with no Jewish background, were willing to support her conversion in Israel with a \$500 monthly stipend. Even after funding her college education, they wanted to continue supporting her, despite their disagreement with her religious choice. The following day, when I taught Rambam on *Character Development, Nutrition, and Health*, we discussed how the same trait can be either a gift or a detriment depending on how it is employed. This concept also applies to the notorious Jewish stiff-necked character trait explicitly addressed in *Parashat Ki Tisa*.

### Does Being a Stiff-necked People Justify Divine Withdrawal or Divine Attachment?

Whereas *stiff-neckedness* is typically seen as a stubborn flaw, the *Eish Kodesh* offers a different perspective. Following the sin of the Golden Calf, Hashem tells Moshe that He will remove His Shechinah (Divine Presence) from accompanying the Israelites:

**ספר שמות פרק לג פסוק ג**

**אֶל אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ כִּי לֹא אֶעֱלֶה בְּקִרְבְּךָ כִּי עִם קִשְׁיָה עֲרַף אֶתָּה פֶּן אֲכַלְךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ:**

"[Go ascend] to a land flowing with milk and honey, for I will not go up in your midst, because you are a stiff-necked people, lest I destroy you on the way" (*Shemot* 33:3).

Due to their disobedience and stiff-necked worship of the Golden calf, Hashem intends to punish them by withdrawing His Presence from them on their journey to the Promised Land. However, Moshe later uses this same trait as a justification for Hashem's continued presence: "Let Hashem go in our midst, for they are a stiff-necked people" (*Shemot* 34:9). How can the same trait justify both divine withdrawal and divine attachment? Hashem declares that because they are stiff-necked, He will not go with them, yet Moshe argues that precisely because they are stiff-necked, they deserve His presence! The answer is that **קִשְׁיָה עֲרַף/ke'shei oref** – 'stiff-necked' can be one of the greatest virtues. Someone who lacks this trait is fickle – easily swayed in different directions. At one moment, he may wish to serve Hashem, and the next moment, he might abandon that commitment. Such a person cannot withstand tests of faith. By contrast, a stiff-necked person – stubborn and strong-willed – is resolute and dependable. Once he makes a firm decision to serve Hashem, we can trust that he remains steadfast when facing trials. Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu

argued that being stiff-necked makes the Israelites worthy of Hashem Himself dwelling among them. However, stubbornness can be destructive when misused. If directed toward negativity – stubbornly clinging to bad behaviors and corrupt character traits – becomes a liability (Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, Piaseczner Rebbe, *Sefer Eish Kodesh, Parashat Noach*).

### Why is Emigrating to Israel Called: “Making Aliyah”?

*Parashat Ki Tisa* is most often associated with Moshe’s fervent intercession for the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf. Yet, interwoven within the Parasha are powerful messages about the holiness of Eretz Yisrael and its role in the divine covenant, as a conduit for spiritual elevation. The unique bond between the Land of Israel and the Jewish people reveals how Eretz Yisrael is not just a physical inheritance but a reflection of divine reality. When a Jew emigrates to the land of Israel, it’s called to make ‘Aliyah.’ Literally, to ascend. The source for this expression may be found in *Parasha Ki Tisa*:

ספר שמות פרק לג פסוק א

עֲלֵה מִזֶּה אֶתָּה וְהָעָם אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלִיתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיַּעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזָרְעֶךָ אֶתְנַנָּה:

“Go, ascend from here, you and the people you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land that I swore to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’acov, saying: ‘I will give it to your descendants’” (*Shemot* 33:1).

Rashi, citing *Babylonian Talmud, Zevarim* 54b) notes that the land of Israel is higher than all [other] lands. That is why it says, ‘ascend.’ This concept of ascending to the Land of Israel is not limited to typography. Rather, it alludes to the spiritual heights that can be attained in the Land of Israel. The Torah is replete with references to how the Land of Israel is intrinsically connected to the Shechinah, the Divine Presence. See for example, “You shall not defile the land where you reside, in which I dwell, for I am the Hashem Who dwells among the children of Israel (*Bamidbar* 35:34). Eretz Yisrael’s very identity is as a dwelling place for Hashem’s Presence. Thus, the absence of the Shechinah would not simply mean a lessened experience – it would undermine the very essence of the land. “...This is why Eretz Yisrael is called אֶרֶץ הַחַיִּים – the Land of the living. One who emigrates to Israel is called an עוֹלֵה/Oleh – ‘one who ascends,’ and one who leaves the Land is called a יוֹרֵד/Yored – ‘one who descends,’ just like hell is called *She’ol*, the underworld, which involves descent (Maharal of Prague, *Be’er HaGola* 6:13).

### Why Would Sending an Angel to Accompany the Israelites be Catastrophic?

At first glance, *Shemot* 33:1 - 4 appears to focus on the punishment for the Israelites’ sin, depriving them of direct divine accompaniment. However, we can also read this passage as a revelation of Eretz Yisrael’s true nature: a land inherently linked with the Shechinah. The very essence of the Holy Land is G-d’s Presence within her. Hashem’s statement, “I will not go up in your midst,” (*Shemot* 33:3) signified a devastating withdrawal of divine intimacy. The Jewish people mourned not just because of a punishment but because they understood that entering the land without divine closeness would be an empty, incomplete experience. The *Bat Ayin* expands on this idea, explaining that Eretz Yisrael is the only land where divine revelation is fully manifest in the physical world. Just as Shabbat is the spiritual core (*nekudah penimit*) of the week, so too is Eretz Yisrael the spiritual core of the world. Within Eretz Yisrael, Jerusalem, the *Beit Hamikdash*, and the *Kodesh HaKodashim* radiate holiness throughout the land and beyond (*Bat Ayin, Parashat Masei*). Thus, the land reflects the *Shefa Eloki* (divine influx) while this revelation is concealed outside the Land. Moshe protested against Hashem’s decision because an intermediary (an angel) would imply a spiritual distance, which is uncharacteristic of the holy Land. “Eretz Yisrael is beloved, for Hashem chose it. When He created the world, He assigned each land to an angelic minister, but He reserved the Land of Israel for Himself...”

(*Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Re'eh* 8). There are no angelic intermediaries in the Holy Land. Whereas angels are appointed in charge of *Chutz LaAretz* (Outside of Israel), in the Land of Israel only Hashem is in charge of Eretz Yisrael.

### Eretz Yisrael as the Conduit of Redemption

ספר שמות פרק לד פסוק י

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הִנֵּה אֲנִי כֹרֵת בְּרִית נֶגֶד כָּל עַמְךָ... הַנְּבִי גֵרֶשׁ מִפְּנֵיךְ אֶת הָאֱמֹרִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי:  
 “Behold, I will form a covenant in the presence of all your people... For I will drive out before you the Emorite, the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite” (*Shemot* 34:10-11).

This promise is not just about physical conquest – it reflects a metaphysical process. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, Yisrael is the epicenter of *tikkun olam* (cosmic rectification). The process of elevating divine sparks begins in the Holy Land (See *Arizal, Sha'ar Hamitzvot, Parashat Re'eh*). The *tikkun* (rectification) of the world begins in the Holy Land. The expulsion of the seven nations occupying the land is not merely a military event but a necessary step in preparing the land to be a vessel for divine light. Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook emphasized that every war for the land is a phase in Israel's redemption. Moshe's plea for divine presence reminds us that Eretz Yisrael is far more than a physical inheritance – it is the very place where heaven and earth can meet. As we navigate our own journey toward spiritual fulfillment, we look to the Land of Israel as a guiding light, a reminder that our highest purpose is to bring divine consciousness into the world.