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Parsha Vayeilech: A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

By Rabbi Akiva Wolff

One of the best-recognized descriptions of the land of Israel is “a land flowing with milk and honey.”¹ This description immediately conjures up a picture of a rich, fertile and desirable land, but what do the words actually mean, and what, if any environmental implications are alluded to in this expression?

We start with the interpretation of the Talmud, which interprets the words “*zavat chalav u'dvash*,” (flowing with milk and honey) as “milk flows from the goats' [udders], and honey flows from the dates and the figs.”² For a pastoral people, this indeed must have been an inviting description of the land. The goats were a source of milk as well as meat, and were very prolific. In Biblical times, goats were a reflection of wealth.

How surprising then that in the land of milk and honey the Jewish Sages later instituted a ban on the raising of small livestock (goats and sheep) in the land of Israel – at least in the settled areas (Mishna Baba Kama 7:7).³

Rashi, in his commentary on the Mishna (Baba Kama 7:7), explains that the reason for the ban against raising sheep and goats in the land of Israel was due to the mitzvah of *yishuv ha'aretz*, literally settling the Land, and by extension living there in such a way that will sustain Jewish existence on the Land for an unlimited time. Although very profitable for the owner, sheep and goats are especially destructive to fields and gardens as well as other green areas.⁴

Clearly, in their considerations for making the ban on raising sheep and goats in the land of Israel, the Sages were faced with a dilemma. On one hand they needed to consider the economic benefits to those that raised sheep and goats; on the other hand they needed to consider the environmental costs, and the injury to the farmers whose crops were being damaged by them. The Sages, in prohibiting the raising of these small livestock, chose what today might be called the ‘sustainable’ path. They ruled against inappropriate development that yields a quick profit for some but damages others, and causes extensive long-term ecological damage. They determined that this was clearly not the kind of responsible development demanded by the concept of *yishuv ha'aretz*.

Unfortunately, one does not need to look very far today to find examples of irresponsible development in the land of Israel. One glaring example is the choice to develop an extensive automobile-based transportation system rather than a safer and more sustainable public transportation system. As a result, many of Israel's most populated areas suffer from terrible

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air pollution. Automobiles also require a lot of valuable land for roads as well as for parking, gas stations, repair shops, etc. For Israel, a small and heavily populated country, this means tangibly less land for housing, schools, parks or other purposes that large numbers of people benefit from.

Weighing the harm caused by automobiles, including long-term ecological damage, against the short-term benefits to those who benefit, it would appear that an automobile-based transportation system does not fit well with yishuv ha'aretz.⁵ Interestingly, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, one of the Torah leaders of the previous generation, was quoted as saying that had there been a Sanhedrin (Religious High Court) in his day, they may well have forbidden the use of private automobiles in Israel.⁶

There are still other interpretations of the expression “flowing with milk and honey” that merit our consideration. In our parsha, the mention of chalav u'dvash is in a negative context: *For when I shall have brought them into the land of which I swore to their fathers, one flowing with chalav u'dvash; and they have eaten and filled themselves and grown fat; then they will turn to other gods, and serve them, and provoke me and break my covenant.*⁷ From this verse we clearly see how the same material abundance which is such a blessing can also lead to forgetting the Creator who provided it.

This leads to the examination of one additional interpretation by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch⁸ in his commentary on the expression a “land flowing with milk and honey.”⁹ Instead of focusing on the meaning of milk and honey, Rabbi Hirsch focuses on the meaning of the word for flowing (*zavat*), and writes:

It is very characteristic that the abundance of produce by “zov” only occurs in reference to Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel)... In Tanach, the word zov never means overflowing. It occurs mainly to describe a human pathological condition, and otherwise as a flowing forth caused by miraculous power... “Eretz zavas...” does not seem to describe a land that develops the abundance in accordance with its natural fertility, but a land that only does this under special conditions. Palestine is a hard land... which can only blossom and flourish “under the continuous special care of G-d for it, from one end of the year to the other.” When it gets water, it blossoms luxuriously. But it only gets the water from above. It is a land that makes it necessary for its inhabitants to be good.

Rabbi Hirsch's interpretation gives us a very different picture. The land of Israel flows *unnaturally* with milk and honey, dependent on the rainfall, which comes according to our actions. When our actions are not proper, for example, if we allow ourselves to be corrupted by the wealth and excess we accumulate (as brought above in Deut. 31:20), then the land will no longer tolerate us.



Clearly, there are many ways to interpret “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Each of the interpretations presented here teaches something about how the Creator wants us to live sustainably in His land and on His earth. May we continue to seek out these messages in the Torah and find ways to apply them in our daily lives and in our relationship to the world around us.

Suggested Action Items:

- Examine our actions, and try to act more sustainably. For example, try to minimize our use of unsustainable modes of transportation, such as automobiles, and switch to walking, bicycling, and using public transportation as much as possible.
- Try to be more conscious of the connection between our moral-ethical behavior and the quality of our environment. This is particularly true for those of us living in Eretz Yisrael, where the Torah teaches that the much-needed rainfall is influenced by the behavior of the inhabitants of the land.

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¹ This expression appears 16 times in the Torah and an additional 15 times in the other Scriptures. In our Torah portion it appears in Deuteronomy 31:20.

² Ketubot 111b, s.v. zavat chalav u'dvash (third line from the bottom).

³ It is interesting to note that there is a disagreement over whether the ban on the raising of sheep and goats in the settled parts of the land of Israel still stands. Amongst those who take the position that the ban is still in effect are the late Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook – first Chief Rabbi of Israel (1906); Rabbi S. Vosner (Shut Shevet Levi chapter 4, siman 227); “Kaftur v’Perach” chapter 10; and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Those ruling that the ban is no longer in affect include the Shulchan Aruch and the late Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank, the former rabbi of Jerusalem (from Nachum Rakover, *Ichut HaSviva*, Jerusalem, 1993).

⁴ See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Batra p. 36a and Rashi there about goats devouring other people's barley.

⁵ Under the reasonable assumption that a proper public transportation system, as an alternative to the automobile-based transportation system being used, will benefit more people, at a lower total cost, with less pollution and less fatalities and injuries.

⁶ See Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (1899-1985), *Pininei Rabbeinu HaKahillat Yaakov*, p. 106.

⁷ Deut. 31:20. (Translation by the author.)

⁸ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) was the intellectual founder of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* school of contemporary **Orthodox Judaism**.

⁹ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch – Translation and Commentary*, (Judaica Press, Gateshead, 1982). In this quote, Rabbi Hirsch is commenting specifically on the verse Exodus 3:8.