YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE KUZARI:

AN INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

by Prof. Shalom Rosenberg

50b: Sleeping Beauty, part 2

 In Bereshit we read of the significant encounter between Avraham and Malkitzedek, king of Shalem. According to the biblical commentator Moshe David Cassuto, the Torah intends to convey "that Jerusalem was a holy city. [This was] an eternal holiness, extending since time immemorial, and even when it was populated by idol worshippers, who were accustomed to worshipping many gods, its inhabitants could not but worship their highest God," who is essentially identical to the one God of Scriptural monotheism.

 Rashi gleans something else from this encounter. Our rights to the land are not the result of a divine promise accompanied by military conquest. Our Sages emphasized our "historical rights" to the land. Rashi describes how the children of Shem lived in the Land according to the original division among the sons of Noach, and how "the Canaanites were conquering the land of Israel from the children of Shem." On the background of this unjust conquest, which destroyed the original harmony between the peoples of the world, Avraham, a descendant of Shem, appears upon the stage of history. He meets with one of the last Shemite kings of Jerusalem, before they were destroyed by the Jebusites. This was Malkitzedek king of Shalem (Bereshit 14:18-20): "And Malkitzedek king of Shalem brought out bread and wine, and he was a priest of the highest God. And he blessed him and said, blessed is Avraham of the highest God, ruler of heaven and earth." In this encounter, the last remaining Shemite monotheistic priest meets Avraham and prophesies, "[God] will someday return [Jerusalem] to your children, who are the descendants of Shem" (Rashi, on Bereshit 12:6).

 The Rambam teaches an additional unique aspect of Jerusalem. In his "Guide For The Perplexed" [3,45] he suggests that Jerusalem is referred to in the Bible as "the place which He will choose," without calling it explicitly by name, for political reasons. The name of the place was hidden so that "the nations would not hold onto it and fight a powerful war over it, as they would if they knew that this place on earth was the source of the Torah." Sadly, this attempt did not help, and the struggles over Jerusalem continue to this day. Political struggles have a mechanism of their own. In Jerusalem, a religious struggle exists as well.

 The Jewish people return to their land with a demand for justice that is beyond law. No one disputes the spiritual ownership of other religions. This is one of the great tests of humanity. Will they recognize the rights of the father who has returned to life and to youth, to live in his own land?

 Jerusalem was conquered by Christians and by Muslims. However, Jerusalem is holy to the Jews not because of an event that occurred in it, nor because of a building in it, but because of very essence. The Temple could burn down, foreign temples could be built in its place, and yet the connection with the land remains, as though nothing has changed. Thus, the Jewish people mourned over Jerusalem, and thus Rihal expressed the longing of Jerusalem for its people:

"Zion, will you not inquire after your prisoners who inquire after you, and are the remnant of your flock...

I cry endless tears to bewail your suffering, and when I dream of the return of your exiles, I am a violin for your songs."

 Whoever has read Mark Twain's description of the parched land, so barren that he felt this could not possibly be the land of which the Bible speaks, understands what the renewal and rebirth of the land means.

 The Ramban saw the double tragedy as the symbol of the deepest expression of the love between the people and the land. The nation could not rest peacefully in any other place in the world, and the land would not bear fruit for any foreign conqueror. It patiently awaited the return of its people.