**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the Parasha**

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***Parashat* *Vezot Haberakha*:**

**“And the Lord caused him to see All the Land”**

**The essence of what Moshe saw**

Immediately following the blessings which Moshe gives the Jewish people in *Parashat Vezot Haberakha*, the Torah tells us about Moshe's seeing the Land of Israel before his death:

And Moshe went up from the Plains of Moav to Mount Nevo, to the top of the cliff, that is over against Jericho; and the Lord caused him to see all the land, even Gilad, as far as Dan.

And all Naftali, and the land of Efrayim and Menashe, and all the land of Yehuda as far as the last sea.

And the South, and the Plain, even the valley of Jericho, the city of palms, as far as Tzoar. (*Devarim* 34:1-3)

Why does the Torah note Moshe's surveying the land, and what does it mean?

The Ramban (ad loc.) explains the permission granted to Moshe to see the land as an act of Divine grace that he merits because of his great love for Israel:

And the reason for this sight which He showed him: since the land was filled with all things good, the beauty of all lands, and since He knew the great love that Moshe Rabbeinu had for Israel, He allowed him to rejoice in the abundant goodness that he saw with his own eyes.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his commentary to the Torah, *Meshekh Chokhma* (ad loc.), notes the necessity of allowing Moshe to see Eretz Israel:

God showed Moshe the land because of what was stated: "Neither shall any of them that despised Me see it" (*Bamidbar* 14:23). He did not want people to say that Moshe was among those who despised Him, God forbid, and therefore He showed him the land.

According tocertainJewish sages, the faculty of sight includes control or possession of that which is seen.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, Moshe's surveying the land bestows upon it and upon its inhabitants, across the ages, blessing and goodness:

Moshe Rabbeinu, peace be upon him, requested (*Devarim* 3:25): "Let me go over, I pray You, and see the good land." This is because seeing involves a connection to the thing being seen…

Even though his request was not granted regarding going over, his request was granted about seeing it, and by seeing it for good, he brought upon it all things good. (*Shem Mi-Shmuel*, *Bereishit*, *Parashat Vayigash*)[[2]](#footnote-2)

These explanations relate to Moshe's surveying the land as an ordinary physical act. Other commentators understand this seeing as miraculous vision. The *Or Ha-chayim* writes as follows:

"And the Lord caused him to see all the land." This means that God activated sight within him that went beyond the limits of ordinary vision, in one of two ways: Either He illuminated his eyes with the “light sowed for the righteous” (*Tehillim* 97:11) which is the light of the six days of creation that was stored away for the righteous, about which *Chazal* say (*Chagiga* 12a) that with it a person can see to the end of the world; or else He drew the land closer before His eyes, and showed it to Him in front of Him.

The *Or Ha-chayim* derives this from the passive form of "And the Lord caused him to see (*vayareihu*)."[[3]](#footnote-3) Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel compares this form to the way that seeing appears in previous commands as an independent act on the part of Moshe:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Get you up onto this Avarim Mountain, **and see the land** which I has given to the Israelites.

**And when you have seen it,** you also shall be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother was gathered. (*Bamidbar* 27:12-13)

Get you up into the top of the cliff, and lift up your eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, **and see with your eyes;** for you shall not go over this Jordan.[[4]](#footnote-4) (*Devarim* 3:27)

According to Abarbanel, Moshe sees the Land of Israel several times from the top of the mountain, each time by way of a prophetic vision.[[5]](#footnote-5) The wording of our verse, "And the Lord caused him to see," indicates a special prophetic level. Below are two sections of his remarks, the first relating to the manner of Moshe's seeing in *Parashat Pinchas* and *Parashat Devarim*, and the second to the manner of his seeing in *Parashat Vezot Haberakha*:

Moshe Rabbeinu saw with his eyes, by way of sensory vision, not only the land in general, but also the detail of each and every district; its fertility and its satiety; its produce and its fruit; its seas, its streams and its springs; and the rest of the things found in the land as if they were all before his eyes.

With this he also saw the division of the land into tribal territories, and the territory of each tribe in the land… For who told Moshe… that the Temple would be in the territory of Binyamin, and the blessing of the land of Yosef for the precious things of heaven, and for the precious things of the fruits of the sun… and that Zevulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea… if not that with that Divine sight he saw the two things that I mentioned…

This is what is intimated in *Parashat Pinchas*, where it says: "And see the land," an allusion to the first thing, that he would see its quality and its detail; and where it says: "which I have given," an allusion that he would see it given to them and divided among the tribes….

After Moshe Rabbeinu went up to the mountain before his death and fully saw these two things… Now, at the time of his death, God shows him these things themselves. He also adds to them, showing him things that would occur in the future in the land, of its conquest, and of the quality of the judges that would be there, and of the royal dynasties, and of the division of the kingdoms, and of the destruction of Israel, each thing assigned to its place. This is as if to say: in this place there shall in the future be this good, and in that place there shall in the future be that evil and destruction, and all the other things — as if he had merited to see them with his senses at the time of their occurrence. For while he knew, with his spiritual prophecy, the successes and the good things that would in the future come to the nation and the punishments and the troubles that would in the future come upon them, now He shows him all this with his senses, assigned and joined to the place of each occurrence.

According to Abarbanel, Moshe's first sightings of the land of Israel resemble photographs of reality in fine detail, as opposed to God's showing him the land of Israel before his death, which resembles seeing a film, in which the characters and plot come to life. In the course of his remarks, he also distinguishes between the first "rational" prophetic visions and the later "sensory" prophecies.

**All-encompassing vision**

Abarbanel then point to the words of the Tanna’im in the *Sifrei* on our *parasha* as the source which is reflected in his interpretation:

"And Moshe went up from the Plains of Moav" (*Devarim* 34:1) — it was an ascent [for him], and not a descent.

"From the Plains of Moav" —

This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him the dynasty of kings that was destined to arise from Ruth the Moabitess, namely, David and his progeny…

"Which faces Jericho" —

This teaches that He showed him Eretz Israel, settled in its tranquility,

and then He showed it to him beset by its oppressors.

"The Gilad" — this teaches that He showed him the Temple, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed him those who destroyed it,

"Gilad" being the Temple [built with cedars of Lebanon],

as it is stated: "Gilad are you to Me, the summit of the Lebanon" (*Yirmeyahu* 22:6).

"Until Dan" —

This teaches that He showed him the land of Dan, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "Until Dan" —

This teaches that He showed him the tribe of Dan worshipping idols,

As it is stated: "And the Danites set up for themselves the carved image" (*Shofetim* 18:30),

And then He showed him the redeemer of Israel destined to arise from him.

Who is this? Shimshon the son of Manoach.

"And all of Naftali" (*Devarim* 34:2) —

This teaches that He showed him the land of Naftali, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: This teaches that He showed him Barak the son of Avinoam, who waged war against Sisera and his hosts.

It is stated here: "And all of Naftali,"

And it is stated elsewhere: "And she sent and summoned Barak son of Avinoam of Kedesh Naftali" (*Shofetim* 4:6).

"And the land of Efrayim" —

This teaches that He showed him the land of Efrayim, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "And the land of Efrayim" —

This teaches that He showed him Yehoshua the son of Nun, who waged war against the Canaanites.

It is stated here: "And the land of Efrayim,"

and it is stated below: "For the tribe of Efrayim, Hoshea the son of Nun" (*Bamidbar* 13:8).

"And Menashe" —

This teaches that He showed him the land of Menashe, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "And Menashe" —

This teaches that He showed him Gidon the son of Yoash, who waged war against Midyan and Amalek.

Another explanation: Since Efrayim was the younger [brother], the verse joined him to the older [brother],

As it is stated: "My [Gidon’s] thousand is the most impoverished of Menashe" (*Shofetim* 6:19).

"And all the land of Yehuda" —

This teaches that He showed him the land of Yehuda, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "And all the land of Yehuda" —

This teaches that He showed him David in his reign.

It is stated here: "And all the land of Yehuda," and it is stated below: "And the Lord, God of Israel, chose me [David] [from all my father's house … For He chose Yehuda to be the ruler, and of the house of Yehuda, my father's house]" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 28:4).

"Until the last sea" —

This teaches that He showed him the face of all of the west, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "Until the last sea (*ha-yam ha-acharon*)" — read it not the last sea, but "*ha-yom ha-acharon* (the last day).”

This teaches that He showed him the entire world from the day that it was created until the dead are resurrected.

"And the South" — this teaches that He showed him the South, settled in its tranquility,

And then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors.

Another explanation: "And the South" —

This teaches that He showed him the Makhpela Cave where the patriarchs are buried.

It is stated here: "And the south," and it is stated below: "They went up to the South and he arrived in Chevron" (*Bamidbar* 13:22).

"And the plain" — this teaches that he showed him Shelomo the son of David, fashioning utensils for the Temple.

It is stated here: "And the plain," and it is written below: "In the plain of the Jordan the king cast them" (I *Melakhim* 7:46).

"The valley of Jericho" —

This teaches that He showed him Gog and all his hosts, who are destined to fall in the valley of Jericho.

Another explanation: Just as this valley is white as it is, and that field is sown with barley as it is,

So He showed him the entire world in the valley of Jericho.[[6]](#footnote-6)

"The city of palms" —

This teaches that He showed him the Garden of Eden, with the righteous strolling about, who are likened to palms.

And similarly it is stated: "The righteous one will flourish like a palm" (*Tehillim* 92:13).

Another explanation: This teaches that He showed him that adjacent to it is Gehinnom, which is narrow at the top and wide below.

And similarly it is stated: "And He has allured you out of distress into a broad, unconfined place" (*Iyov* 36:16).

"Until Tzoar" —

These are the oppressors of Israel,

Like the tax inspectors, who reside with the government and are destined to perish with them.

(*Sifrei Vezot Haberakha* 357)

This *derasha* accords with Abarbanel's description of the nature of Moshe's prophetic vision before his death, "as if he had merited to see them with his senses at the time of their occurrence."

In his commentary, Abarbanel makes use of conceptual categories regarding prophecy from the school of the Rambam, for the purpose of interpreting *Tanakh*. In this context, a *derasha* of *Chazal* is brought as a basis for this interpretation. In this way, the medieval sages establish a connection between philosophy, on the one hand, and exegesis and Midrashic interpretation, on the other. The literary approach to these *derashot* developed in recent generations looks at the form of the *derasha —* its language, structure, and context — as holding the key to understanding it. We will follow this approach in analyzing the *Sifrei*'s *derasha.*

The *derasha* describes Moshe's vision of the land as an all-encompassing vision: the history of the people of Israel in all periods and in all its evolutions, for better or worse. This vision relates also to universal human history: "He showed him the entire world from the day that it was created until the dead are resurrected…. so He showed him the entire world." Thus, the panoramic prophecy revealed to Moshe atop Mount Nevo combines the dimension of place and the land with the dimension of time.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The *derasha* does not present a uniform sequence of time from the beginning to the end. The main course passes from Israel's initial period in their land, from the days of their settlement and the days of the Judges, to the end of days, the time of the fall of Gog. However, not all of the characters and events appear in chronological order: the royal dynasty derived from Ruth precedes the prophetic dynasty derived from Rachav; Yehoshua appears after Barak and Shimshon; and more. Also, although the order of the *derasha* is dictated by the wording of the verses which mention various places one after the other, the *derasha* that ends with “‘Until Tzoar’ — these are the oppressors of Israel," which appears after the Garden of Eden, attests to a deliberate deviation from the chronological order.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the table below, we present the words that are expounded alongside the content of the *derashot*, one after the other, in order to facilitate an examination of the order of their appearance:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | The Plains of Moav | the dynasty of kings descending from Ruth |
| 2 | which faces Jericho | the dynasty of prophets descending from Rachav |
| 3 | and the Lord caused him to see the land | tranquility, oppressors in Eretz Israel |
| 4 | the Gilad | tranquility, oppressors in the Temple |
| 5 | until Dan | the land of Dan, tranquility, oppressors / idol worship / Shimshon |
| 6 | the land of Naftali | the land of Naftali, tranquility, oppressors / Barak |
| 7 | Efrayim | the land of Efrayim, tranquility, oppressors / Yehoshua |
| 8 | Menashe | the land of Menashe, tranquility, oppressors / Gidon |
| 9 | Yehuda | the land of Yehuda, tranquility, oppressors / David |
| 10 | the last sea | the West, tranquility, oppressors / all of history |
| 11 | the South | the land of the South, tranquility, oppressors / the Makhpela Cave |
| 12 | the plain | Shelomo fashions the vessels of the Temple |
| 13 | the valley of Jericho | Gog / the entire world |
| 14 | the city of palms | the Garden of Eden and Gehinnom |
| 15 | until Tzoar | the oppressors of Israel |

The *derasha* is comprised of expositions relating to fifteen words in the verses that describe the objects of Moshe's vision when he goes up to Mount Nevo. The description, "He showed him the land… in its tranquility, and then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors," repeats itself nine times over the course of the *derasha*, and relates to the axis of what happens in the land — the experiences of each of the territories (regions) mentioned.

The other things that appear in the *derasha* divide into two main groups:

* 1-10: The course of Israelite history until the establishment of a permanent monarchy in Israel
* 11-13: A summary of the history of the Land of Israel throughout history

The first group outlines the path of the Jewish people from the time they enter the land until the establishment of a royal dynasty by King David through various figures of leadership. Each of these figures is associated with a single period and takes significant action for the advancement or welfare of the nation. At the end (10) there is a "jump" that relates to all of human history (see table).

The second group begins with the initial acquisition of Eretz Israel by the patriarch Avraham, and continues through the building of the Temple to the war with Gog and Magog, when all of the nations of the world will gather in Eretz Israel to fight and be judged for their actions against Israel throughout history.[[9]](#footnote-9) This group also ends on a universal note, with a *derasha* concerning the valley of Jericho, where God shows Moshe "the entire world" (13).

Each of the last two *derashot* relates to another dimension in time. *Derasha* 14 revolves around the world that is beyond time,[[10]](#footnote-10) while *derasha* 15 relates to the present of the period of the Tanna’im, during which time Israel's oppressors multiply. The description, "like the tax inspectors, who reside with the government and are destined to perish with them," echoes the consciousness of life in a period of persecution, under the watchful eyes of those loyal to the Roman Empire within Jewish society in Eretz Israel in the first and second centuries of the Common Era.

Let us summarize the key points emerging from our study of the *derasha*:

* The existence of a chronological central line — from Israel's entry in the land until the war of Gog and Magog
* Localized chronological discontinuity
* A pattern of tranquility and oppression that repeats itself nine times in different parts of the country
* Two circles of history — the people and the land
* Finishing with the present

Thus, the *derasha* is formed from an integration of the history of the land and of the people, as a complex and multifaceted structure.

Within this system, I propose to see the main often-repeated pattern of tranquility and oppression as symbolizing the process of the formation and crystallization of the nation, over different periods and through different transformations, towards the realization of its destiny.

**A source of strength for future generations**

The phrase "oppressors of Israel" accords with the wording "and then He showed it to him, beset by its oppressors," which is repeated throughout the *derasha.* The tax inspectors who inquire into the actions of the Jews make use of their sense of sight; in opposition stands the vision of Moshe, empowered by God:

I, even I, am He that comforts you!

Who are you, that you are afraid of man that shall die, and of the son of man that shall be made as grass?

You have forgotten the Lord your Maker, that stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth.

You fear continually all day because of the fury of the oppressor, as he makes ready to destroy,

But where is the fury of the oppressor? (*Yeshayahu* 51:12-13)

The Jewish people's entry into their land is their entry into human history, and into their role within it. From a bird’s-eye view, every period and every part of the Promised Land can find itself as part of a rich, turbulent, confusing — but unified — tapestry. Moshe's vision is the source of power for the later generations, as it contains an awareness of the present confrontation as part of a supervised, vast, complex Divine process, throughout history. This belief has the power to comfort, to encourage and even to dissolve the power of the oppressor.

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This *shiur* concludes a year of writing about the *derashot* of *Chazal* on the weekly *parasha.* I thank God for having granted me the privilege of meditating upon the words of the Torah in health and happiness. I thank the Virtual Beit Midrash for having granted me this forum in which to share my ideas. I thank you, my dear readers, for being my audience. I would be glad to hear from you.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity (*Cambridge: 2013), pp. 27-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Shem Mi-Shmuel*, *Moadim*, *Shemini Atzeret ve-Simchat Torah*; commentaries of Rav Chayim Paltiel and Seforno, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The passive form of the verb appears twice in the Book of *Zekharya* in the context of a prophetic vision: "And the Lord showed me (*vayareini*) four craftsmen" (2:3); "And He showed me (*vayareini*) Yehoshua the High Priest standing before the angel of the Lord" (3:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In *Devarim* 32:48-49, we find another command to Moshe to ascend the mountain:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe that selfsame day, saying: Get you up onto this Avarim Mountain, to Mount Nevo, which is in the land of Moav, that is over against Jericho, and see the land of Canaan, which I give to the Israelites for a possession.

The verse explicitly relates to seeing "the land of Canaan, which I give to the Israelites for a possession," which is Eretz Israel, which will be divided into the tribal territories. This is the way the verse is expounded in *Sifrei Ha'azinu* 338:

"And see the land of Canaan” — Rabbi Eliezer said: With his finger, Metatron pointed out all of Eretz Israel to Moshe: Until here is the boundary of Efrayim, until here is the boundary of Menashe… [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In contrast to prophecy by way of an analogy or code, which is the mode of prophecy of the rest of the prophets, Moshe's prophecy is a vision of the physical and spiritual realities themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This wording is difficult. Compare the parallel passage in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach*, *Amalek* 2:

Another explanation: “The valley of Jericho” — cannot anyone see the valley of Jericho! Rather, just as this valley was settled — this field full of wheat, and that field full of barley — so He showed him all of the Land of Israel [entirely settled] like the valley of Jericho. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *derasha* in the *Sifrei* has parallels in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach*, *Amalek* 2 and in *Midrash Tanna’im, Devarim* 34:4. *Midrash Tanna’im* relates to the dimension of place without integrating it with the dimension of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Tanna’im give expression to a conception of order in world and national history; compare the *Sifrei*'s *derasha* here to *Avot de-Rabbi Natan,* Version I, 31; *Seder Olam* 30; BT *Avoda Zara* 5a; *Vayikra Rabba* 6, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Yechezkel* 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is possible that the Garden of Eden and Gehinnom are located in Eretz Israel. See *Pirkei de-Rav Kahana*, Appendix 2. Accordingly, *derasha* 14 can be seen as a continuation of the second group of *derashot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)