

Dear Community,

Living with eight other guys in an unconditioned two-bedroom apartment during an Israeli summer is definitely a formative experience. Nothing builds a relationship like the nightly mosquito wars, standing shoulder to shoulder with your roommates fighting wave after wave of vampiric, aerial, attackers. Deep into the night, philosophical debates raged on topics ranging from G-d's existence to the proper way to eat a shawarma on a date. However, despite all the beautiful camaraderie and my love of Zion there, were moments of weakness. My mind would wander to the cool, air conditioned, intruder free bedroom waiting for me in my parents' home in New Jersey.

One night, as I was talking to my grandmother, Babushka Mila, I mentioned my longing for the cooler climes of my childhood bedroom. She, however, was the wrong audience for one seeking sympathy. For one, she had grown up in a communal apartment in the Soviet Union, an experience far less exciting than what I was enduring; yet it was not that detail which bothered her. 'Sashenka,' she told me instead, 'you are living in Israel, in Jerusalem. What could you possibly complain about?'

This expression of her unconditional love of our homeland was not new to me. On one occasion, I had related a Torah thought analyzing the passage, found in this week's parsha, where G-d allows Moshe to see the land of Israel from a distance. In my analysis, I questioned the value of simply looking at Israel from afar. Babushka Mila could not understand the question: "He got to see Israel, our land! How can you ask what the value was?"

In many ways this week is the celebration of Jewish longing for our homeland. Even though we have merited to have the State of Israel, we still ache for a time when we can live in peace. A time when we can live in world not saturated with the belief that the Jews belong nowhere. A time when we can live in a land where we can sense G-d presence, sense His love. Engage in the mizvot we now can only read about. Behold the Beis Hamikdash in all its splendor, the city on the hill.

G-d did not allow Moshe to enter the land but he allowed him to ascend Mount Nevo and gaze from afar at the destination of this forty-year trek. Why did Moshe require a special dispensation from G-d to be allowed to see the land? Surely he could have made the hike and looked out into the distance without special authorization. In addition, many apologies to my Babushka, but what was the significance of merely gazing at the Land from afar?

When we think of Israel, it is easy for us to allow the physical and emotional beauty blind us to the pulsating spiritual core of the land. To see Israel solely as a Jewish homeland and place of religious and spiritual sites robs the land of its primary splendor and significance. Israel is the land where, according to the Torah, "the eyes of G-d rest upon it from the beginning of the year until the year's end." In this week's Torah portion and for a few weeks following, the Torah describes the deep spiritual quality of the land as well as its resultant sensitivity to sin. It is a land where the material and the spiritual meld together, to the point where its very fruits and vegetables need to be treated with additional mitzvot.

Moshe desperately wanted to be able to experience the spiritual power of the Land. The power and connection of the Land of Israel were too important to give up without a fight. Reb Moshe Alshich, one of the great sages of Tzfat during its golden era, explains that Moshe was devastated by the fact that he was leading the people into a land that was so important, and yet he knew they would misuse it and be expelled for that abuse of its holy power. These two realities drove him to throw himself at G-d's feet, begging to be allowed to enter the Land and lead by example, show the Jews how to properly actualize the boundless potential of their homeland.

Moshe was denied this request, but G-d heard his distress, and therefore wanted to show him what would become of the Jewish people at the end of days. The Alshich explains that this vision was not merely a sightseeing tour of popular sights, but a prophecy concerning the end of days, a vision of the Jewish people returning to their homeland and connecting to the raw spiritual power of the land.

When we think of Israel now, we need to internalize this message: the true value of this land, the true beauty that goes deeper than a nationalistic pride in a home for Jews. This love felt by my Babushka, this love felt by Jews throughout the world and throughout the centuries, the ache of our souls crying for home, cannot be satisfied by a political entity in a world filled with godlessness and alienation. This love should drive us to fight for the final redemption, the moment when the power of the Land of Israel can be truly unleashed to its full potential and we can experience the culmination of our national mission.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein