**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Geulat Yisrael**

**Rav Moshe Taragin**

**Shiur #25: The Ramban and Mark Twain**

In 1867, Mark Twain, as part of a well-documented journey, visited Palestine. As he crisscrossed the barren landscape, he offered the following description and observations:

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds – a silent mournful expanse…. A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely…. We never saw a human being on the whole route….we pressed on toward the goal of our crusade, renowned Jerusalem. The further we went the hotter the sun got, and the more rocky and bare…the landscape became.… There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country…. Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies….

This sterile and infertile condition, which Twain beheld in the 19th century, had been foreshadowed in *Parashat Bechukotai*’s horrific depictions. As predicted there, because we betrayed our divine warrant to Israel, we were exiled and our cities were demolished. Following the description of the wreckage to come, the Torah announces: "I will destroy the land, and your enemies who settle in it will find it desolate” (*Vayikra* 26:32). Whereas most of *Bechukotai* portrays the capture of the land of Israel and the defeat and expulsion of the Jews, this verse describes the state of the land in the period *after* exile: it will *remain* desolate.

Famously, the Ramban (and, in more abbreviated version, Rashi) viewed this prophecy as a favorable note within the terrible predictions: During our extended, centuries-long absence from the land, no nation or culture will succeed in settling Israel. Their attempts to till the land will be fruitless and their efforts to inhabit its cities will be futile. The land will remain desolate, empty, and "available" for the return of her children.

For centuries, powerful empires endeavored in vain to conquer Israel and establish a lasting presence. However, Israel didn’t yield its fertility, nor did it invite long-term human colonization. The land still carried a divine curse, which could only be alleviated by *our* return and *our* rehabilitation of the land. We corrupted the integrity and honor of this land, and only we can lift the curse.

The land *itself* refused to embrace strangers. They were welcome to come and sojourn, but each settlement of this eternal land came with an expiration date. Those who tried to remain beyond "checkout time” were violently expelled. The land waited in animated suspension for the return of her children, who alone could unlock her full potential. Until we returned, the land remained inactive and defiant.

The Ramban didn’t just write about an abstract phenomenon – he lived this prophecy in a very personal fashion. In 1267, emigrating from Spain to Israel, he encountered a fledgling Jewish community in a land of ghosts. The city of Yerushalayim could barely muster a *minyan* of ten men!

During the Ramban's era in particular, the land violently revolted against its would-be conquerors. Even short-term admittance to foreigners was denied. In the roughly 120 years between 1177 and 1291, numerous wars were waged over cities throughout Israel and particularly over Yerushalayim. Saladin fell to the crusaders in 1177, only to overcome them ten years later. Just four years after that, in 1191, he was defeated again, by the armies of the Third Crusade. In the latter half of the next century, crusader armies fell to invading Egyptian forces. The land was in outright convulsion; all human attempts to seize the land of God were thwarted. The Jews may have been exiled long ago, but their land was still waiting. The prophecy of *Bechukotai* was in full display to the Ramban and his contemporaries.

Fast-forward six centuries later, and Twain witnessed the same prophecy – still alive and still thwarting settlement of the land. Too bad he didn’t study the Ramban! How long would it take for this eternal curse to be lifted? Surprisingly, not long at all. It just took the return of the indigenous dwellers of this land of God.

Less than fifteen years after Twain’s visit through the wastelands of Palestine, history shifted and the land reawakened. Our motherland opened her arms to her lonely and long-lost children. Deserts and arid lands once again bloomed with lush verdant landscapes and sprouted fruits and crops which had been absent for two millennia. Malaria-infested swamplands were drained to forge modern cities such as Petach Tikva and Chadera. Through great devotion, and sometimes at the great cost of life, large dormant terrains were now teeming with Jewish life.

And we haven’t just restored the land's ancient fertility; we have also innovated modern ways to preserve it. Facing the challenges of limited water supply in an urbanized modern world, we have learned to conserve our sweet water while sweetening our hard coastal water. While we continue to pray for Heavenly rain, we provide as much human-sourced water as possible to our land and her children.

Beyond the agricultural renaissance, we have managed to construct a modern democracy upon a land that had witnessed the brutal force of totalitarian rule since Titus demolished the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The combination of democratic freedom and economic welfare is rare in the modern world, and even more so in our part of the world. Part of the resuscitation of Israel is not just its agricultural revival, but the construction of a stable and sturdy modern state built upon the principles of freedom and human dignity.

We still yearn for an ultimate and final spiritual revival, with the construction of a *mikdash* and a state saturated with the presence of Hashem. Until then, history remains imperfect and our accomplishments preliminary. Yet, who can ignore the revival of our homeland – the restoration of its ancestral energy and the joy of children returning home.

Twain was correct: Palestine sits in sackcloth! The State of Israel, however, is bedecked in a wedding dress and dances to the sweet music echoing through its cities and through the streets of Yerushalayim. Just as we were promised, the land remained abandoned while we were absent. Our Mother waited for us, just as we waited for her. The reunion is sweet. Just as we were promised.