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SHELAH

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**RELIGIOUS ZIONISM: BEYOND LEFT AND
RIGHT**

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According to Yossi Klein HaLevi, Zionists are divided between "Pesach Jews" on the Left and "Purim Jews" on the Right. For Pesach Jews, the story of the Exodus is primary and its central lesson is that God will not stand idly by the suffering of the innocent. The story must be retold every year to serve as a reminder that freedom is the birthright of not just the Jewish people but all people. Its existence is never guaranteed and must constantly be fought for. The suffering of the Jews in Egypt makes clear that when they finally arrive in the Promised Land, they have an absolute moral obligation to others not like them. For Pesach Jews, Zionism can be distilled to one verse: "Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Purim Jews, however, grasp on to a different narrative. In the book of Esther, the Jewish people are viciously targeted for genocide despite having done nothing wrong. Their salvation comes not through revealed miracles but through the affirmation of Jewish power. With it, the Jews can defend themselves, and without it, they are nothing more than sheep to the slaughter. In a world where God's face remains hidden, the Jewish people have no choice but to look after themselves. After lacking a land for so long, Israel provides the existential security the Jewish people so desperately need. For Purim Jews, Zionism is animated by the need to be ever vigilant: "Remember what Amalek did to you as you left Egypt" (Deuteronomy 25:17).

The conflicting verses of the Left and Right present a challenge for Zionism, but not an insurmountable one; when two verses contradict, a third verse can resolve the dispute. A newly published collection of Rav Shagar's writings, titled *My Covenant of Peace*, represents this quest for a third verse that will enable Zionism to move beyond Left and Right.¹ At over five hundred pages, the book collects essays from a twenty-five year period beginning with the Invasion of Lebanon, continuing with the First Intifada and the Oslo Peace Process, and concluding with the Second Intifada and the Disengagement from Gaza. Each one reflects Rav Shagar's attempt to grapple with challenging political questions through the lens of Torah. While many rabbis invoke the word of God only to justify their political positions, Rav Shagar's approach turns to the multiplicity of views contained within the Torah in order to engage the complexity of the issues before him.

Neither Left nor Right

Rav Shagar refuses to see himself as part of any ideological camp. He explains, "I do not define myself as Right or Left; rather I approach each issue on its own (*inyani*). Our challenge is to find the correct path between the Right and Left in accordance with a changing reality" (68). His refusal to embrace one of Zionism's competing ideologies perhaps traces back to his biography. Though raised as a Religious Zionist to believe that the state of Israel heralded a new redemptive age, this belief met its limits on the battlefield of Nafach during the Yom Kippur War. Sent to the Golan Heights in the early days of the war alongside two other young soldiers, his tank was hit as soon as it reached the front. It burst into flames, yet somehow Rav Shagar managed to fling himself from the wreckage. Nevertheless,

he did not escape unscathed. His friends were killed, and his body grievously wounded.

The national catastrophe of the war, combined with his personal tragedy, challenged many of the truths he had long taken for granted. It raised questions for which he had no answers, and though the costs of war have long been justified by appeals to political or religious ideologies, Rav Shagar found himself unable to do so:

Of course, it is easy to create slogans, to speak with pathos. There is nothing easier than trading in war and blood. But reality is stronger than words. The fear one speaks about in a religious sermon is different from fear one feels when traveling in a tank towards war, and it is even more different from the fear one feels inside a tank covered in flames. The faith is different as well. (38)

Trauma leaves scars, and while scars are a sign of healing, they never fully disappear. For Rav Shagar, the scars he bore on his mind and body were a constant reminder that life's most difficult questions elude simple answers. This realization granted him a unique perspective on the dramatic political events faced by Israel. Rather than fall into the trap of one political camp and view all political questions through this narrow lens, he saw a bigger picture that enabled him to criticize both sides without denying the legitimacy of either.

A clear example of this approach appears in the essay "Min Ha-Meitzar," written in 1987 as a response to the first Intifada. In it, he notes both the dangers of right-wing extremism and the challenges of relinquishing the occupied territories. The miraculous victory of the Six Day War, he argues, brought about a certain arrogance within Religious Zionism. In place of the generation which had won the War for Independence arose a new generation, the *kippot serugot*. However, they differed from the previous generation. Unlike Israel's founders, they were "not seeking self-improvement, driven by deep pain, or haunted by longing. Rather they carried God's promise in their pocket" (51). Their self-confidence bordered on arrogance, which found its way into Gush Emunim and the settlement enterprise as a whole. Fueled by the belief that the settlement efforts were a fulfillment of the divine plan, many founded settlements illegally. In a pattern reminiscent of recent years, Rav Shagar highlights the attempt of Gush Emunim to establish an illegal settlement outside the Palestinian village of Sebastia in the Shomron only for the Israeli government to forcibly evacuate them. The lawlessness inherent to founding illegal settlements, Rav Shagar argues, is not without its consequences.

There is a straight line from Sebastia to the Jewish underground. It is impossible to ignore this. If people are willing to take the law into their own hands and transgress the laws of the state in the case of settling Sebastia, why wouldn't they permit themselves to act similarly regarding violence towards innocents, like the Jewish underground did? (51)

Once Gush Emunim permitted itself to break Israel's laws for the sake of a higher purpose, what was to prevent others from going even further? This is exactly what happened, he explains, in the years following Sebastia when the Jewish Underground perpetrated a number of terror attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank. When they were finally brought to justice, it was discovered that several high-ranking members of Gush Emunim had been involved. Yet despite his sharp critique, Rav Shagar also sympathizes with Gush Emunim. He notes that "if we are going to criticize the breaking of the law by Gush Emunim, we also need to recognize the other side of the coin: If Gush Emunim had asked permission from the government to establish a settlement, the whole project would never have happened at all" (51).

Throughout the essay, Rav Shagar alternately agrees with arguments of both the Left and Right. In doing so, he identifies a central dilemma Israel still struggles with today. Returning the territories may not bring Israel peace, but maintaining the occupation is immoral. He writes, "Is there a solution to the question of returning the territories? Indeed, Menachem Begin is correct. If we return the territories, the katyushas will fall in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. But those promoting peace are also correct. It is impossible for one nation to subjugate another" (51).

While it is common for the Left to argue that the occupation corrupts Israel's soul, Rav Shagar justifies his critique by citing Maharal (*Netzah Yisrael* 1), who wrote that the Jewish people's exile in Egypt was destined to come to an end because each nation has its natural place in the world, and therefore no nation can rule another permanently. The same would apply to Israel's occupation of the Palestinians. Just as the Jewish people were destined to go free from Egypt, so too, Rav Shagar implies, the Palestinians are as well. Those who think the status quo can be maintained indefinitely are profoundly misguided because "it is impossible for one nation to subjugate another without its moral and spiritual character becoming corrupted" (52).

Following in the Footsteps of Rav Kook

In many ways, Rav Shagar's critique of the Left and Right is deeply reminiscent of Religious Zionism's spiritual forerunner, Rav Kook. Because of Religious Zionism's sharp turn to the political Right in recent decades, many fail to realize that Rav Kook never saw himself as tied to any political party; in fact, he repeatedly lamented the factional nature of Jewish politics. In an important essay (*Orot Ha-Tehiyah* 18), he writes that the ideologies of the Jewish people divide into three camps. The Liberal camp, most associated today with what we would consider to be Israel's Left, emphasizes the Jewish people's moral obligation to humanity and the importance of bettering society for all. The Nationalist camp, associated today with Israel's Right, puts the needs and national interests of the Jewish people at the center even at the expense of others. Lastly, the Orthodox camp, similar to today's ultra-Orthodox, stood firm in their unyielding commitment to the Jewish tradition. Each camp grasped a central element of God's vision for the Jewish people: the universal, the national, and the holy. But in failing to recognize that each camp had a place within the divine plan, all three viewed the others as obstacles or enemies. This perspective was dangerous, for the harmonious synthesis of all three camps was the ideal vision of the Torah.

Rav Kook's greatest hope was to unite all three camps under the vision of Religious Zionism, and he believed that the unfolding process of redemption taking place in the Land of Israel would make this possible. Though the core principles of the three camps may appear to conflict with each other, eventually, these contradictions would be resolved and unify within a higher divine truth.

Rav Shagar's earlier writings in *My Covenant of Peace* bear the distinct influence of Rav Kook. He too notes that both the Left and Right embody divine truths, and though politics may divide them, one must still aspire to a unity that resolves their contradictions. "Beyond all the oppositions—and there are oppositions on every issue and every approach—there is one root. In every position there are sparks of holiness. The question is whether we have the ability to arrive at the root in which the oppositions are unified" (22).

Several of Rav Shagar's earlier essays express the optimism that some sort of political synthesis is possible. However, Rav Shagar's later writings betray an attitude that is more skeptical about such possibilities, drawing on Rebbe Nachman of Breslov to emphasize the necessity of contradiction rather than the optimism of harmony. Left and Right each have their place but the challenge is to live them as a productive tension rather than to search for a final resolution. "The path we must take is not the effort to

unify opposites, to build a coherent awareness, rather to build the possibility of multiple consciousnesses—a schizophrenic consciousness—without becoming cynical" (154).

The Disengagement from Gaza and its Discontents

Few if any political events were as significant for Rav Shagar as the Disengagement from Gaza in 2005. His several essays on the subject, written before, during, and afterwards, depict his struggle to make sense of an event Religious Zionism considered a profound catastrophe. The Jewish state, in which it had imbued its hopes and dreams, appeared to be turning away from Rav Kook's messianic vision. If redemption was just beyond the horizon and settling the territories would make it a reality, how could the state of Israel actively work against this? Many Religious Zionists believed that the Disengagement simply would not occur. Surely God would provide a miracle demonstrating that the divine plan must go forward. Others argued for vigorous action to stop the Disengagement, encouraging religious soldiers to refuse orders to take part in the expulsion of Jews from Gush Katif, and planning mass acts of civil disobedience. Like he had done in the past, Rav Shagar took a more nuanced approach. He expressed his opposition to the Disengagement, but also noted that "the expulsion of Jews is not invalid from a pure halakhic perspective" and that "it is forbidden to associate it with Nazi expulsions, because the decision does derive from political and security concerns" (160). Furthermore, he did not believe that religious soldiers should refuse to follow orders, if only "to preserve some level of societal unity and solidarity" (149).

What most concerned Rav Shagar was not necessarily the Disengagement itself but what would come after. Because a governmental coalition imposed the disengagement rather than a public referendum, he worried that it lacked the popular will that would grant it legitimacy in the eyes of the Right. Instead, it was experienced not only as a betrayal by the state to which they had dedicated so much, but as an act of outright violence. Thus, he identifies it as a turning point in Israel's history.

For everyone, the battle is so intense today not only because of the singular issue of Gaza. In reality, this is the opening shot of a struggle for the entire Land of Israel, and the Right and Left recognize this... It is not just a political struggle. Rather, it is a cultural struggle for the character of the state and Israeli society. (128-129)

The political battle around the Disengagement was so fierce because it was a fight for Israel's soul. If the Left was to

“win” and the Disengagement comes to pass, Zionism’s contradictions will not be resolved. Rather, Rav Shagar fears, it will only further inflame a culture war between the Left and Right. He fears that the violent and coercive nature of the Disengagement will only lead to further political polarization, and it is here where he is most prescient if not prophetic.

Violent conflict invites the next conflict. There is a well-known “*vort*” (Deuteronomy 26:6): “The Egyptians acted harshly [*va-yarei’u*] towards us” – they made us evil [*ra’im*]. The matter is also correct regarding the disengagement. The threat of expulsion turns us evil, and this is because of the simple reason that hate fuels hate. (129)

By imposing its will on the Right through the Disengagement, the Left abandoned the mode of persuasion so central to democratic politics. This move, he claims, will only serve to radicalize the Right for years to come by convincing it to take up non-democratic means as a way of advancing its political agenda. While one can debate the extent to which Rav Shagar has been proven correct in recent years, there is no question that the traumatic memory of the Disengagement still looms large for many on the Right. Political polarization on the Right remains one of Israel’s greatest challenges and the legacy of the Disengagement plays no small part in it.

What comes next for Religious Zionism?

Just as Rav Shagar was forced to question some of his most deeply held beliefs in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, so too Religious Zionism was forced to do the same in the wake of the Disengagement. Could one continue to confidently declare that Israel is *reishit tzemihat ge’ulateinu*, the beginning of the flowering of redemption? For many the answer remained the same as it had always been, a resounding yes. Others experienced a crisis of faith, with some even embracing more nihilistic religious philosophies that saw the state as an opponent of redemption. Rav Shagar, however, recognized that while catastrophic, the Disengagement was an opportunity for much needed introspection on the part of Religious Zionism.

For Religious Zionists unwilling to question their core beliefs, the Disengagement merely proved that they must do a better job conveying their message to Israeli society. Rav Shagar, however, vehemently disagreed.

If rabbis from the Religious Zionist community cannot find a solution for broad sections of their own community, and especially the youth, how do they have the arrogance to bring their Torah to the

community and youth who are much more distant? It appears they feel as if they are already living in the generation of Rav Kook, and they therefore try to engage with and resolve the questions of our generation with copies of Rav Kook’s answers for his generation. (131)

He argued that the religious and political crisis presented by the Disengagement should be an opportunity for *teshuvah* on behalf of Religious Zionism. As Rambam explains, those who fail to see crisis as a necessary opportunity for *teshuvah* follow “the path of cruelty and it causes them to remain stuck to their evil ways” (Hilkhot Ta’anuyot 1:3) For Rav Shagar, the Disengagement must lead to a renewal of Religious Zionism, one in which even core beliefs may need rethinking. He makes this clear in a striking essay written just months before it was scheduled to take place.

The change must take place in Torah itself, and I am aware of the bad impression felt by those listening when the words change and Torah are joined together. We believe in the eternity of the Torah, but even with this, the Oral Torah is compared to the moon which teaches the renewal and development of Torah, terms that Rav Kook himself used. (131)

Rethinking Redemption

Few tenets are more central to Religious Zionism than the belief that Israel’s founding inaugurates the beginning of the redemption. This belief, as argued from the teachings of Rav Kook, has influenced nearly all Religious Zionist thought. It serves as a cornerstone of the settlement enterprise, and it is at this belief which Rav Shagar takes aim. His concern is that messianic enthusiasm too often demands to be transformed into a political platform, and in doing so, it runs the risk of becoming a “radical evil” (133) that seeks to impose its will on others out of the belief that the promised future is already at hand. This kind of messianism, he warns, can give license to the worst moral atrocities.

Thus, religious Zionism must rethink its understanding of redemption to separate it from politics. In a sense, he notes, it would be easy to embrace the approach of the Haredim, who limit the dream of redemption to the *siddur*, or that of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, messianic Religious Zionism’s harshest critic, who wrote that “any messiah who comes is a false messiah.” Nevertheless, Rav Shagar was unwilling to give up the belief that redemption must be a concrete reality, not something left only to our prayers. For him, the Zionist project is fueled by a utopian spirit that is inextricably bound up with the Jewish people’s yearning for redemption. Excising it would deny Zionism’s very

legitimacy. He emphatically states, “Without messianism there can be no Religious Zionism, just as there cannot be Zionism; a utopian pathos is an essential part of it—‘to fix the world’ (*le-taken olam*)” (134).

For Rav Shagar, it is essential that Religious Zionism hold on to its dream of the state of Israel as *reishit tzemihat ge’ulateinu*, but the question remains: how can such a belief be a vital force in religious life without succumbing to its potential dangers? To address this dilemma, Rav Shagar turns to two German Jewish thinkers from the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig, neither of whom would have ever been confused as a Zionist. Both came of age in *fin de siècle* Germany, at a time of great optimism. However, Germany’s failures during World War 1 forced Jews and Germans alike to rethink many of their core ideals. Benjamin and Rosenzweig focused much of their efforts on rethinking modern notions of philosophy, truth, and historical progress, and though raised secular, both affirmed a Jewish theological notion of redemption as the necessary corrective to modernity’s limitations. Benjamin ultimately became a Marxist and Rosenzweig a religious Jew, but both articulated a belief in an immanent messianism that seeks to cultivate a space for rupture and transformation rather than impose its will on reality.

Whereas liberal conceptions of history tended to see modern life as a process in which the new replaced the old for the better, Benjamin’s dream of a better world meant not incremental improvement but a radical transformation of reality. This transformation could only be properly sustained by drawing on the Jewish belief in the messianic redemption, a claim he makes in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Modern capitalism, which created the illusion of progress while perpetuating profound inequality and oppression, could only be changed through a rupture, one that would make a true break with the present rather than merely serve as its continuation.

As the thinker Walter Benjamin put it well, messianism that is like a miracle can be understood as a revolution, as opposed to the Enlightenment’s conception of progress. The reason for this is that which merely comes last is not truly capable of birthing something new, rather it can only recycle the old and repeat itself. Messianism as a utopian echo that acts upon us and inspires us, must continue to provide spirit for those who interpret faith. Messianism is indeed a revolution—a refusal, the place in which the desire of the subject bumps into historical laws. (133-134)

The kind of messianic faith offered by Benjamin refuses to accept the status quo. It compels believers to recognize that redemption is not achieved through any particular political battle, and it cultivates a resistance to the present that causes one to look at it differently. What at the moment looks like ironclad, unbreakable rules will ultimately be nothing more than illusions.

Rosenzweig articulates a similar notion, although with a different emphasis. While Benjamin is a Marxist who sees history in materialist terms and therefore grants no special status to the Jewish people, in *The Star of Redemption* Rosenzweig perceives the Jewish people as existing outside of history. For the Jews, redemption is not some far off possibility but something that is always possible *ha-yom*, “today.” Thus, the Jews do not participate in history like other peoples. Their attention is always attuned to God’s law and the present moment rather than oriented around an attempt to build something for the future. Even so, while the possibility of a complete and total redemption is always “today,” Rosenzweig was careful to point out that this moment remains perpetually *adayin lo*, “not yet.”

The tension between redemption as potentially “today” and still “not yet” captivated Rav Shagar, because it expressed the lived experience of Religious Zionists in Israel. To be in the Land of Israel dwelling among the Jewish people is to experience God’s closeness and the possibility of transformation while still knowing that it has not yet arrived, for the world continues as it always has. He expands upon this point by connecting Rosenzweig’s thought to the narrative of Song of Songs. The book depicts two lovers in the Land of Israel who yearn to be together. Their passion is palpable, and it infuses all that they see and do. Yet, despite being so close to consummating their love, each finds the other constantly out of reach. Even the attempt to open the door when one hears one’s lover knocking, reveals only their absence, not their presence. In this way, Rav Shagar explains, messianism preserves the gap between redemption and reality. It consists of a

faith in the messiah as one who will come, one who even comes and goes; one who comes and goes and is still “not yet” to come... “My beloved is like a gazelle or like a young stag. There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice.” (*Song of Songs 2:9*) Like in Song of Songs, opening the door causes the beloved to slip away. (134)

The belief that redemption can be “today” but still “not yet” may sound paradoxical, but Rav Shagar sees it as creating a new kind of political consciousness. Not one that cannot

provide a political platform, but one that can possibly allow for a different kind of politics. In Rav Shagar's words: "This is the true utopian spirit... Messianism is not a political argument but it can be the spirit which animates politics, the vision that stands at its foundation. It is not a present but a future that we yearn for and strive for" (134-135).

To better understand this idea, it is helpful to think about those who have the custom of keeping a bag packed under their bed in anticipation of the messiah's arrival. On the one hand, they know that redemption is not yet here, but they nevertheless remain ready for it at any moment. Such an approach embodies a profound truth. To live one's life with the faith that the messiah can come today, while still aware that he has not yet come, is to experience life differently from others. On the outside one's actions may look mostly the same, but on the inside reality feels different because one lives with the awareness that the current state of the world is only temporary.

It is often to our detriment that we invest so much in the structures and modes of thinking that dominate our lives, for it is often our attachment to them which serves as the greatest obstacle to achieving the change that we truly yearn to see in the world. For Rav Shagar, this impediment includes the ideologies of Zionism's Left and Right. Though each may represent a verse in the Torah, and therefore appear immutable, it is upon us to recognize that each represents but one verse. There are always more verses, more redeeming possibilities waiting to be discovered if only we are open to seeing them as a reality.

The Future of Religious Zionism

In the fifteen years since Rav Shagar wrote the essays in *My Covenant of Peace*, much has happened to Israel. The Left has completely fallen out of power, and the Right has gained

¹ Ha-Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), *Briti Shalom: Yamin u-Smol, Milhamah ve-Shalom* [My Covenant of Peace: Right and Left, War and Peace] (Yediot Aharonot,

ascendancy. During this same period of time, Religious Zionism has become much more fractured and no longer remains the unified political force it once was. Many now vote for right-wing parties with a more secular bent and the only official Religious Zionist party is distinguished by its extremist beliefs. A yearning for redemption has been combined with bigoted statements against Palestinians and LGBTs, advocating for the expulsion of Arab citizens of Israel, and a glorification of Meir Kahane has moved from the fringes to become the norm.

It's hard to believe Rav Shagar would have felt anything other than shame that the only party in the Knesset to literally bear the name Religious Zionism (*Tzionut Datit*) currently embodies the two tendencies he perceived as most dangerous: a messianic fervor that seeks to impose its chauvinistic vision on Israeli society combined with the belief that the use of power and even violence can solve Israel's most difficult problems. He would no doubt argue that Religious Zionism must confront its demons by offering new thinking that addresses the questions of the present moment.

Does Zionism have a future beyond Left and Right, and does Religious Zionism have a role to play in making that possible? The answer remains unclear, but we must not forget what Rav Shagar took to be a foundational principle of Religious Zionism, one also affirmed by the teachings of Rav Kook. The Torah always contains the potential for renewal. As Rav Shagar described it, "We believe in the eternity of the Torah... that the Torah is a Torah of truth because it is a living Torah, and life is constant change, a spring that gushes forth anew" (131). Even after his passing, Rav Shagar's writings in *My Covenant of Peace* can offer us exactly that.

2020) [Hebrew]. All unidentified page numbers refer to this volume. All translations by the author unless otherwise noted.

GRIEF, GRATITUDE AND ... GRAPES? TEARS ON TISHAH BE-AV AS TOOLS OF TIKUN AND THANKSGIVING

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EDITORS' NOTE: While originally published on July 16, 2018 for Tisha B'Av, this article offers substantial insight into the story of the spies in Parshat Shelah.

Witnessing the Kotel Plaza on Tishah Be-Av afternoon jam-packed with worshippers lamenting “the city that is ... laid waste, scorned and ... desolate without inhabitants” leads many to question the logic of tears on Tishah Be-Av in our times. I propose to shed light on the meaning and importance of our tears by examining a thread that connects *birkat ha-mazon*, *bikurim*, the righteous daughters of Tzeloofhad, and the sin of the spies.

“Desirable” Land – Mysterious Adjective

Every time we enjoy a meal and recite *birkat ha-mazon*, we thank God for giving us a land that is “desirable, good, and spacious”: *eretz hemdah tovah u-rehavah*. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 48b) states that one who does not praise the land of Israel with these words in the second blessing of *birkat ha-mazon* does not fulfill his obligation. Rambam (*Berakhot* 2:3), Tur (*Orah Hayim* 187) and others endorse this rule as authoritative.

Why are these particular kudos – desirable, good, and spacious – deemed so essential? Surprisingly, the Talmud does not seek or offer any source.

The phrase *eretz tovah u-rehavah* distinctly echoes God's promise to Moshe, at the scene of the Burning Bush, to liberate the Children of Israel from slavery and bring them to a “good and spacious land” (*Shemot* 3:8). *Talmidei R. Yonah* note this connection, and Meiri adds that this marks the first time that God promises *Eretz Yisrael* to Israel as a nation, i.e. after the era of the individual patriarchs. Evoking God's original promise of the land with the words *eretz tovah u-rehavah* fits perfectly in a blessing which expresses our thanks for the gift of the Promised Land.

So far so good: we have found a meaningful biblical source for “good and spacious.” But the adjective *hemdah*, desirable, is much more puzzling. Nowhere in the Pentateuch is that word used to describe the land of Israel.

Talmidei R. Yonah cite Yirmiyah 3:19, which praises the land of Israel as *eretz hemdah*. However, they do not explain why that verse or word is particularly relevant to the context of *birkat ha-mazon*. Instead, *Talmidei R. Yonah* offer only a general suggestion that our blessing employs adjectives which the Bible uses to praise the land. But if that were the only selection criterion, there are other biblical kudos to choose from. Surely a more familiar praise like “flowing with milk and honey” would come to mind well before the obscure *hemdah*! Indeed, *Kaftor va-ferah*¹ (chap. 10) is troubled by this question and leaves it unanswered.² Moreover, the context of Yirmiyah 3:19 seems incongruously sad in a blessing of thanks. God gave us this desirable land, but we repaid Him with faithlessness. Why select an adjective of praise that is not only obscure, but carries with it such a dark association?

Shibolei Ha-leket (157) offers an alternative explanation for *hemdah*, later quoted by R. Yosef Karo (*Beit Yosef, Orah Hayim* 187) and others. According to Talmudic tradition, Joshua composed the second blessing in *birkat ha-mazon* upon his entry to Israel (*Berakhot* 48b). *Shibolei Ha-leket* suggests that having witnessed first-hand his great teacher Moshe's deep, unfulfilled longing to enter Israel, Joshua was moved to praise the land as an object of great desire — *eretz hemdah* — in humble gratitude for meriting to enjoy the produce of Israel, a privilege that his master sadly never shared.

I find *Shibolei Ha-leket's* explanation incredibly moving, particularly in our own days, when our nation has tasted our own version of what Joshua experienced. By God's grace, we have merited to once again walk the streets of a free Jewish Jerusalem — “a dream of hundreds and [of] thousands of years, a dream which many *gedolei Yisrael* did not merit to realize,” as R. Aharon Lichtenstein poignantly wrote.

Nevertheless, as powerful as this interpretation of *eretz hemdah* feels, we may be bothered by the lack of a biblical source text corresponding to Joshua's supposed use of the phrase *eretz hemdah*. Can we locate a Biblical source for *eretz hemdah* that is also clearly pertinent in the context of *birkat ha-mazon*?

“They Scorned the Desirable Land”

I suggest that the phrase *eretz hemdah* in *birkat ha-mazon* alludes to the following verse:

Va-yimasu be-eretz hemdah; lo he-eminu lidvaro
(*Tehilim* 106:24).

Recounting the Sin of the Spies, the Psalmist laments that the Children of Israel “scorned the desirable land and did not trust His word.”

Why is this verse, with its dark connotation, an appropriate reference for expressing gratitude in *birkat hamazon*? After all, the verse speaks explicitly of *rejecting* the land.

The power and poignancy of recalling our forebears’ tragic scorn for *eretz hemdah* when we recite *birkat ha-mazon* will become clearer when we reflect on the concept of “elevating sin” through sincere repentance.

Elevating Sin Through Love – and Fruit

According to *Hazal*, the national catastrophes of *hurban* and exile that we mourn on *Tishah Be-Av* were rooted in an earlier failure occurring on the same date: the sin of the *meraglim*, the “spies” dispatched by the Israelites to scout out the land of Israel. The disheartening report of those scouts provoked a tearful rejection *en masse* of the Promised Land. In response, God decreed forty years of wandering in the desert, until a new generation would arise, worthy of entering Israel. According to the Rabbis (*Ta’anit* 29a), God further decreed:

You have wept for no good reason; you will henceforth have good reason to weep on this date in future generations.

At first blush this teaching sounds almost hopelessly fatalistic. Our ancestors erred grievously and irreparably on the Ninth of Av. The date is cursed. Epic national tragedy on that date seems preordained and unavoidable.

However, R. Menachem Ziemba *zt”l*, a Warsaw Ghetto martyr, popularized a beautiful teaching of R. Yitzhak Luria (the *Ari Ha-kadosh*). According to R. Luria, bringing *bikkurim* (first fruits harvested in Israel) to the Temple repairs the Sin of the Spies. R. Ziemba added insightful support for R. Luria’s idea by pointing out that the exemplars of *bikkurim* mentioned in the Mishnah [*Bikkurim* 3:1] are the same three fruits that the spies brought back with their damning report: figs, grapes, and pomegranates.³

Indeed, not only are the species of fruit themselves reminiscent of the spies’ failed mission, as R. Ziemba noted, but the introduction and conclusion of the farmer’s declaration also evokes the first words of the spies’ report:

They [the spies] reported and said: “**We came into the land** where you sent us ... and **here is its fruit.**” (*Bamidbar* 13:27)

I declare this day to the Lord your God **that I have come into the land** which the Lord swore unto our fathers to give us ... and now, **behold, I have brought the first of the fruit** of the land, which You, O Lord, have given me. (*Devarim* 26:3, 10)

But how, and in what sense, can one “repair” the harm done through a past misdeed by performing a different *mitzvah* centuries later?

I picture the farmer who brings his first fruits to the Temple doing so with much deeper gratitude when he connects with feelings of remorse for our people’s historic rejection of the land of Israel. The desire to make amends invests the farmer’s pilgrimage with even greater devotion. In phrasing reminiscent of the spies’ report, the farmer affirms that he too has come into the Promised Land and has brought a sample of its fruit. But this time, instead of cynical rejection, the report is one of heartfelt gratitude and appreciation. Recalling our nation’s failure in the Sin of the Spies only serves to intensify the farmer’s passionately grateful embrace of our formerly-rejected land.

Bringing *bikkurim* can therefore “elevate” the Sin of the Spies into a source of inspiration and merit. I am applying here the beautiful concept of “elevating sin” through loving repentance that is developed at length by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in the essay “Blotting Out Sin, Or Elevating Sin?”⁴:

The future can be built on the foundations of the past. How so? By elevating and exalting evil. How does one exalt evil to such an extent that it ceases to be evil?... Repentance [motivated by love]... infuses [man] with a burning desire to come as near as he can to the Creator of the universe and attain spiritual heights undreamed of before he sinned...

The intensity of sin and the sense of guilt and shame that overwhelms man in its wake are such strong drives that they impel the penitent upward and outward in the direction of the Creator of the universe. The years of sin are transformed into powerful impulsive forces which propel the sinner toward God...

The Sin of the Spies is transformed into a spur for even greater closeness to God by bringing the first grapes, figs, and pomegranates of one’s harvest to the Temple in a sincere expression of gratitude.

***Eretz Hemdah*: Transforming Sin to Merit**

Similarly, we can repair the Sin of the Spies while reciting *birkat ha-mazon*. The key to this effect lies precisely in the words *eretz hemdah*, alluding to the Sin of the Spies and our scorning of the desirable land.

By thanking God each time we eat a meal for the gift of *Eretz Yisrael* and praising it as *eretz hemdah* – land of desire – we evoke and admit the folly of our ancestors in rejecting a land they should rightly have desired. We affirm that the Land of Israel is indeed desirable in our eyes, that we truly desire and love the land that our nation once mistakenly rejected. Alluding to the Sin of the Spies in this manner deepens our appreciation for the precious opportunity we have been given to enjoy the *eretz hemdah*. Our hearts are opened to acknowledge this gift with even greater sincerity. The same phrase which described the essence of the Sin of the Spies – rejection of *eretz hemdah* – thus rectifies and elevates that sin, becoming an instrument for expressing our deepest gratitude for that same land.

A stirring message emerges from juxtaposing *eretz hemdah* with *tovah u-rehavah*. Alluding to the Burning Bush (*tovah u-rehavah*) recalls the innocence and purity of God's original vision and promise; with *hemdah*, we remorsefully recall how that vision was nearly derailed as a consequence of our rejecting the "desirable land."

Thus, the second blessing of *birkat ha-mazon* embodies a powerful virtuous cycle. Thanking God for the Land of Desire intensifies our remorse for the past error of rejecting it, while that very sense of remorse in turn intensifies our appreciation for a gift made even more remarkable by forgiveness and second chances. This blessing, devoted at its core to gratitude for the gift of the land and its produce, is thus a perfect vehicle through which to recall, recant, and rectify our historic scorn for that land. With every meal, we have the power, through remorse and loving repentance, to transform the Sin of the Spies into fuel for a more passionate appreciation of the Promised Land.

The Daughters of Tzelofhad

Rambam and Ibn Ezra both famously write that the death of *dor ha-midbar* during the 40-year delay in the desert allowed for the growth of a new generation born in freedom, unaccustomed to slavery, and less fearful of combat.⁵

We can go further. The death of *dor ha-midbar* in the desert presumably intensified the next generation's desire for the land of Israel. In Moshe's farewell address to the generation poised to enter Israel, he poignantly describes their parents' belated pangs of regret (Devarim 1:41-45):

You replied to me saying: "We stand guilty before the Lord! We will go up now and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us...."

But the Lord said to me, "Warn them: Do not go up and do not fight, since I am not in your midst..."

You flouted God's command and willfully marched up to the hill country. The Emorites who lived in those hills came out against you and chased you like bees, crushing you at Hormah in Se'ir.

Again you wept before the Lord but the Lord would not heed your cry or give ear to you.

The yearning of parents who never made it to the Promised Land surely left a powerful mark on their children, imbuing in them a burning eagerness to enter Israel and to not repeat the prior generation's mistakes.

The daughters of Tzelofhad exemplify this impact. They successfully plead with Moshe to inherit their father's portion in the land, because he left no sons. Supporting their claim, the daughters unashamedly assert their father died "of his own sin" – explained by R. Yehuda b. Beteira (*Shabbat* 96b-97a) as being one of the *ma'apilim* who died in the failed attempt to ascend and enter Israel despite God's decree. The daughters' keen, resolute desire to possess the land in their father's name was itself likely inherited by witnessing their father's painful regret over his initial rejection of the Promised Land, and his tragic death in the wake of that regret.⁶

We have now seen three illustrations of how the Sin of the Spies and the resulting decree could be transformed into powerful fuel for good:

- cementing the next generation's resolve to courageously enter and settle Israel under Joshua's leadership;
- deepening the meaningfulness of the Israeli farmer's gesture in bringing his first fruits to the Temple; and
- intensifying our thanks in *birkat ha-mazon* for a desirable land, *eretz hemdah*.

Sowing with Tears and Joy

"Those who sow with tears *and* joy combined shall reap." So runs the re-punctuated, Hasidic rendering of Tehilim 126:5.

God has generously graced us with the remarkable gift of renewed Jewish sovereignty in Israel and Jerusalem. Yet we continue to mourn our historic national calamities on *Tishah*

Be-Av, the anniversary of the Sin of the Spies, with unresolved grief. Why? What precisely should we aim to *feel* nowadays on *Tishah Be-Av*?

Personally, my own *Tishah Be-Av* experience is most meaningful when I regard our tears and grief as means to transform the tragedies and failings of our past into fuel for an even deeper appreciation of the precious and fragile gifts with which God has only recently entrusted us again. The farmer bringing *bikkurim* to the Temple, the individual blessing God for *eretz hemdah* after finishing a meal, and the righteous daughters of Tzelofhad – each stoke their feelings of love and appreciation for the land of Israel by recalling the Sin of the Spies and its heartbreaking consequences. How privileged are we that our *Tishah Be-Av* liturgy today carries similar power and meaning.

Tishah Be-Av in our days reminds us that the Jewish sovereignty we now enjoy is a delicate, priceless prize that our people sadly mishandled and forfeited in the past. Twice burned, thrice shy. If God does not protect Jerusalem, its mortal guardians toil in vain.⁷ Our goal on *Tishah Be-Av* is an emotional experience ensuring we never take Jerusalem for granted.

In our traditional prayer of *Nahem* we beseech God to:

Console the mourners of Jerusalem and the city that is... laid waste, scorned and desolate; in mourning bereft of her children, laid waste of her dwellings, robbed of her glory, and desolate without inhabitants...

May our painful recall that Jerusalem was “laid waste, scorned, and desolate” for nearly two millennia inspire us

¹ A fourteenth-century work written in Israel by R. Farhi, focused mainly on laws pertaining to Israel.

² *Orhot Haim (Birkat Ha-mazon 55)* suggests that *eretz hemdah* implicitly includes the praise that Israel flows with milk and honey. This seems rather forced. “Flowing with milk and honey” more clearly implies “desirable” than vice-versa. Why choose the less familiar, non-Mosaic phrase?

to sharper awareness of how precious is the gift of sovereignty over a thriving Jerusalem aglow with spiritual and physical beauty -- and that this rare, exquisite gift demands our loving attention, gratitude, and devotion to righteousness and Torah.

May the seeds we sow annually on *Tishah Be-Av* – with tears, even in our joyous era – help us to speedily reap and enjoy a harvest of *geulah shleimah*.

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³ *Wellsprings of Torah*, an anthology of *divrei Torah* on the weekly *parshah*, for *parshat Shelah*.

⁴ From *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*, by Pinchas H. Peli.

⁵ *Moreh Nevukhim* III:52; Ibn Ezra on Shemot 14:13.

⁶ See Rav Elhanan Samet, *Studies in Parshat Ha-shavua* Vol. 2II, *Parshat Shelah*.

⁷ Tehilim 127:1