

The Land of Israel

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This book of Devarim keeps on referring to how special the land of Israel is. Its produce "A land of grain wheat and barley, wine, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and honey," "A land flowing with milk and honey."

In Egypt and in Babylon produce came from irrigation. In Israel rains were the only source of fresh water and so the people were more dependent on Nature and God to bring the rains at their appointed times. This explains the unique relationship we have with our homeland and God (even if it has no oil, although it seems drilling in the Mediterranean might even solve that problem because natural gas has already been found off shore).

The importance of 'Our land' is emphasized throughout the Torah. Specifically, this week, the reading opens with the ceremony of the First Fruits that each season were dedicated to God. Yet for most of the history of the Jewish people the majority of Jews have not lived on 'our land.' The Medieval commentators argued as to whether it is still a religious obligation to settle there. Some like Ramban, Nachmanides, went so far as to say that we only keep the Torah in the Diaspora in preparation for living a full Jewish life in our own Land.

But it has been recognized by law even if living in our own land is preferable, we may live wherever we can make a living or where history and circumstances take us. The Talmud even said one should not leave Babylon because there, there once was more scholarship and greater safety than in the Land of Israel occupied by the Romans.

Nowadays we are lucky. We have the choice. But still if one really wants to live a life totally dedicated to following the bible, the only place where one can keep most Torah commandments including agricultural ones, is in Israel. The truth is that wherever we are, we just have to try to do our best!