



5785 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schrier Parashat Matot-Masei / פרשת מטות-מסעי

When Holiness Attracts Darkness

As *Klal Yisrael* prepares to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* repeatedly warns them to clear the land of the Canaanites. If these evil inhabitants remain, they will become a deep source of trouble for the Jewish people.

Hashem warns in *Parshas Ma'asei*, "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the Land from before you, then those whom you leave over will be **as spikes in your eyes and thorns in your sides**, and they will harass you in the land in which you settle. (*Bamidbar* 33:55)"

The *Ramban* notes the double language "spikes" and "thorns," interpreting it as a warning of dual danger. First, the Canaanites will "blind" us with their foreign ideologies and idolatry, causing grave spiritual failure. This corruption is metaphorically described as "spikes in the eyes." Then, they will be able to physically harm the Jewish people and ultimately drive them out of *Eretz Yisrael*, like a painful thorn that pierces and wounds the body.

The *Netziv* similarly interprets "spikes" as a reference to spiritual threats. But he adds a shocking insight. He infers from the words "in the land in which you settle" that *Eretz Yisrael* itself intensifies the danger of ideological seduction. There is something unique about the Land of Israel that makes the *yetzer hara's* influence even more dangerous.

The *Netziv* (in both *Ha'amek Davar* and *Harchev Davar* *ibid*) cites stunning *Midrashim* that suggests *Klal Yisrael* is more likely to be soiled with *avodah zara* in *Eretz Yisrael*. Most disturbing of all, *Yerushalayim ir HaKodesh* was the most attractive site for the despicable worship of foreign deities! The *Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:14) recounts that *Nevuchadnezar* himself mocked the faithful Jews who refused to bow to an idol in *Bavel*, saying: "Just the other day, did not Jews stream to Jerusalem to worship every conceivable idol?"

How could this be? How could the holiest land on earth, and the city that serves as a beacon to the world, become a hotspot for the worst forms of spiritual corruption?

The answer lies in the twisted nature of the *yetzer hara*. His goal is not merely to trip us up, but to neutralize our greatest strength. As *Shlomo HaMelech* writes in *Kohelet* (7:14), *זֶה לַעֲמֵת זֶה עָשָׂה אֱלֹקִים* – God created one thing to balance the other. The *Sefarim HaKedoshim* explain that God maintains spiritual balance in this world so that we can truly earn our connection to Him. He therefore allows forces of evil to counter those of good. This maintains His hiddenness, thereby preserving our free will and ability to willfully seek Him out.

The *Maharal (Netzach Yisrael* 4) writes that this is exactly why the *yetzer* for *avodah zara* burned so hot in *Yerushalayim*. The city has a unique spiritual capacity to reveal God's absolute unity. But the more powerful the *kedushah*, the more intense the opposition. The *yetzer hara* flings itself at the holy city, desperate to create chaos and confusion in the place most capable of clarity and connection.



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But the *Maharal* points to an irony: The burning desire for *avodah zarah* that destroyed the first *Beis HaMikdash* was no longer present during the second. Instead, as the *Gemara* in *Yoma* (10a) teaches, the Second Temple was destroyed due to *sinat chinam*—baseless hatred.

Why did the *yetzer hara* change tactics?

During the first temple period, the Jewish people were divided. Ten tribes formed their own distinct northern kingdom and no longer traveled to *Yerushalayim*. *Yerovam*, who broke away from *Malchus Beis Dovid*, ensured that none of his subjects could return to the *Mikdash*. In this divided reality, *Yerushalayim's* unifying power lay dormant and irrelevant. There was no threat of national unity; the *yetzer* was content.

But in the time of the second *Beis HaMikdash*, the entire Jewish people had reassembled. They were united around one temple, one *Kohen Gadol*, and one unified *Yerushalayim*. The latent power of the holy city to integrate all Jews was awakening.

So the *yetzer* got to work, unleashing *lashon hara*, distrust, and hatred in a desperate bid to sabotage *Yerushalayim's* power. And our unity collapsed. His success caused the ultimate destruction of the holy city. *Yerushalayim*, the city whose essence is *achdus*, could not survive such internal fragmentation.

Now, in the midst of the Three Weeks in which we mourn our baseless hatred destroying our holiest city, we again find ourselves at each other's throats. The divisions are painful, and the issues are so complicated. One cannot help but feel an intense sense of utter *yeush*.

But there is a strange comfort in this struggle.

The *yetzer hara* only fights what threatens him. His fiercest resistance is always reserved for our greatest strengths. The more focused he is on attacking our unity, the more we know how awesome the potential of *Medinat Yisrael* is to unify every single Jew. The harder he tries to divide, the more vital our efforts to hold each other close.

