



## 5785 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Parashat Vaetchanan / פרשת וַאֲתַחֲנֶן

### The Mountain and the Cedar: Transcending Sin and Weakness

In *Moshe's* famous final prayer, his last-ditch effort to gain entry to *Eretz Yisrael*, he begs the *Ribbono Shel Olam* to let him cross over the *Yarden*. However, the formulation of his request seems quite cryptic: "Please let me cross over and see the good land that is on the other side of the *Yarden*, this good mountain and the *Levanon*. (*Devarim* 3:25)" The vague reference to a "good mountain" is shrouded in mystery. Which mountain does *Moshe* mean? And while all of *Eretz Yisrael* is beautiful, what draws *Moshe* specifically to the *Levanon*?

*Chazal* reveal that *Moshe* is really referring to a particularly special mountain: Jerusalem. And "the *Levanon*" references the holy temple that was destined to be planted in the center of the holy city, the *Beit HaMikdash*. *Moshe's* request was ascending in order of sanctity. First, he longs to cross into the holy land. Then, to ascend to Jerusalem. And finally, to behold the *Beit HaMikdash*, the pinnacle of his life's mission.

Why is the *Mikdash* referred to as *Levanon*? On a simple level, the future sanctuary to be erected by *Shlomo HaMelech* was constructed from the cedars of Lebanon (*Chizkuni* *ibid*). In the ancient world, these tall and sturdy trees were renowned as the best of construction materials. Many ancient monarchs deliberately sought out these trees for the construction of their palaces. (In fact, the royal palace in *Shushan*, of Purim-fame, was constructed from Lebanon cedars.) If mortal kings were utilizing this special wood to project their own ephemeral honor, *Shlomo* intuitively understood that *Hashem's* own house of glory must best them.

But the *Gemara Yoma* (39b) provides a different explanation behind this cryptic reference. The word לבנון refers to the *Beit HaMikdash's* capacity to whiten the sins of *Klal Yisrael* – של ישראל – שהוא מלבין עוונותיהן.

The *Maharal* (*Gur Aryeh* *ibid*) sees a unifying theme behind *Chazal's* two explanations for the title of *Levanon*. He explains that both mountains and cedars rise above their surroundings. In a similar sense, Jerusalem and the *Beit HaMikdash* are spiritually separated and distinct from this world. The holy land is already the "highest of all lands", spiritually elevated beyond all of *Chutz La'aretz*. But the move to Jerusalem represents another qualitative jump in sanctity that is akin to climbing a spiritual mountain. In the rarefied air of *Yerushalayim*, a Jew lives an elevated life that hovers above mundane reality.

Planted at the top of this "mountain" is the towering cedar, the *Beit HaMikdash*. Ascension to *Har HaBayit* reflects an additional level of spiritual *aliyah*, another qualitative jump into a different realm of *kedushah*. When a Jew "climbs" into this realm that is so elevated beyond vulgar physicality, he is capable of cutting away the petty mistakes he made in the confusion below. The two explanations are truly one: the towering cedar facilitates a spiritual ascension that enables us to transcend our mishaps.

And this is exactly what we so desperately year for. Without the *Mikdash*, we lost a most sacred ability: to transcend our petty human foibles and mistakes, achieving a rarefied view of this world, our purpose, and



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our destiny. Without the towering cedar of Jerusalem, we lose perspective. What should be trivial distinctions between Jews become gaping chasms.

*Moshe's tefillah* was tragically not accepted. But his unfulfilled dream became our eternal mission. We still yearn desperately for the *Nechama* that the rebuilding of Jerusalem promises: the restoration of clarity, unity, and peace. May we speedily witness the rebuilding of the city on the mountain, crowned once more by the towering cedar above.

