



5786 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schreier Parashat Matot-Masei / פרשת מטות-מסעי

Reverse Engineering Destruction

As *Hashem* prepares *Klal Yisrael* to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, He repeatedly emphasizes the need to stamp out the idolatry of the Canaanite nations. He adjures *Moshe* to warn them (*Bamidbar* 33:55) that if these nations are not entirely removed from the land – along with their immoral and idolatrous practices – there will be severe consequences. *Hashem* tells *Moshe* that these remaining residents will become “spikes in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will harass you in the land in which you settle.”

The double formulation of this verse is strange. Why does the Torah use two metaphors to describe the damaging presence of the Canaanite nations, comparing them to both spikes in our eyes and thorns in our sides?

The *Netziv* explains that these two symbols reflect a spiritual failure that culminates in worldly failure. First, the Canaanite nations will metaphorically blind us; their immoral debauchery will distract and deceive us, planting spikes into our eyes and causing us to follow after them into moral bankruptcy. Once this occurs, we will no longer be deserving of control over the holiest place of earth. Slowly, the same Canaanite nations that caused our spiritual collapse will also begin to reassert control over the land, becoming thorns in our sides. Eventually, they will evict us from the land, ironically reversing the very process that we failed to complete so many years before.

But the *Netziv* notes that the Torah’s deep concern for our spiritual failure in *Eretz Yisrael* is not coincidental. The Canaanite nations may have been depraved, but depravity alone would not explain the Torah’s emphasis. Instead, it is precisely the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* that leaves it especially vulnerable to the evil inclination. זה לעומת זה עשה אלוקים – this one against that one God has made. Because this world must be a level playing field, in which humanity can equally choose between that which is right and wrong, *Hashem* counterbalanced the intense *kedushah* of *Eretz Yisrael* with a fiery inclination towards idolatry within its boundaries.

In fact, the *Netziv* asserts that the place most prone to idol worship is *Yerushalayim* itself! Because *Yerushalayim* is the ultimate seat of *Hashem’s malchut* in this world, reflecting His unity and control over creation, the evil inclination is also granted its greatest sway within her holy walls.

This balancing effect does not just exist with regard to *Hashem’s* oneness and idolatry. Every unique facet of sanctity expressed by *Yerushalayim* is counteracted by a corresponding force of impurity that seeks to dominate the very same city.

For example, *Yerushalayim* is uniquely primed for Torah study. The *Lishchat HaGazit* – the Chamber of Hewn Stone – was the seat of the *Sanhedrin* and the source of ultimate Torah instruction. כי מציון תצא תורה – Torah emerges from *Yerushalayim*.



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Yerushalayim is also uniquely suited to facilitate *achdut Yisrael*, binding together the various tribes of Israel into one seamless unit.

And yet, as the *Churban* of *Yerushalayim* approached, vicious *lashon hara* echoed through her streets, and seething hatred permeated the city. The *Netziv* notes that *lashon hara* counteracted the purity of Torah speech, and our baseless hatred destroyed *Yerushalayim*'s unifying power. How ironically tragic that the greatest spiritual gifts bestowed upon *Klal Yisrael* were squandered because of the negative forces specifically designed to counteract them.

But there is a beautiful twist to this bitter reality. When attempting to identify what prevents us from fully reclaiming *Yerushalayim*, we need only look at the areas upon which the evil inclination seems most intent. When he launches a desperate offensive, targeting something with relentless ferocity, it becomes obvious that beneath the battle lies a powerful force of sanctity waiting to be revealed.

When I look at the vicious divisions that exist among us, especially as we approach *Chodesh Av*, I initially despair. Our mutual distrust and hatred are reminiscent of the darkest moments in our long history *r'l*. But upon further reflection, I find an unexpected glimmer of hope. If this is how ugly the *yetzer hara* can make us look, then imagine how beautiful and powerful *Klal Yisrael* will become once the latent power of *achdut Yisrael* is finally unleashed. May we witness it speedily in our days.