



Canfei Nesharim

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V’Zot Habracha: Perfecting the World

By Baruch Rock

Parshas V’Zot HaBracha is lovingly dedicated by Evonne and Jerry Marzouk in honor of their son, Binyamin Rafael.

The Torah reaches the end of its yearly study cycle with *V’zot Habracha*, literally “and this is the blessing.” In *V’zot Habracha*, Moses (Moshe), acting in a manner much like his ancestor Jacob who blessed his sons moments before his passing, stands before the nation of Israel, a confederacy of tribes bound by the Torah, to bestow his final blessing upon the people moments before his death.

A close look at one component of Moshe’s blessing provides us with an overall picture of the nature of his blessing, as well as a deep insight into the essence of environmental Torah. “And of Zebulun he said: Rejoice Zebulun in your departure and Issachar in your tents.”¹ Rashi (France, 1040-1105), the preeminent commentator on the Torah, tells us that the members of the tribe of Zebulun were merchants earning their livelihood on the Mediterranean Sea. With the money they earned they supported themselves and in addition, the tribe of Issachar, whose task was to engage in constant Torah study. As a result of Issachar’s devotion to Torah learning, the tribe produced many members of the supreme legal body in ancient Israel, the Sanhedrin.² Among the many responsibilities the Sanhedrin held was the calculation of the calendar cycle that determined the dates of the major Jewish festivals, which in turn had awesome implications for all of the tribes of Israel, as well as for the world.

Each of the festivals, *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*, brought a gathering of all the tribes at the Temple in Jerusalem. These triannual meetings nurtured the formation of a spiritual center and strengthened our national consciousness. The gatherings at the Temple served as a focal point for the mission of the Jewish people, namely the bringing of a time where we will see, as the prophet Isaiah promises, the nations “beat their swords into plowshares.”³ This metaphor describes the ultimate vision of the Jewish people, which is no less than a perfecting of the world, a perfection known in Judaism as *Shabbat* (Sabbath)—“...the day that will entirely be Shabbat and rest for a life of eternity.”⁴ We experience a microcosm of this with the celebration of each festival, as well as each week when we celebrate Shabbat.

Looking once again at the relationship between Zebulun and Issachar, it can be understood in environmental terms as an example of a bio-region. A bio-region is an association of residents of a definable natural or socially constructed region, be it a road, water body, landform, language, or

¹ Deut. 33:18.

² See Nehama Leibowitz *Studies in Devarim: Ve-zot Ha-Berakhah; Essay # 5; The Blessings of Issachar and Zebulun*; for a nice array of views on this point.

³ Isaiah 2:4

⁴ Mishna Tamid 7:4

common interest.⁵ Within the bio-region are several different social spheres: the self, the home, the community, the village/town/city. Moving beyond the bio-region it can be argued that a state is an aggregate of bio-regions, as is the world. As we have seen throughout this weekly Torah portion project, the Torah forbids wanton destruction, limits the extent and the way in which we use the earth's resources, encourages social justice and caring for the world that G-d has given us, and demands of us a constant awareness of our actions in this world and the sanctity that a life based on G-d-consciousness can provide. The beauty of the example of the tribes of Zebulun and Isaachar is that by each tribe fulfilling its specific role, caring for its own "bio-region" as it were, they affected powerful transformation for the nation, and laid the groundwork for the perfecting of the entire world.

Certainly, the ecological crisis facing the world today is incredibly serious and of the utmost importance, but perhaps the most startling realization is that the ecological crisis is in actuality the manifestation of a deeper, more profound crisis: the deterioration of social relationships in the context of taking responsibility for, caring for, and giving to one another. This deterioration affects every fiber of the universe.

The "social message" offered by the relationship of Zebulun and Isaachar is the essence of environmental Torah. If we each fulfill our specific role in the world, each of us caring for ourselves and for the other, care for the earth will follow as a natural consequence.⁶ This was the task of our forbearers, and this task still remains before us. The utopian vision of the future, a world of perfection that is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and is embodied by the Jewish Shabbat, is a gift to the entire world – which can be made real by our own actions, taking care of each other, in the present.

Just as in the natural world the integrity of an ecosystem relies upon the health and vitality of each of its components, the same is true for the Jewish people, and for humanity as a whole. We must each do our part to ensure that our social relationships are strong, healthy, and well maintained. In so doing, we will become a more whole people and a more whole world. As we learn in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), "...It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. Yet, you are not free to desist from it..."⁷

In this light, we add another facet of understanding to the words of Isaiah, "...nations shall walk by your light, Kings by your shining radiance."⁸ Our responsibility as humans and as Jews demands that we assume the mantle of leadership of caring for one another. Only in this manner can we ensure the viability of our care for the earth. Moshe's blessing teaches us that only by fulfilling our mission as a Jewish people – taking on the responsibility of fully caring for one another as exemplified by Zebulun and Isaachar – only then can we be caretakers of the earth, and a light unto the nations. And that is the greatest blessing we can work and hope for.

Suggested Action Items:

- Share the teachings of this series with your family, friends, teachers and students — taking the suggested actions to heart.

⁵ See *Earth User's Guide to Permaculture: Teacher's Note* by Rosemary Morrow

⁶ For a beautiful, simply written treatment of this topic, see David Watkins' *Urban Permaculture*.

⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:21

⁸ Isaiah 60:3

- Deepen your understanding of yourself and your understanding of the Torah's teachings on relationships.
- Increase acts of kindness: Listen to others attentively. Volunteer in a soup kitchen. Assist the elderly.
- Connect to your local community center and/or synagogue.

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