

It Will Fall

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Massei

Speaking to Moses, the Eternal said, “Command the Israelites; say to them, ‘Because you are coming into the Land of Canaan, this is the land, within its borders, that will fall to you as an inheritance.’” (Numbers 34:1-2)

What a strange expression! **The land . . . will fall to you.** Land can be purchased; land can be conquered; land can be given or taken; but land is not a movable object that can “fall.” We are compelled, then, to look for a deeper meaning, something beyond the plain-text physical meaning of these verses.

There is something sacred about land. Certain places have a special holiness, but every place is, in some way, a holy place. Not every place is holy to every people, but every place is holy to someone. It might be a special forest glade where a young (or not so young) couple first realized they were in love. It might be a hospital room where a loved one miraculously recovered from a life-threatening illness or injury, or where a loved one met death in a state of incredibly elevated spirituality. It might be a classroom where someone experienced an “aha” moment. Or it might be the sacred ancestral homeland of a nation. Every place has its holiness, whether that holiness has become manifest yet or not. As our master and teacher Martin Buber says, everything in the world is either holy or waiting to be hallowed.

And so there is something holy about the Land of Canaan as well. But the text tells us that, when we enter into the land, it will fall to us. In what way will it fall? And why?

The Hebrew word כִּי (*kee*), which we have rendered *because* (traditionally rendered *when*) speaks volumes. The balance of this chapter provides instructions for dividing the land – for marking its borders and for assigning territories to each of the tribes, to each of the families. And perhaps this it is which explains how the land will fall.

The land, the holy land, will fall to the level of those who occupy it. When we came into the land, when we divided it up, when we concerned ourselves with who owns which part, we became blind to the reality, the spiritual reality, that the land does not – can not – belong to us or to any people. The land is G*d's, and those who hold it do so only as stewards, not as owners.

Two men once came before Rabbi Yehezkel Landau of Prague (1713-1793) with a dispute over a parcel of land. Each had documents attesting to his ownership of the land, and each brought legal citations to support his case. The rabbi listened to both men's claims and read their supporting documents. He then said, "Let us adjourn briefly. We will reconvene in ten minutes, at the site of the disputed parcel."

When they gathered at the disputed site, the rabbi knelt and placed his ear to the earth, remaining in that position for almost half an hour. When he rose, he said, "I have listened to each of you as you brought your claims before me, and I have read your supporting documents. Now, however, I have also listened to the land, and the land has spoken to me. The land has told me that it does not belong to either of you. Rather, you both belong to it."

When we attempt to take the land, to claim it as our own, to divide its ownership, we cause the land to fall from its level of holiness (as G*d's land) to our level; **it will fall to you**. When we understand ourselves as stewards, not owners; when we learn to share, then we can raise its holiness to an even higher level.

Shabbat Shalom.