



A Connection WITHOUT AN Entry Permit

Rabbi Reuven Brand

We had been dreaming of, planning for, and hoping to attend a wedding this summer in Israel. There were many complexities in leaving our children in Chicago and flying to Israel, but they did not dim our excitement and anticipation for this rare trip. But ultimately, my wife and I experienced what so many others have over the past months. The Israeli government would not allow tourists to enter due to health considerations. With just a keystroke, our trip disappeared; we never reached the Promised Land.

Although the cancellation of our planned trip was undoubtedly a “first-world problem,” it was still a significant disappointment – and one which provoked reflection. First and foremost, my wife and I were sad to miss sharing a *simcha* with people who mean so much to us. But on a deeper level, I felt a sense of disbelief: Even after vaccines and so much progress in fighting the Covid pandemic, a trip to Israel was still out of reach. Israel out of reach? I felt a strange sense of being in exile, locked out.

It was noteworthy that the Israeli government’s decision to foreclose summer tourism was reported on Tisha B’Av, a day when we contemplate the complexities of our relationship with Hashem, the state of our exile, and our relationship with Eretz Yisrael.

On Tisha B’Av, we mourn. We grapple with tragic events and are left with profound and challenging questions. We feel our collective longing for Israel, the home of our fathers and our future. Captured in the words of generations of poets, we express our desire to return to the beautiful Land of Israel.

And yet, our Tisha B’Av experience today is profoundly different from that of our great grandparents. Their



experience highlighted a longing for a far-off, mostly out-of-reach dream. But in the modern era, Tisha B’Av has taken on a new dimension for Jews living in the Diaspora. Today, Tisha B’Av challenges us by posing an implied question: Why am I not now living in Hashem’s Land, the Land of our people?

We confront the same questions as we move through the Jewish calendar. On Tu B’Av, we recall a turning point for the people of Israel, who finally stopped dying in the desert as Hashem cleared them for landing in the Land. On Rosh Hashanah, we remember Avraham Avinu’s journey to Hashem’s chosen place in the heart of Eretz Yisrael. The introspection of the *Yamim Noraim* opens our eyes and hearts to consider whether we are doing our best to nurture our connection with Hashem. This overall spiritual reflection invites us to seriously engage the contradictions of our Jewish life in the Diaspora, especially today.

Why haven’t we chosen to make our life in Israel? Why is it important in the first place? And how can we strengthen our connection with Eretz Yisrael from afar? These age-old questions lie just beneath the surface of our busy everyday lives. We should consider them as part of our annual spiritual checkup.

The recent reality of only Israeli citizens and their immediate relatives being allowed into Israel has highlighted our family’s personal decision to live in America, bringing the implications of this choice squarely into focus. We have become more conscious of our separation from the Land of Israel.

Why is Hashem preventing us from entering our holy Land now? Hashem’s ways are mysterious; we are not privy to His plans. We do not ask מָדוּעַ, seeking a rationale, but rather לָמָּה, “for what.” Perhaps Hashem wants us to consider the reasons we haven’t moved to Israel. Or maybe He is challenging us to find new ways to connect to our Land and our people. Or could it be that He wants us to keep asking questions, to keep the conversation going?

The Chafetz Chaim and Rav Kook, 20th-century spiritual visionaries, kept the Land of Israel at the center of their spiritual and everyday conversation. They emphasized that we are on the threshold of redemption. We can too. Although this process may be slower than they imagined, we know that Israel is our ultimate destiny. We know the unfolding of the process of Jewish history will continue, along with its hiccups and frustrations. We know that one day all barriers of entry to Israel will disappear. Most importantly, we know that even if we are not currently in Hashem’s Land, we can connect with it wherever we are.

Rabbi Reuven Brand is the Rosh Kollel of the YU Torah Mitzion Kollel, a community Torah institution with a vibrant Beit Midrash, array of creative learning opportunities, unique women’s initiative and diverse outreach programming. He lives in Skokie, Illinois with his wife, Nechama, and their five children.