

# The Cursed Land

As I was preparing for a class on the Hoshanot during Sukkot, I noticed the peculiar language of the 6<sup>th</sup> Hoshana that we said of Hoshana Rabba. The prayer begins הושע נא אדמה מארר, save us from the cursed land. I asked “what cursed land?” The note in our Artscroll Mahzor for Sukkot points to this week’s Torah reading. When Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden, G-d said to him ארורה האדמה בעבורך, “the land is cursed because of you.”<sup>1</sup> The verse continues, כי ימי חיך, “you shall eat by the sweat of your brow all the days of your life.”<sup>2</sup> The following verse begins וקוץ ודרדר תצמיח לך “thorns and thistles shall the land sprout for you.”<sup>3</sup> Not exactly the most pleasant or comforting images.

Before Adam’s transgression he had it easy: all he had to do was to pluck the fruit from the trees. As Radak, Rabbi David Kimhi, comments, “You (Adam) will not have to work before you can eat... ‘to till it and to

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:17

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:18

tend it”<sup>4</sup> meant nothing more than light work-not work that would raise a sweat.”<sup>5</sup> He now has to work hard in order to yield any fruit. As a matter of fact, Rashi says that the sproutings will be “artichokes and cardoons, which can only be made edible with great effort.”<sup>6</sup> A lot of effort will need to occur in order to produce a little food.

This fate of Adam is transposed onto each of us through the *Hoshana* we said less than a week ago. While at times in life we feel like we are in Eden, that things flow naturally without effort, at other times each of us strives to produce something yet our best efforts and hard work fails. We might even feel (G-d forbid) cursed just like the land of Adam is cursed. We might feel unproductive, that our efforts do not bear fruit. The Hoshana is a prayer for G-d to save us from this: to make our efforts bear fruit and to make sure that we do not give up.

Some might take a more ecological approach, arguing that with global warming our efforts are taking even more fruit. With drought preventing crop growth and fires destroying them in California, flooding

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:15

<sup>5</sup> Radak on Genesis 3:17 ד"ה ארורה האדמה בעבורך

<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Genesis 3:18 ד"ה וקוץ ודרדר תצמחך לך

wiping out entire crops of fruit in Florida and numerous other natural disasters, the *Hoshana* could be calling on G-d to save us from our worst inclinations and tendencies, reducing our carbon footprints.

Alternatively it could be beckoning us to think twice before doing something destructive, reminding us that hard-earned respect and careers can be ruined in an instant over something foolish. It can be equally important to pray that G-d save us from ourselves as it is to pray that G-d to save us from natural disasters and sources where the earth is or feels cursed.

As we begin the Torah anew this morning, let us think about what we can do to make our lives a little more Eden-like and feel a little less cursed. At the same time, let us recognize that sometimes we need to work by the sweat of our brows in order to achieve results about which we feel proud and accomplished. Perhaps Adam's Eden was not an ideal but rather something meant to be short-lived. The next time we feel that our land, our lives, is cursed, let us pray to G-d that we have the inner

strength needed for transformation and may we be the change we want to see in the world.