

# ONEG SHABBAS

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## A Land Flowing of Milk and Honey

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Ostensibly, when we encounter the first expression of “a land flowing of milk and honey”, it may not occur to us that this description relates to drinking. Quite the contrary: on the one hand, milk is a beverage, albeit not of an intoxicating variety. Moreover, honey, which, as Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) describes it, flows from figs and/or dates (רש"י על שמות י"ג:ה; ד"ה זבת חלב ודבש), is something that flows and, thus can potentially be drunk. Again, though, is there any connection here with an intoxicating beverage? According to the second century sage, Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, he argues that it can be drunk and potentially intoxicating (*Nazir* 4a & *Bekhorot* 45b). Now that we have connected this expression to drinking, what can we understand about it?

The appearance of this expression in our Torah portion is the first such appearance, as we read (Ex. 3:7-10):

And The Lord said, “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. (8) I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (9) Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (10) Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רָאִיתִי  
אֶת-עֲבֹד עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר  
בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-צַעֲקָתָם  
שִׁמְעֹתִי מִפְּנֵי נַגְשָׁיו כִּי  
יָדַעְתִּי אֶת-מַכְאֲבוֹ: (ח)  
וְאָרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ | מִיַּד  
מִצְרַיִם וְלָהֲעֵלֹתוֹ  
מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַהִיא אֶל-אֶרֶץ  
טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּה אֶל-אֶרֶץ  
זֹבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל-מִקְוָם  
הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי  
וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי: (ט)  
וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת  
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל גְּבָהָ אֵלַי  
וְגַם-רָאִיתִי אֶת-הַלֹּחֵץ  
אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם:  
(י) וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ  
אֶל-פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי  
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם



This is the first appearance of the phrase in the Torah, with three subsequent appearances in Exodus (3:17, 13:5, and 33:3), one in Leviticus (20:24), one in Numbers (14:8), and several in Deuteronomy (6:3, 11:9, 26:9, 26:15, and 27:3), but what does it signify?

It would seem to be, as Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270) articulated, that both the agricultural produce, as well as consumable items from animals would be abundant (ד"ה אל ארץ; זבת חלב ודבש):

The sense of the expression, a land flowing with milk and honey, is that He first praised the land as a good land, meaning that its climate is good and beautiful for people and that all that is good is found in it, and as a large land, meaning that it will afford all Israel to be established in a broad place. It may be that large means spaciousness, referring to [the extensive lands of] the lowland, the valley and the plain, large and small, and is not confined mostly to mountains and valleys. He then began to praise the land as being a land for cattle, having good pasture and good water which cause the cattle to have abundant milk, for healthy and good cattle with abundant milk are to be found only where the climate is good, with plenty of vegetation and good water. But since these are found only in the marsh-lands, while on the height of the mountains fruits are not very fat and good, He further states that this land is so fat that its fruits [all over] are fat and sweet, even to the extent that it all flows with the honey that comes from them.

וטעם זבת חלב ודבש כי שבח תחלה את הארץ שהיא טובה, לומר שהאוויר טוב ויפה לבני אדם וכל טוב ימצא בה, ושהיא רחבה, שיעמדו בה כל ישראל במרחב או טעם רחבה שיש בה רחבות, שפלה ועמק ומישור גדולים וקטנים ואין רובה הרים וגאיות וחזר ושבח אותה שהיא ארץ מקנה שיש בה מרעה טוב, והמים יפים, ויגדל החלב בבהמות, כי אין הבהמות בריאות וטובות ומרבות החלב רק באויר טוב ועשב רב ומים טובים. ובעבור שימצא זה באחו ובמרום הרים אין הפירות שם שמנים ויפים מאד, אמר כי היא עוד שמנה שפירותיה שמנים ומתוקים עד שתזוב כולה בדבש מהם.

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Thus, He has praised the land for all its goodness of the Eternal, for the corn, and for the wine, and for the oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd. This is the meaning of the verse, "It is the beauty of all lands" (Ez. 20:6).

והנה שבח אותה על כל טוב ה', על דגן ועל תרוש ועל יצהר ועל בני צאן ובקר. וזהו צבי היא לכל הארצות (יחזקאל כו)

Thus, according to Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, the land flowing of milk and honey is a shorthand way of describing good agricultural conditions for fruit-growing, as well as good land conditions for grazing livestock. It's a great land for both growing flora and raising fauna. Moreover, he also points out that the description אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּה "a good and wide land" is a good climate for people and wide enough for them to spread out.

### Is the Land Always Flowing?

Another comment of his, though, points out that it is not as if the lands always are so agriculturally abundant (ibid.):

He mentions here six nations and omits the seventh. Perhaps this was because his land was not flowing with milk and honey as were these [lands of the six nations mentioned].

יזכיר בכאן ששה עממים ויניח השביעי, אולי לא היתה ארצו זבת חלב ודבש כאלה

This would seem to indicate that it would only be with the children of Israel entering the land would it then be able to actually flow with such abundance.

### Not Always Flowing?

Picking-up on this comment, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) further develops it (רש"י הירש על התורה, שמות ג'ח):

Es ist sehr eigentümlich, daß die Bezeichnung der ZOB – Produktenfülle durch und sonst nie א"י nur bei wieder in solcher Bedeutung vorkommt, bei dem jüdischen Lande aber der stete Ausdruck ist ZOB. überfließen. Es תניך im kommt vorzugsweise nur zur Bezeichnung eines krankhaften Zustandes beim Menschen und sonst nur als ein durch eine Wundermacht (Ps. 78, 20) – הכה צור ויזובו מים – oder durch Gewalt – bewirktes Ausfließen – יזובו מדוקרים (Klagel. 4, 9). vor, "erdolcht strömen sie ihr Blut aus". Alles zusammengenommen dürfte wohl nicht ein ח' יודי Land bezeichnen, das seiner natürlichen Fruchtbarkeit nach diese Fülle entfaltet, sondern ein Land, das dies nur unter besonderen Bedingungen tut. Palästina ist ein hartes Land (Bereschit 26, 3). האל

It is very strange that the designation of the abundance of products by oozing only occurs in the land of Israel and never again in such a meaning, but is the constant expression in the Jewish land. In Tanakh, oozing never means to overflow. It is preferably only used to describe a pathological condition in humans and otherwise only as an outflow caused by a miraculous power - "He struck the rock and waters flowed" (Ps. 78:20) - or by violence - "those who were stabbed (their blood)] will flow (Lam. 4:9). – before, "stabbed, they pour out their blood." Taken together, "the land flowing of milk and honey" probably does not describe a country that develops this abundance based on its natural fertility, but rather a land that only does this under special conditions. Palestine is a hard country, these lands (Gen. 26:3). We have repeatedly



Wiederholt sahen wir es von Hungersnot heimgesucht, und auch, nachdem Israel es verlassen, liegt es öde heißt es von השמים תשתה מים ihm. Ein Land, das nicht wie Ägypten nur ohne weiteres von seinen Bewohnern auszubeutende, natürliche Bedingungen der Fruchtbarkeit bietet, sondern, "das nur unter einer steten, von Anfang des Jahres bis zum Ende des Jahres darauf gerichteten besonderen Gottesfürsorge" aufzublühen vermag. Wenn es Wasser hat, so blüht es üppig auf. Allein dieses Wasser erhält es nur von oben. Es ist ein Boden, der seine Bewohner nötigt, brav zu sein. Für ein hartes Volk, wie wir waren, gehört ein hartes Land – אל מקום Die jetzigen הכנעני. Bewohner sind durch die darin genossene Üppigkeit entartet, und das Land speit sie aus. Nur freibleibend von allem kanaanitischen Unwesen wird Israel sich seine Fülle erhalten

seen it afflicted by famine, and even after Israel has left it, it remains desolate. "a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven" (Deut. 11:11) is what it says. A land that does not, like Egypt, only offer natural conditions of fertility that can be easily exploited by its inhabitants, but "that can only flourish under constant, special divine care from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." If it has water, it blooms profusely. It only gets this water from above, it is a soil that requires its inhabitants to be good. A hard people like us need a hard country. – "to the place of the Canaanites" (Ex. 3:8). The current inhabitants have degenerated because of the opulence enjoyed there, and the land spews them out. Only by remaining free from all Canaanite mischief will Israel maintain its fullness.

There is a lot to unpack here, although let's begin with his clever approach to juxtaposing the land being not necessarily already agriculturally abundant, but needing appropriate care in order to achieve this state. He further argues that the children of Israel would need to properly behave in order to receive such bounty, as opposed to the previous inhabitants. He also describes the anomalousness of the attribution of products oozing in Israel, but nowhere else., including that it has to with special human energies that flow from the appropriate behavior carried out there.

### Conclusion

God's stated intention of bringing the Israelites to a good and wide land flowing of milk and honey is not to be taken for granted. It is only through taking care of it that we can achieve such produce.

L'chaim 🍷