

The Nature of Exile

Part 1, The Problem

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Exile is primarily a state of mind long before it becomes a state of being. Long before one is physically banished from one's homeland, one's mind is first banished from its domain of psychological balance. The inner state brings about the outer state.

When the individual become disconnected from one's own inner psyche, one loses contact with one's purpose of being. When one can no longer see into the depths of one's own being to understand oneself, to know oneself and to be oneself, one goes into exile from one's own self.

This is the first level of exile, the exile of the self from the self. All other exiles, political and social only materialize after this first and worst level is unfortunately realized.

Psychological exile can exist even if and when physical exile does not. For example, although the Jewish

people are presently in their ancient and natural homeland physically, they are still very very far away from embracing what such a bond and union is supposed to be. As such, all modern day Jews, in the Land of Israel or outside of it are still all in a state of exile of one kind or another.

Hundreds of years ago, the Ba'al Shem Tov made a rather profound proclamation. He stated that to be "in the Land of Israel" was not a statement of physical location but rather one of spiritual accomplishment. In other words, to be in Israel was understood as a place in the mind and spirit, regardless of the place of the physical body. In light on this, a traditional teaching of the Sages is subject to a profound new understanding.

Our Sages long ago taught that prophecy is a unique spiritual accomplishment that can only be acquired in the Land of Israel. Yet, there are Biblical examples such as the prophet Ezekiel who clearly was a prophet in far away Bavel. What the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches enables us to understand not only how Ezekiel was a prophet outside the Land of Israel, but also how for centuries we have had Sages and Seers alike who all stood in the Presence of G-d all the while living abroad outside the Promised Land.

We see that regardless of their physical locations, Sages and Seers from around the world were all psychologically and spiritually in the Promised Land and thus fulfilled the requirement to be in the



“Land of Israel” enabling them to merit their spiritual accomplishments. This is one of those rare occasions where one can fulfill a spiritual requirement internally without necessarily equally fulfilling it externally.

Although this great level has been accomplished by many throughout the ages, it is a level unfortunately accomplished by very few in these days. Apparently living in the physical Promised Land has not helped the many who are there to achieve the spiritual level of being in the psychological Promised Land. This is clear from the state of detachment we see exist between the people and the Land itself, and the clear intent and desire many share to surrender sovereignty over parts of the Land to a determined, bitter foreign enemy.

The psychological exile also continues in the world of religion with the clear and overt embrace by many in the religious establishment of the dress, language, norms, mentality and lifestyle that was commonly practiced outside the Land in far-away long-ago Europe. These segments of the religious community upon establishing themselves in the native Homeland made no efforts to return to the Promised Land psychologically with all its necessary changes both internally and externally. Because of their detachment from the natural terrain, the imposition of their foreign model into the new country, land and lifestyle has stood out as a bizarre foreign element which has been the source of much psychological and cultural conflict.

One cannot hammer a square peg into a round hole. Even to attempt to do such is foolish because the fit is unnatural. All such attempts are by nature doomed to failure. Yet, regardless of how unnatural and abnormal it may be, there are still those who are so detached from the natural reality that they relentlessly continue to hammer away trying to fit something into a place that is just not natural and thus not destined to fit. Western culture, European values and a foreign mindset do not and cannot fit into the Promised Land. The attempted imposition of such values, culture and lifestyle only goes to prove and validate the continuing state of psychological exile suffered by the masses of the people. We see that this psychological disassociation affects both secular and religious alike.

What happens physically in the world is only the final step of that which begins in the mind. We can never resolve issues of physical exile or social strife before we address the psychological source that leads to them. Exile is a multifaceted psychological problem. It exists within each of us and becomes manifest through our own personalities, dispositions, and prejudices.

The Jewish people today suffer in exile even when living in our ancient Homeland because the real exile is always psychological. Until the individual can address the personal psychological state and correct one's way of thinking, exile will never come to an end.

If we as a people ever wish to redeem ourselves from our present imprisonment and exile, we had better first come to realize that the outer state begins within. And unless we address the psychological situation within, nothing on the outside will ever change. Judging from the present state of affairs, I fear our present exile will continue to last for a long time.

There is however a solution, but it requires of us understanding and the courage to look internally at ourselves honestly. In PART TWO of the essay entitled, THE SOLUTION, I will outline some psychological insights discussed by the Ba'al Shem Tov and how we can learn from them to make ourselves better individuals, and with G-d's help address some of our societies greatest problems.