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The Eternal Nation

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Vayakhel-Pekudei
The Eternal Nation

Good Shabbos!

In the year 1867, the legendary American writer Mark Twain (whose real name, of course, was Samuel Clemens) visited the Holy Land. During that time period, there was a rise in tourism visits by U.S. citizens to the Holy Land to “walk in the footsteps of the Bible.” So Mark Twain took one of these “Bible Tours” of the Land, traveling as a writer for a newspaper and mailing 50 of his reports back to a California-based newspaper called the *Daily Alta*.

Two years later, his records of his trip (which actually included an initial tour of Europe) were published in a book called “The Innocents Abroad,” of which some 70,000 copies were sold in its time.

So in the book, Mark Twain describes how his party arrived in the Holy Land via Syria, immediately visiting the Dan region that today is called Tel Dan. Mark Twain immediately introduces the Biblical phrase “From Dan to Beersheba,” explaining that it symbolizes the entire length of the Holy Land. And in like manner, in every place he visits, he mentions the Biblical connection to that place.

When he visits Hatzor, for example, he mentions the goat sacrifices brought by the Biblical Joshua, also relating that in that same general area, it was 100 years after Joshua that Deborah the Prophetess ordered the great general, Barack Ben Avinoam, to recruit 10,000 men and go out to war against Sisra. Mark Twain goes on to relate how Sisra fled the battlefield and stopped to rest in the tent of a woman named Yael, the very same Yael who killed him. And in relating all that, he describes standing in the places these Biblical figures stood and describes these battles.

However, he adds that when he studied the Bible, he got the impression that everything was so big—but he “could not comprehend how a land this small could have a history so great.”

When Mark Twain learned the story in school of how Joshua had destroyed all the Canaanite kings, he pictured the kings of England, France and Russia in his mind. However, when he visited the Holy Land and met the locals, he understood that the kings of the Bible were probably more like Bedouin sheikhs who commanded tribes of no more than 2,000 men at most.

As they proceeded, their guide took them to a place where a certain pit had a tradition of being the pit into which Joseph had been cast by his brother. So in his book, Mark Twain tells the entire story of the Sale of Joseph and how, in the end, Joseph forgives his brothers and not only forgives them, but also saves them from famine.

Later, Mark Twain and Co. get to the Kinneret. There, they try to rent a boat and crew to go out on Lake Kinneret. But the sailors want a fee equivalent to \$8, while they only want to pay \$4. The group tried to haggle over the price, but the Arab boatmen didn't want to hear it and walked off. The group tried to call them back, but it was too late.

With regards to Tiberias, Mark Twain knew enough to point out that this city actually does not appear in the Bible but that the Sanhedrin was seated in Tiberias in its final days. He notes that Tiberias is one of four cities sacred to Jews, writing that in the Holy Land, there are four cities that are entitled "the Holy City." These are: Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias.

What's interesting is not only the fact that Mark Twain knew of these four "Holy Cities," but also that many great and famous rabbis lived in Tiberias and were buried there in the cemetery, along with another 25,000 Jews who came there over the years specifically so that when they passed away, they could be buried near those rabbis.

Mark Twain's tour group continued on to Safed. Of course, he mentions here that Safed is one of the four cities sacred to Jews, and that according to the Jewish faith, "it is there that the true Messiah shall appear and redeem the world."

Now, one of the dreams of every pilgrim to the Holy Land was to cross the Jordan in the footsteps of Joshua, who told the Kohanim to hold onto the Holy Ark and split the Jordan in two. But when they got to the Jordan River in the chilly predawn, the water was cold as frost and the current was too strong. They all stood on the bank shivering from cold until one of them finally had the guts to jump into the water, and they all went him after him. Mark Twain relates how the water went up to their chests as they waded across the Jordan, and then sat out in the open, soaking wet, waiting for the sun to come.

So, all that was with regards to the spirit of the Holy Land. But as far as the residents of the Land itself in those days were concerned, Mark Twain had not a single good word to write about them. He describes them as dirty, lice-infested, poor, boorish and disgusting. He writes that the Land is desolate, devoid of gardens and orchards and with everything a destroyed wasteland. To him, it was a complete disappointment compared to what he saw in images drawn and painted of the Land of Israel.

But then he writes that the things that G-d promised in the Book of Leviticus were fulfilled in the Land of Israel. When the Bible warns that if the Jewish Nation shall not keep the Torah, they will be exiled from the Land, the Torah writes, "and I shall lay waste the Land, and your enemies who live in it shall lay waste to it (Leviticus 26:32). And Rashi adds, "This is a good measure for [the Nation of] Israel, for the enemies shall not find contentment in their land, which shall be desolate of its residents."

Mark Twain writes that he visited Jerusalem, finding endless numbers of downtrodden and pitiful poor people who all asked for one thing: "Bakshish." In those days, over half

of Jerusalem's population was Jewish—but he doesn't mention even once that he met any Jews. He only writes that in Jerusalem, there stands the "Wall of Tears" where Jews come to pray.

But there is another place where Mark Twain does mention the Jews, and at length—his famous essay, written in 1899, entitled "Concerning the Jews."

Most people who have heard of it are aware of the positive things that he writes about the Jew as an historical figure, but are not aware that the same essay also includes some rather anti-Semitic material—specifically, the charge that Jews are historically less patriotic military-wise for their host countries, serving and fighting for their flags less than citizens of other religions.

"Concerning the Jews" was Mark Twain's response to a letter written to him by an American Jewish lawyer. In that letter, the Jewish writer asks how it could be that Jews are such good and loyal citizens but are still hated by everyone. The writer also asks in the letter if Mr. Twain sees an end to anti-Semitism.

So Mark Twain responded with a six-point essay, in which "Point No. 1" contains the following statement. "The Jew is not a disturber of the peace... He is not a loafer, he is not a sot, he is not noisy, he is not a brawler nor a rioter, he is not quarrelsome... With murder and other crimes of violence he has but little to do... That the Jewish home is a home in the truest sense is a fact which no one will dispute. The family is knitted together by the strongest affections; its members show each other every due respect; and reverence for the elders is an inviolate law of the house... When he is well enough, he works; when he is incapacitated, his own people take care of him. And not in a poor and stingy way, but with a fine and large benevolence."

So besides the fact that the Jew, according to Mark Twain, is more upright than the average person, the proof according to Mark Twain lies in the Jew's success in business. He writes, "The basis of successful business is honesty; a business cannot thrive where the parties to it cannot trust each other."

Thus, he continues: "In the matter of numbers of the Jew counts for little in the overwhelming population of New York; but that his honesty counts for much is guaranteed by the fact that the immense wholesale business houses of Broadway, from the Battery to Union Square, is substantially in his hands."

And as further proof to the Jews' integrity, Mark Twain writes, "I suppose that the most picturesque example in history of a trader's trust in his fellow-trader was one where it was not Christian trusting Christian, but Christian trusting Jew. That Hessian Duke who used to sell his subjects to George III to fight George Washington with got rich at it; and by-and-by, when the wars engendered by the French Revolution made his throne too warm for him, he was obliged to fly the country. He was in a hurry, and had to leave his earnings behind - \$9,000,000. He had to risk the money with someone without security. He did not select a Christian, but a Jew - a Jew of only modest means, but of

high character; a character so high that it left him lonesome - Rothschild of Frankfort. Thirty years later, when Europe had become quiet and safe again, the Duke came back from overseas, and the Jew returned the loan, with interest added."

Mark Twain writes further that it was reported in the newspapers of Vienna, the capital of Austria, that a fierce hailstorm struck the great central cemetery of Vienna and caused tremendous damage. Tombstones were broken and crypts were shattered. Hundreds of windows were broken, and 300 local laborers worked for over three days to restore the damage.

But at the end of one of the report there was once sentence: "Not one ice block touched the Jewish burial ground." And Mark Twain uses this to prove that there is something special about the Jewish Nation.

And so, Mark Twain asks, if everything about the Jews is so good, then why have the Jews historically had it so bad? Why is there such anti-Semitism?

Well, this great American author claims that the primary reason is not the Christian religion—bringing as proof the fact that anti-Semitism existed well before the Christian religion. Rather, he argues that the cause of anti-Semitism is that the Jew is more successful and sharp than his non-Jewish neighbor.

"If he set up as a doctor, he was the best one, and he took the business. If he exploited agriculture, the other farmers had to get at something else. Since there was no way to successfully compete with him in any vocation, the law had to step in and save the Christian from the poor-house," Mark Twain wrote.

The Jew was thus "forbidden to engage in agriculture; he was forbidden to practise law; he was forbidden to practise medicine... Even the seats of learning and the schools of science had to be closed against this tremendous antagonist," and all because Jews were more skilled and more successful.

And so, he concludes, "I am convinced that the persecution of the Jew is not due in any large degree to religious prejudice. No, the Jew is a money-getter; and in getting his money he is a very serious obstruction to less capable neighbors who are on the same quest."

But in Point No. 6, which only consists of four paragraphs, he pens the most famous part of "Concerning the Jews":

To conclude - If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one per cent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance,

medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvellous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

We now stand just before Shabbos Mevorchim for the month of Nissan—the month in which our ancestors went free.

And as the Rebbe would always quote, it is in this month that G-d chose “to take for Himself nation from the midst of nation” (Devarim 4:34). G-d chose us and took us out of Egypt in order to give us the Torah; the secret of the eternal life of the Jew is his eternal connection to G-d, and his following the path of the Torah, which is eternal.

My dear friends: it’s clear that the Jewish Nation is the Eternal Nation and will exist forever. But we only have to do one thing: ensure that in the future, our descendants be a part of the Eternal Nation.

Good Shabbos!