

In the Presence of the Divine
Eikev 5782

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I.

Ours is a sedra that, from beginning to end, extols the virtues of the Land of Israel, from beginning to end. The land is praised for its natural resources, its flowing springs of water, its abundant grains, its seven special species, and its mining potential for both iron and bronze.

In contrast to the manna, which the Torah presents as a great test of faith, a form of *innui*, of affliction, and a nisayon, a physical and spiritual test, the Land of Israel is presented as the “ארץ הטובה”, the good land, of abundant Divine blessing.

Small wonder then, that the sedra, from a normative standpoint, opens with the obligation of birkat ha-mazon. While, of course, halalkha dictates that we are obligated to recite birkat ha-mazon whenever the criteria are met anywhere in the world, it is far from trivial that the Torah presents the obligation, according to the simple reading of the text, as relevant only in the Land of Israel, וברכת את ה' אלוֹקֵיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ.

Indeed, the sheer fact that a core section of what all agree is a Torah level obligation, and quite possibly, the only bracha that meets this criterion, is *birkat ha'aretz*, a paeon attributed to Yehoshua bin Nun, as well as a subsequent bracha, attributed to David and Shlomo, regarding the sanctity of Yerushalayim, firmly establishes that even when one recites birkat ha'mazon outside of the Land of Israel one is clearly expressing gratitude for the ארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך.

Moreover, the fact that a woman's obligation regarding this mitzvah, anywhere in the world, in principle as opposed to practice, may well remain in doubt on account of the fact that they are technically not inheritors of the Land underscores the fundamental role of the Land of Israel in this mitzvah.

II.

In light of this opening, it is entirely appropriate that towards the coda of the sedra, in the classical section of the Torah as far as reward and punishment is concerned, which constitutes the

second paragraph of the Keriat Shema, we find exile from the Land as the grave consequence of abrogation of the covenant. What could be worse than being exiled from a Land of such goodness and bounty?

Yet, from within this section, which exhorts the Jewish people towards stringent performance of mitzvot so that they might remain in the land in perpetuity, למען ירבו ימיכם וימי בניכם על האדמה אשר, one finds a most striking, and initially confounding, Talmudic passage.

The Talmud in Berachot relates that R. Yochanan, the leading rabbinic figure in the Land of Israel, and indeed, the primary decisor of the Talmud Yerushalmi, was stunned to learn that people were living to old age in the Diaspora. After all, the Torah seems to make it clear that the potential for אדמה אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך is indeed limited to אדמת ארצות ימים.

The Talmud relates that when R. Yochanan was told that the individuals in question spend their early mornings and late evenings in Batei Knesset and Batei Medrash, he was assuaged, and concluded that this indeed was responsible for the longevity of these individuals.

To be sure, one might interpret the Talmud as suggesting that even without the merit of being in the Land of Israel, these individuals were able to compensate, so to speak, by quite literally building their lives around prayer and study. Yet, it seems to me that, properly understood, a more fundamental explanation is in order.

III.

In a striking departure from the wondrous aesthetic portrayal of the Land of Israel at both the opening and coda of the sedra, we find, in the sixth aliyah, that the Torah departs from this motif. On the contrary, there, the Torah portrays the Land of Israel as inferior, as it were, to Egypt, with its Nile, as it concerns natural water supply. The Land of Israel, by contrast, is wholly and utterly dependent on rains, למטר השמים תשתה מים.

In addition, the Torah's depiction of the Land of Israel in this section relates to the spiritual qualities of the Land, ארץ אשר ה' אלקיך דרש אותה, a Land which the Almighty seeks at all times, תמיד, and upon who His gaze is perpetually fixed, עיני ה' אלקיך בה.

As developed by Ramban throughout his commentary on the Torah, two distinctive modalities exist for Providence in this world. In both modalities, the total and absolute control of the

Almighty is axiomatic. The distinction, however, lies in Divine immanence. Ramban asserts that within the Land of Israel, and there alone, Divine providence is immanent, without any intervening cosmological layers. As such, even non-Jewish peoples such as the Kutim, brought to the Land of Israel, are held to a much higher spiritual bar within the Land.

By contrast, even the Jewish people when exiled, and not only other nations indigenous to the earth outside of Israel, experience an alienation from the Almighty. His Providence there is manifested indirectly, as He is multiple levels removed from direct interaction.

For Ramban, this is the fundamental explanation as to why, even before the Torah was given, the Patriarchs kept the Torah within the Land of Israel, just as it underlies the rabbinic statement that dwelling in the Land of Israel is tantamount to all other mitzvot in the Torah in aggregate, insofar as dwelling there potentiates a far greater qualitative performance of any mitzvah than might be achieved outside the Land, as one performs the mitzvah in the presence of the Almighty himself.

It is possible, though not certain, that this cosmology underlies Ramban's celebrated view that dwelling in the Land of Israel is always an obligation. What does seem certain, however, is that the famous rabbinic statement that only those who dwell in the Land can be said to have a relationship with the Divine, כל הדר בארץ ישראל כמי שיש לו אלוה, should be understood in light of Ramban's model.

Indubitably, it is this singular, numinous opportunity that the Land presents which, relative to the undeniable aesthetic beauty and material resources of the Land, make it the object of our perpetual yearning and desire.

IV.

We may now return to the Talmudic passage involving R. Yochanan with a new perspective. If, indeed, what is critical regarding the Land is that it is a repository for the Divine, it may well be said that the Batei Knesset and Batei Medrash of Bavel, and elsewhere, are to the Land of Israel what embassies and consulates are to sovereign states.

As *mikdashai me'at*, places of communion with the Divine presence, which rests upon even one who sits alone and learns, and visits the houses of prayer of the Jewish people in the presence of a quorum, these locations share a critical feature of the Land of Israel itself.

If this the case, it is not that the merit of care with respect to the mitzvot of Torah study and prayer compensated for the absence from Israel, but that, to a certain degree, being present in these mikdashei me'at, and especially, as is recorded in the gemara, building one's life and daily schedule around them, achieves the same ends as all of the Land of Israel- putting one in direct communion with the Almighty.

In this respect, it seems noteworthy that a contemporary of R. Yochanan in the Land of Israel, R. Yehoshua b. Levi, is cited in this very same passage in the Talmud as exhorting his own children, who already had the benefit of ambient immanence of the Divine within the Land, to build their days and nights around these *mikdashei me'at*. Apparently, he felt the need for the inherent sanctity of the Batei Knesset and Batei Medrash, as far as longevity was concerned, was not obviated by being in the Land itself.

It is perhaps in this light that we might best understand Chazal's eschatological vision, that the Batei Knesset and Batei Medrash of the Diaspora will be integrated into the Land of Israel in the future. As a sovereign state that finds itself no longer in need of a foreign service, with the embassies and consulates to house them, would surely repatriate its diplomats, so too, these extraterritorial outposts of the numinous Land will be restored to their rightful place.

From this vantage point, those who remain outside the Land in the current milieu, would be well advised to construct their lives around these *mikdashei me'at*. It is not merely the quantity of life and potential for longevity that beckons, but perhaps more importantly, the quality of life, the sense of His ongoing Presence.