

ואתחנן אל ה' בעת ההיא
Reflections on Chibat Eretz Yisrael

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מה יפו פעמיו בנעלים בת נדיב- כמה נאים רגליהם של ישראל בשעה שעולין לרגל (חגיגה ג)

In Honor of the Aliyah of נפשי ידיד, Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener, his wife Lisa, and their children. May He who is שוכן בציון shower them with all of His most cherished blessings, אלהי פעמים.

I.

In one of the Torah's most plaintive and poignant scenes, our *sedra* opens with the image of Moshe pleading with the Almighty for entry into "the good land", הארץ הטובה. The usage of this term, as opposed to the proper name for the Land of Israel, amplifies the emotional register of the scene. For Moshe, plain and simply, it is ארץ הטובה, the Good Land, in both the spiritual and aesthetic sense, and, his yearning to enter the space cannot be overstated.

Moshe's request itself is deeply revealing. On the one hand, he, characteristically, never articulates a desire to *lead* the Jewish people into the Land. There is no frontal challenge to the edict of *Mei Merivah*, "you shall not lead this congregation into the Land given to them", לכן לא תביאו את הקהל, הזה אל הארץ אשר נתתי להם. For Moshe, the request is purely to be in the Land, without any other motive altogether.

Moreover, the framing of Moshe's request is illuminating with respect to the substance of this desire. Moshe begins by noting that the Almighty has only started to reveal His greatness and power to His servant, ואתה החלות להראות את עבדך את גדלך ואת ידך החזקה. In addition, Moshe emphasizes the extent to which the Almighty has, concomitantly, distinguished Himself, as it were, from any false deities, who could never bring to bear the miracles which the Divine has wrought, אשר מי אל בשמים, ובארץ אשר יעשה כמעשיך וכגבורותיך.

The immediate pivot, from this framing, to Moshe's request per se, is strongly indicative that Moshe's desire to enter the Good Land is inextricably linked with a desire to more fully and deeply appreciate the Divine presence itself. Moshe's request, in this respect, connotes his deep

understanding of the value of the Land as the place where the Divine is to be found and where we can commune with Him most directly.

Finally, the opening word of Moshe's petition, 'ואתחנן', subject to such extensive rabbinic discourse in its singularity, connotes, as Rashi expresses, Moshe's sense, predictably, of appealing to Divine grace, מתנת חנם, rather than his innumerable personal merits. To be sure, Rashi's formulation is generic: the righteous, almost by definition, do not and cannot perceive themselves as entitled, or even 'deserving', of particular goods. Their relationship with their Creator is experienced in a wholly non-transactional sense, in which they render service unreservedly. In the words of the celebrated Mishnah in Avot, 'שלא על מנת לקבל פרס', 'not for the sake of being rewarded'.

However, one senses, especially within context, that there is a particular application of this sensibility as it concerns Moshe and the Land of Israel. While it is certainly true that the righteous do not experience religious life transactionally, the, singular and special gift, מתנה טובה, to employ Chazal's terminology (Berachot 6a) that is the Land of Israel occupies a very different realm. Even if one, in a more general sense, might experience one's relationship with the Divine in a crasser, more transactionalist sense, who could relate to the 'Good Land' in such a fashion?

Indeed, as captured so inimitably in the Aggadah in the coda to Masechet Ketuvot (112a), as R. Zeira was maligned by the heretic for his seeming recklessness in fording the Jordan, he could only respond, "the place to which neither Moshe nor Aharon merited entry, who is to say that I should merit entry," דוכתא דמשה ואהרן לא זכו לה אנא מי יימר דזכינא לה. Indeed, the sense that the Land of Israel, its purity and sanctity, is no one's entitlement, permeates the collective halakhic consciousness profoundly.

Indubitably, the Almighty's decision, within our context to deny Moshe's request for entry qualitatively enhances this perception. If Moshe, with all of his merits, the one about whom it was said, 'צדקת ה' עשה, and his ordinances with Israel, ומשפטיו עם ישראל, is not granted access, who, free of delusion, could possibly imagine it as anything other than the greatest of gifts?

II.

From a halakhic standpoint, the literature surrounding the controversy between the Ramban and Rambam, amongst others, regarding mitzvot *yishuv eretz yisrael*, as to whether there is a personal

mandate to live in the Land of Israel in all generations, is deservedly robust. Certainly, the question is of profound practical and theological import, and quite literally, impacts upon, and even shapes, the course of a halakhic Jew's life and worldview.

Yet, for all of the just and proper significance placed on that question, it has, perhaps, obscured an issue of substantially less controversy, and perhaps, no less significance: *Chibat Eretz Yisrael*, the beloved nature of the land of Israel, the intensive and visceral attachment, perhaps most dramatically articulated by Moshe at the outset of our *sedra*, but reverberating throughout the ages, of a Land which yearns for her children, and children who yearn for their Land.

It is the basis of the metaphor which Yirmiyahu employed repeatedly throughout the work of Eicha, of an inconsolable mother, bereft of her children, עולליה הלכו בשבי לפני צר, but, who, in his eponymous work, finally receives consolation upon their return, מנעי קולך מבכי ועיניך מדמעה כי יש שכר, לפעולתך נאם ה' ושבנו בנים לגבולם.

It is an almost ineffable quality, to which R. Yehuda HaLevi gave voice, of לבי במזרח ואני בסוף, מערב, my heart be in the east, even as I dwell at the furthest reaches of the West,

To cite just one example of this, the Rambam himself, in the very location where, to Ramban's consternation, seems to *permit* living in exile (while, it must be noted almost categorically proscribing leaving the Land of Israel once there, as well as ruling that one certainly should live in the Land of Israel, even at the expense of a higher quality of Jewish life in the Diaspora), waxes nothing short of poetic regarding the profound, affective bond between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, and in particular, between the greatest of the sages and the Land of Israel, who would literally kiss her boundaries and roll in her dust.

While much has been said in attempted explication, ranging across a vast spectrum, as to why Rambam seemingly did not codify an affirmative obligation to live in Israel in all generations, what has received far less attention is the undeniable, expansive value that the Rambam accorded to the Land, and the highly charged emotional bond which he so inimitably describes. And it is precisely this bond which so animates halakhic consciousness.

III.

To be clear, Chazal could not and would not sever the affective element of our bond to the Land which He seeks out, upon which His eyes constantly peer, ארץ אשר ה' אלוקך דורש אותה תמיד עיני ה',

אלוקיך בה, from the normative plain. Even with respect to Moshe himself, Chazal (see Sotah 14a) are emphatic that his motivations were inextricably linked to the ability to perform mitzvot in the Land that are inapplicable outside the Land.

Similarly, the celebrated Midrash, cited by Ramban and others in supporting the contention that a personal mandate persists regarding dwelling in the Land of Israel, features a group of scholars, in leaving the Land, crying and declaring that the mitzvah of dwelling in the Land 'is the equivalent of the entire rest of the Torah', מצות יישוב ארץ ישראל שקולה כנגד כל התורה כולה. In this image, the normative and affective dimensions fully coexist.

There is no denying, however, on the basis of the opening section of our sedra alone, the intensive, affective bond with the Land which Moshe felt, transcending any particular performance. As noted by Ramban, הארץ היתה חביבה עליו מאד ולא זכה אליה, the 'Land was exceedingly dear to him, and yet he did not merit it.'

While appreciating the diverse range of halakhic views regarding the mitzvah of יישוב ארץ ישראל, and indeed, the practical applications thereof, we need not be embarrassed to emphasize, for ourselves, for our children, and for our community overall, with at least as much vigor, the profound attachment all believing Jews, of every halakhic and ideological stripe, have felt for the Land.

For some, admittedly, this takes on much more of an eschatological note, factoring into their צפית לישועה as well as their innermost thoughts, thrice daily, while reciting להרותנו גדול, but, for a variety of reasons, be it competing halakhic values, or ideological reservations, cannot be immediately actionable. For others, it is actionable in the most immediate sense of the term, and justifies, in a very real sense, the assumption of even the greatest of ייסורין affiliated with acquiring this מתנה טובה (See Berachot 6a).

Wherever one comes down with respect to the pragmatic aspects of this question, what is ultimately of greatest moment is the intensity of the bond, the depth of the yearning, that attaches itself to the relationship between Jew and the Land itself.

It is the quality of that bond that not only ensures, at the national plane, our future direction, השתא הכא, לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל, but, in a pervasive and ongoing sense, defines the inner experience of each son and daughter of the one to whom the words לך לך were first uttered, nearly four thousand years ago.

