YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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**Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel a"h   
by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family.**

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**Shiur #14: Farming or Shepherding – A Question of Character, Part 2**

In last week’s lesson, in our effort to understand why so many agricultural *mitzvot* are limited to the Land of Israel, we began discussing the spiritual challenges of the farming profession. We noted that from the dawn of time, the decision to dedicate one’s life to agriculture or shepherding was not just a professional decision, but a statement of character. A careful reading of the Torah seems to indicate that Kayin’s choice of farming as a profession was related to his drive for acquisition. Similarly, Noach’s activity as a farmer and Esav’s role as a man of the field contributed to their respective downfalls.

Our forefathers, followed by Yaakov’s twelve sons, dedicated themselves to the noble profession of shepherding, with only the partial exception of Yitzchak. Yet it is Yitzchak’s limited agricultural pursuit that Yosef later identified with the future destiny of the Jewish people.

**Yosef and the Dream of Sheaves**

Yosef had two dreams (*Bereishit* 37), the first related to gathering sheaves in the field, and the second regarding the solar system. While his brothers were taken aback by what both dreams implied, i.e. their subjugation to Yosef, they also may well have taken issue with the very subject of the first dream, which implied that Yosef had left the family tradition. The verses state:

Joseph dreamt a dream and told it to his brothers, and they hated him yet the more. He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamt: There we were binding sheaves in the field when suddenly my sheaf arose and remained upright, and your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Do you mean to reign over us? Are you going to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Rav Hirsch explains:

It is remarkable that he should have dreamt of binding sheaves. That was something with which they ordinarily had no connection: they were shepherds. Becoming an agricultural people was still only their destiny in the distant future. If agriculture was so much in his mind that he even dreamt of it, the brothers were justified in thinking that this only could be due to the teaching and information given to him by his father, Yisrael, regarding the expected national destiny of the family. All the more, then, could the brothers believe themselves justified in saying: Will you indeed in the future be king over us, or perhaps even now already rule over us?

This understanding is in line with the new reality that Yosef understood lay in store for the Jewish people, as discussed by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Five Addresses*):

Biblical Joseph was not persuaded that “Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s wanderings” (37:1) would endure for long. The words “Your seed shall be strangers in an alien land” (15:3) kept tolling in his ears. He saw himself and his brothers in an alien environment, far from the land of Canaan, in new circumstances and under new conditions of life. In his dream he saw “behold we are binding sheaves”; we are no longer in Canaan, we are in the land of Egypt and we can no longer be shepherds. We are integrated into a new economy with new styles of living, characteristics, and laws …. Basically he dreamt of a new framework within which the unity of the family could be preserved, even in the far-flung places where the Creator of the Universe would scatter them. His constant preoccupation was the continuation of Abraham’s tradition amidst a new economic structure and civilization.

While his brothers were not yet ready to accept this reality, Yosef dreamt of a future in which agriculture would become a necessity for the Jewish people. His identification of the positive aspects of agriculture later allowed him to correctly interpret Pharaoh’s dream.

**Pharaoh’s Dream: The Egyptian Perspective**

Pharaoh, like Yosef, had two dreams, one relating to livestock and one about sheaves of grain (Chapter 41). Although Pharaoh was surrounded by the greatest dream-interpreters of the day, they failed to interpret the dream in a way that sat well with him.

Why did Pharaoh’s advisers fail to interpret his dreams correctly? It is possible that the idea of gathering in sheaves seemed to them an act so devoid of spiritual significance that it could not possibly convey a message from God. Yosef, meanwhile, understood that though agriculture is a challenging profession where “sin crouches at the door” (4:7), man can “rule over it” and apply it in a spiritually positive manner. Therefore Yosef had no difficulty seeing how an agricultural, earthy dream contained within it a divine message. As Rav Hirsch (4:2) notes:

Man’s natural labor was agriculture. Man needed to “work the land” in order to provide himself with food for sustenance …. This is also Israel’s destiny according to the Torah.

The Egyptians, meanwhile, had already chosen agriculture as their prime pursuit, and the Torah pointedly notes that the Egyptians abominated shepherds (46:34). It is often understood that this disdain resulted from Egyptian worship of livestock, but Yosef’s description of the Egyptians’ attitude to his brothers may indicate otherwise:

Yosef said to his brothers and to his father's household, “I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and I will say to him, ‘My brothers and my father’s household who were in the Land of Canaan have come to me. The men are shepherds, for they have [always] been owners of livestock, and they have brought their flocks and their cattle and all they have.’

“And if it comes to pass that Pharaoh calls you and asks, ‘What is your occupation?’ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been owners of livestock from our youth until now, both we and our ancestors,’ so that you may dwell in the Land of Goshen, because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.” (*Bereishit* 46:31–34)

Rav Hirsch details the contrast between our forefathers’ choice of shepherding and the Egyptians’ disdain for that profession:

… consider the antipathy of the ancient Egyptians toward shepherds and pastoral peoples. All the negative outgrowths of the agricultural mentality discussed above were found in Egypt. Egyptian culture was based on agriculture; its characteristic features were polytheism on the one hand and human enslavement on the other. Work was the purpose of man. The individual per se had no value, no dignity, no freedom. The Egyptian was born a slave to his occupation. Faith in God, faith in the freedom of man and man’s likeness to God remained alive only in the hearts of one tribe of shepherds – our forefathers. The Egyptian leaders were very shrewd in instilling in their people an implacable hatred for pastoral peoples.

The Egyptians, explains Rav Hirsch, specifically chose agriculture because it was a mode of acquisition, and one that allowed the wealthy and successful to take advantage of the weak and poor. Work that centered around tending to the needs of the animal kingdom was antithetical to their way of life.

Yosef, who did not believe that agriculture was all bad, looked forward favorably to a Jewish agricultural future. However, in view of the prevailing culture, he warned his family to stay far away from agriculture while in Egypt and to announce loudly that they were shepherds. This, he felt, not only would help them maintain their separation from the Egyptians, but would also enable them to maintain the positive qualities of the shepherd without being confounded by the spiritual challenges of working the land.

**Agriculture as a Mitzva**

At what point, then, would shepherding cease to be the main Jewish occupation? When would working the land and gathering sheaves become a legitimate profession?

Let us look at the verses of *orla*,[[1]](#footnote-1) in Chapter 19 of *Vayikra*:

When you shall come to the land and you shall plant (*u-netatem*) all types of trees for food, you shall consider their fruit forbidden (*orla*). Three years shall it be forbidden to you: it shall not be eaten. (*Vayikra* 19:23)

As we saw previously, some elements of *orla* apply outside the Land of Israel. Why, then, does the Torah introduce this mitzva with the phrase “When you come to the land”?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Perhaps the answer to this question is to be found in the midrashic understanding of the word “*u-netatem*” as not merely a condition – “*and* you shall plant” – but a commandment in its own right – “*then* you shall plant.” The Midrash, identifying here a commandment to cultivate fruit trees in the Land of Israel, describes this planting as an ultimate mitzva:

Rabbi Yitzchak son of Rabbi Shimon said: “‘You shall follow after the Lord, your God’ (*Devarim* 13:5) – Is it then possible for mortals to follow the Holy One, blessed be He, concerning Whom it is written, ‘Your way is in the sea, and Your path in many waters’ (*Tehillim* 77:20)? And you say, ‘You shall follow God’?!

“‘And you shall cleave to Him’ (*Devarim* 13:5) – Is it then possible for a mortal to ascend to the heavens and cleave to the divine presence, concerning which it is written, ‘For the Lord your God is a consuming fire’ (4:24)?!

“[How then are we to understand this idea of adhering to God?] From the very start of the world’s creation, the Holy One occupied Himself with planting, as it is written, ‘The Lord God planted a garden in Eden’ (*Bereishit* 2:8). So, too, when you enter the Land, you must first occupy yourselves with planting. Thus it is written, ‘When you come to the land, then you shall plant all types of trees for food …’” (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:3)

When the time comes to enter the Land of Israel, even planting a fruit tree becomes a holy act of walking in God’s ways. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein points out:

The “planting” with which God occupied Himself was not the mere planting of trees; it was the very creation of the world, the infrastructure for all that would follow. Thus, upon entering *Eretz Yisrael*, we are also commanded to plant trees and to cultivate the land – not only in relation to the *mitzvot* of *orla* and *reva'i*,[[3]](#footnote-3) but to establish the infrastructure for national existence. If God builds an entire world on the foundation of planting trees, then we too are required to plant in *Eretz Yisrael* so that there will be a healthy economy and a basis for communal life.

Yosef saw that there would be a need to work the land – but only the Land of Israel. By the same token, the Torah’s negative approach to agriculture is limited to the period before Jewish settlement of the Land.

Rav Hirsch (*Bereishit* 4:2), following a discussion of Kayin’s unfavorable choice of profession, explains how all the agricultural *mitzvot* comprise a foundation for a positive spiritual experience in the realm of farming:

The Torah anticipates the chronic dangers inherent in agriculture and prescribes the remedy, legislating against deification of property. Shabbat and *shemitta* [the sabbatical year] forever testify that the earth belongs to God, and man is His servant. The agricultural laws, such as the prohibitions of *kilayim* [forbidden mixtures] and *orla*, on one hand, and the positive injunctions of *leket*, *shikhcha*, and *pe'ah* [leaving produce in the field for the poor], on the other, remind man of God’s presence, cautioning him to maintain brotherly and neighborly love. Thus the Torah solves the moral problem of agriculture; in this way a society of God-fearing farmers is created, all sharing brotherly love and equality. But outside of the Torah framework, a danger is presented to faith in God and to the freedom and equality of all men.

**The Time to Plant**

Based on this approach, it is not difficult to understand why Yitzchak was involved in agriculture. Yitzchak was the one of our forefathers who was most intimately connected to the Land of Israel, even planting the Land in the midst of a famine (*Bereishit* 26). Of the forefathers, only Yitzchak never left the Land. Yitzchak understood that a Jew must view the Land of Israel not only as a place to graze livestock, but as the place where the Jewish people engage in agriculture. This could become a Jewish profession only once the Jewish people came to the Land of Israel and settled it, and only then would the agricultural *mitzvot* become binding. At that point, these *mitzvot* would be needed to allow the Jewish people to weather the challenge of tilling the soil: being involved in acquisition, yet not consumed by it.

If this analysis is correct, then we can understand why the agricultural *mitzvot* are limited to the Land of Israel. Outside the Land of Israel, one should focus on shepherding rather than farming. There, the challenges of a life of acquisition cannot necessarily be solved by agricultural *mitzvot* to reframe one’s outlook. Only in the Land of Israel is the farmer God’s partner in transforming His barren land into a spiritual wonderland of physical beauty. Only in the Land of Israel do a land’s holiness and the mitzva of building it up transform every act of acquisition into a spiritual act.

Yet even in the Land of Israel, difficulties and challenges attend a life of tilling the soil. Farming is no longer the facile pursuit that it was in the Garden of Eden. If the Jewish farmer were to work hard yet lack agricultural *mitzvot* to help him build a holy character, he would be liable to forget God. Therefore, as we will see next week, the Torah makes very clear that building up the Land of Israel requires a mentality very different from that of the Egyptians, and even that of the sojourning Jews in the desert.

1. See the discussion of *orla* – the prohibition against benefiting from a tree’s fruits during its first three years of growth – in our last *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to our discussion here, we suggest that this question touches on Rav Chaim Soloveitchik’s discussion (*Hilkhot Ma’akhalot Asurot* 10:15) of whether *orla* outside of the Land of Israel is an extension of *orla* in the Land of Israel or is a separate mitzva. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See our previous *shiur*. The mitzva of *reva’I* requires the owner of a fruit tree to bring the produce of its fourth year to Jerusalem, where the fruit is to be eaten in a state of ritual purity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)