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

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**Shiur #15: The Interpersonal Message of Life in the Land of Israel**

**Introduction**

In the past few lessons we began discussing the agricultural *mitzvot* contained in *Parashat Kedoshim*, starting with the agricultural gifts to the poor – *leket* and *peah* – and continuing with the *mitzvot* of *orla* and *kilayim* later in the chapter.[[1]](#footnote-1) We analyzed the unique contributions of these *mitzvot* to one’s interpersonal behavior, as well as how they educate the Jew to maintain an appropriate perspective on wealth.

The central importance of these *mitzvot* in encouraging gift-giving and regulating one’s attitude towards physical success led us ask why many of these *mitzvot* are limited to the Land of Israel. After all, shouldn’t *mitzvot* that teach the proper perspective on wealth apply wherever a Jew lives?

In answering this question, we traced the age-old dilemma of the preferred pre-industrial profession. Almost without exception, from the dawn of time, shepherding was the preferred occupation of those individuals who were spiritually inclined; farming was the profession of those interested in physical acquisition, rather than tending to the needs of others. Many farmers, beginning with Kayin, were overly influenced by their acquisitions, and their outlooks changed accordingly.

Yet despite the negative portrayal of working the land in the early years of mankind, Yosef dreams of a new future in which the agricultural profession will not be off-limits to Jews. This dream would be fully realized when the Jewish people entered and settled the Land of Israel. Physically building up the land would be an essential aspect of the mitzva of settling the Land of Israel; planting and harvesting would be a core part of Jewish life.

However, lest Jewish involvement with the land distance the people from the spirituality of their shepherding forefathers, a system of *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz* (*mitzvot* applicable only in the Land of Israel) was required. These *mitzvot* not only recognize the holiness inherent in all that grows in the Land of Israel, but foster the creation of a God-fearing agricultural society in which physical acquisitions bring one closer to spiritual success.

Ideally, the Jewish people would remain in the Land of Israel for eternity. In practice, though, the reality of sin resulted in exile. However, even in the Diaspora, where many agricultural *mitzvot* do not apply, understanding this system of living amidst physical bounty in the Land of Israel can serve as a prototype for economic activity. Even in the Diaspora, Jews can mimic the interpersonal outlook and character-building facilitated by the *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz*.

In order to better understand this idea, let us take a look at the Torah’s message regarding the nature of life and agriculture in the Land of Israel, as opposed to Egypt. This contrast between different agricultural contexts is not new – in fact, it seems to be an underlying theme in the Torah, beginning with the Garden of Eden, including Lot and Avraham, and continuing through the travels of the Jewish people in the desert. To understand what makes Israel so special, Moshe stresses in the Book of *Devarim*, requires understanding why God specifically chose this land for Jewish habitation.

**Moshe’s Ambition**

Most of the Book of *Devarim* contains Moshe’s final messages to the Jewish people. Here, at the end of his life, he shares a historical perspective on the Jews as a people, and on what they must do to successfully enter the Land of Israel and dwell there in physical and spiritual sublimity. He spares nothing in his descriptions of the vastness and physical beauty of the Land, but he also does not shy away from contrasts with the people’s previous places of residence, or from the challenges that will attend the Land’s settlement.

Moshe’s description of the Land’s beauty is saddening, coming as it does against God’s refusal to allow him to enter it. The Gemara asks why, despite repeated denials by God, Moshe continued with his desperate supplications to enter the Land of Israel:

Rabbi Simla’i expounded: Why did Moshe desire to entire the Land of Israel? Did he perhaps need to eat of its fruit, or to satisfy himself with its goodness? Rather, this is what Moshe said: There are many *mitzvot* that the Jewish people received that can be fulfilled only in the Land of Israel. Let me enter the land so that they are all fulfilled by me. (*Sota* 14a)

The Gemara is unwilling to accept that Moshe desired to step foot in the Land due to its physical fruits and beauty that he so effectively described. Rather, the Gemara explains that he desired to fulfill the unique *mitzvot* of the Land.

While it is understandable that the spiritual giant Moshe would not have been enticed by the mere physical beauty of the Land of Israel, the physical pleasures of the Land that the Gemara downplays are, remarkably, the very heart of what we say regarding the Land in Grace after Meals. In both *Birkat Ha-mazon* and *Berakha Achat Me-ein Shalosh*,[[2]](#footnote-2) we describe our gratitude for the Land of Israel, given to us so that we can eat of its fruit and satisfy ourselves with its goodness – the very pleasures that the Gemara downplays with regard to Moshe. Are these actions then significant, or not?

A number of answers have been offered, but we will suggest our own. Very possibly, Moshe did in fact desire to partake of the fruit and goodness of the Land of Israel – but only after performing the agricultural *mitzvoth*, as he so passionately desired. The Land’s bounty alone, if acquired without the mindset fostered by these *mitzvot*, is not reason enough to come to the Land of Israel. After all, we recall, the Spies (*Bemidbar* 13) brought back with them some of the Land’s beautiful fruits, yet ultimately discounted its significance. Moshe, though, desires to take part in the agricultural *mitzvot* of the land, which would enable him to eat of its fruit with the correct spiritual perspective. Only in this way is the Land’s fruit good reason for coming there.

**Settling the Land of Israel and the Growth of the Fruit**

The physical development of the Land of Israel is an essential part of the mitzva of settling the Land. It is for this reason that the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 98a) describes the physical growth of produce in the Land of Israel as a sign of the impending redemption:

Rabbi Abba said: “There is no clearer indication of the End than this, as it is stated (*Yechezkel* 36:8): ‘But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and bear your fruit for My people Israel [when they are soon to come].’”

Rashi explains Rabbi Abba’s statement as referring to the Land’s bringing forth fruit in abundance. Elsewhere (*Ketubot* 111b), the Gemara even details what type of bounty the Land will yield at the time of redemption:

The Land of Israel is destined to produce sweet rolls and fine wool …. Wheat will grow like palm trees on the mountain tops …. Wheat grains will be like the two kidneys of a great ox.

Logically, the reason for this change must be that the growth of produce in the Land of Israel is directly related to the spiritual state of the Jewish people. In fact, as implied by the verse quoted above and in *Vayikra* 26 (and stated explicitly by Maharsha in his commentary to *Sanhedrin*), the years in which the Land was uninhabited by Jews completely lacked agricultural success. The Gemara (*Ketubot* 112a) relates that following the exile, Rabbi Yehoshu’a said to the Land:

Land, Land, take in your fruits. For whom are you producing your fruits – for idol-worshippers who imposed themselves on us due to our sinfulness?

At that point, as the Jews were exiled, the Land of Israel ceased to bear fruit. Testimony to the total lack of growth in the Jews’ absence appears in the writings of Ramban and others, but was made famous by an 1867 passage in Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad*, in which he writes of his trip there:

Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. Where Sodom and Gomorrah reared their domes and towers, that solemn sea now floods the plain …. about that ford of Jordan where the hosts of Israel entered the Promised Land with songs of rejoicing, one finds only a squalid camp of fantastic Bedouins of the desert; Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, today …. Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens; the wonderful temple which was the pride and the glory of Israel, is gone …. Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land?

Mark Twain merely put into words the reality of the Land of Israel without its Jewish inhabitants, characterized by a total lack of the fruits the Jewish people so desire.

Conversely, growth in the Land of Israel is a harbinger of a spiritual return to the land and a testimony to the unique connection between the Land and its people.

Rav Yissachar Teichtal, in his *Eim Ha-banim Semeicha* (p. 84), states that development is such an essential part of the mitzva of settling the Land and so necessary for the ultimate redemption that

the simple Jew who builds the Land without any spiritual intent (*kavvana*), merely for his own benefit, accomplishes a greater rectification (*tikkun*) in the supernal worlds than the most righteous man with his tearful, mournful midnight prayers (*tikkun chatzot*) recited for the Divine Presence and the end of the exile.

He cites *Reishit Chokhma* and *Yismach Moshe* as halakhic sources showing that the performance of a mitzva without intent is greater than lofty intent lacking physical performance of the mitzva. Though his position is subject to heavy debate, it is abundantly clear that the physical growth of the Land of Israel is spiritually significant, as is eating the physical bounty of the Land.

Yet, as we have seen, the fruit of the Land has significance only if grown in the correct context. As much as Moshe desired to partake of the fruit of the Land, he desired to do so only once the *mitzvot* *ha-teluyot ba-aretz* had been fulfilled through them. Thus, in order to make sure that the growth of the Holy Land would not become a physical trap for its Jewish inhabitants, Moshe had to explain what life in the Land had in store for them. His guidelines governing the attitude of the Jewish people once in the Land constitute a core component of his final speeches to the Jewish people. These directives, which appear throughout the book of *Devarim*, appear at especial length at two points in *Parashat Eikev*.

**The Land and the Desert**

In Chapter 8 of *Devarim*, Moshe Rabbeinu reminds the Jewish people that adherence to the *mitzvot* will enable them to possess the land that God promised them. Moshe then continues by contrasting the Land of Israel with the places where the people lived previously (*Devarim* 8:2–5).

You shall remember all the way that the Lord, your God, led you these forty years in the desert .... He afflicted you and made you hungry, and fed you manna, which you had never known and your fathers had never known ... in order to make you know that it is not by bread alone that man lives ...

These verses serve as both an introduction and a contrast to life in the Land, whose praises Moshe proceeds to enumerate (verses 7–10):

For the Lord, your God, is bringing you to a good land, a land with streams of water, [with] fountains and depths that flow from the valleys and the hills, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of oil-bearing olives and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarceness, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you will mine brass. You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the Lord, your God, for the good land that He has given you.

These praises of the Land reiterate its superior physical properties, especially relative to the desert in which the Jews had sojourned. Yet involvement in the physical beauty of the land does not come without spiritual challenges. The next verses therefore warn the Jews of the dangers of involvement in physical bounty and excessive pride in physical wealth and possessions.

Beware lest you forget the Lord, your God … lest when you eat and be satisfied, and you build good houses and dwell in them, and your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiply, so that your heart becomes haughty and you forget the Lord, your God ...

The message of these verses is clear: the Land’s physical bounty, if misused, can lead to disaster. If a person views his success as the result of human effort – rather than that of man’s divinely blessed partnership with God in building the land – then he is liable to become distanced from God and forget Him. Taken to its logical conclusion, this state of affairs culminates with the famous declaration found later in the chapter, denying God’s role in human prosperity:

My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth. (8:17)

Before this verse, though, the Torah again contrasts the Land of Israel with the desert (8:15–16):

… Who led you in the great and terrible desert, [with] snakes, poisonous serpents, and scorpions, and thirst for lack of water; Who brought forth water for you from the rock of flint; Who in the desert fed you the manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to afflict you ...

The desert served an educational goal. The people’s sustainment by manna from Heaven conveyed the eternal message that it is really God Who supplies food. Yet, as the repeated contrast of the Land and the desert reminds the people, it will be challenging to recall this truth once they have arrived in the Land.

**The Test of the Desert and the Test of the Land**

The desert itself was fraught with challenges, which were largely addressed in a miraculous manner. The Jews were fed manna, drank from the well of Miriam, and were protected by seven clouds of glory. Yet, when the verses in *Parashat* *Eikev* contrast the period in the desert with that following entrance into the Land, the consumption of the manna is described as a test:

… that I may put them to the test of whether they walk in My law or not. (8:16)

The commentators discuss just what test was posed by this state of extreme divine kindness, in which all physical needs met from above, without any need to work.

Rashi views the test with reference to the specific laws associated with the manna, such as not leaving any over and not attempting to gather it on Shabbat.

Other commentators, though, see here a test of outlook.

Sforno states the test is to see “whether you will do His will when he grants you sustenance without suffering.” Ramban goes one step further, explaining that the test involved being totally dependent on the manna while in a desert lacking any source of other food. The manna taught reliance on God, as the people were in a position in which they could not provide for themselves. *Ha-ketav ve-Hakabbala* further explains that the essence of a divine test is to indicate to man himself the extent of his faith and trust in God.

This was true of the period in the desert, mentioned near the beginning of Chapter 8, and the manna, whose significance is reemphasized in verse 16. In the middle, though, is the description of the Land of Israel, part of which we saw earlier. The purpose of describing the wonderful bounty of the Land – a stark contrast with the desert – is not merely to note the great fertility of the Land of Israel, but clearly also to point to the moral dangers and pitfalls that physical prosperity might bring.

Would the Jew recall amid the plenty that God’s rain is the new manna from Heaven? Would man recall that even when all is fertile, it is divine blessing that fuels this growth?

Rav Hirsch (*Devarim* 8:14–17) notes how these questions stem from the verses’ message:

After you have attained independence and wealth, you are likely to forget that you were a slave in Egypt and helpless in the wilderness, and that you attained independence and wealth only with God’s help. The fullness of plenty you enjoy by means of the ordinary course of nature is equivalent to the revealed miracle of the sustainment of the wilderness; it is the work of God’s hand and the gift of His providence.

The manna, “bread from Heaven” (*Shemot* 16:4), contrasts strongly with the bread that man eats in the Land of Israel, with whose blessing we recognize that it too is from God, “Who brings forth bread from the land” (“*ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz*”). In this way, the test of the manna was to be supplanted by the ultimate test of living in the lap of luxury in the Land of Israel, yet not taking its yield for granted.

Moshe was well aware that the challenge awaiting the people in the Land was liable to cause them to deny God’s hand in their prosperity. It might even elicit in them the same types of inhumane behaviors that characterized the people of Egypt. That too was a land of physical prosperity – but, as discussed previously, a sort of prosperity that drove its inhabitants towards utter cruelty to others. There was one similar place in the Land of Israel, compared by the Torah (*Bereishit* 13:11) to Egypt and mentioned in Twain’s description above: a place that also translated physical plenty into spiritual desolation, and was deserving of destruction. Sodom.

Three chapters later, Moshe mentions fleshes out this contrast between the lands of Egypt and Israel, and how the Jews are to live prosperously in the Land of Israel while recognizing God’s role in human affairs and not trying, like the people of Sodom, to cut off the hands of others. This message – a central part of the Torah’s social vision for the spiritual utopia of Israel – is the model for Jewish ethical living wherever a Jew resides. In next week’s lesson we hope to detail Moshe’s eternal message in this regard.

1. *Orla* is the prohibition against benefiting from a tree’s fruits during its first three years of growth; *kilyayim* is that of forbidden mixtures. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Birkat Ha-mazon* is recited after one eats bread; *Berakha Achat Me-ein Shalosh*, after the consumption of other grain products, fruits of the Seven Species, wine, and grape juice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)