**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

**Shiur #15: Rav Kook’s Perspective on the Return**

**Introduction**

In [last week's](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-14-rav-kooks-preface-shabbat-ha-aretz) lesson, we introduced Rav Kook's analysis of the historical process described in *Parashat Bechukkotai,* the dispersal and exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel due to non-observance of *shemitta* and *yovel*. Rav Kook explains that although exile is a harsh punishment, as the Nation of Israel can only fulfill its destiny in the Land of Israel, it also gives the nation a chance to purify itself in order to return to the land in a more successful manner.

Exile allows the Jewish people to develop a spiritual focus; without a homeland, the standard needs of a commonwealth, from a government and an army all the way to sanitation services, are neither an issue nor a problem for the Jewish people. Life in the Diaspora entails the cessation of all political and national activities, allowing people to focus their religious energies on study and pure spirituality.

In his introduction to *Shabbat Ha-aretz*, Rav Kook sharply delineates the bitter conflict between moral values and "the oppression, coercion and grubbiness stemming from [the desire for] acquisition and property, which must be manifest in the world of action.” When the negative influence of national life became too morally injurious, writes Rav Kook, there is no avoiding "the terrible detachment, the expulsion of the nation from the land.” In exile, the Jews may change focus and begin a process of spiritualization.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 8a) says something similar:

Since the day the Temple was destroyed, God only has in His world the four cubits of Halakha.

While the Temple stood, the opportunity and challenge of merging the physical with the spiritual was keenly felt. The Temple, after all, was a physical structure, the place where God took the dust from the place of the altar in order to form man (see lesson 4). It is there that the *kohanim* partook of many of the offerings, attributing more spiritual significance to the act of eating. The Temple allowed the merging of heaven and earth, giving spiritual significance and greater enjoyment to all of man's physical pursuits.

However, physical presence and control of the site without the necessary spiritual connection is meaningless. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 96b) informs us that when Titus became haughty, feeling as if he had destroyed the holy Temple, a voice came out from the heavens and informed him: “You are making a mistake; you are simply grinding flour that was already milled.” In other words, once the edifice lost its spiritual core, the Temple was as good as demolished. Destroying the Temple was therefore the consolation, as we discussed last lesson; God chose to raze a ruined building and salvage the nation, giving them another chance.

The Temple's destruction, and the exile which followed, was a resounding blow for the aspirations of the nation as a whole; but at the same time, the exile of the people from the land provided an opportunity to focus on the purely spiritual aspects of religious life. Religious life is much more limited in the Diaspora, but much easier. To be a Jew in the exile one must study and pray, do kindness and the like; but one need not try to build a redeeming economy, a national army, a political hierarchy, and all other aspects of human society.

The challenges of attempting to build a commonwealth are well worth it, but they are challenges nonetheless.

Rav Kook saw the reality of his day, in which the people were beginning to return to the land with the goal of settling it, and not only as individuals. Broad agricultural development was on the agenda, and political aspirations as well. In his writings elsewhere, Rav Kook describes the state and commonwealth of the Jewish people as being capable of expressing "The foundation of God's Throne in the world, whose entire desire is that God shall be one and His Name shall be one."

The nation in its land has potential and expectations, so when the people are not deserving of this reality and privilege, being in the Land of Israel does not advance this goal. Therefore, they are banished, but the Land of Israel waits for the nation to be ready to return and fulfill its mission, with exile being the training ground for the return. So explains Rav Kook in his introduction to *Shabbat Ha-aretz* (translation by Rabbi Julian Sinclair):

In exile, Israel abandoned its preoccupation with secular matters that concerned the people as a whole, and turned its eyes and hearts toward heaven. It stopped trying to amass power, chariots, and horses like every other people on earth, and the nation as a collective ceased all materialistic pursuits. It no longer desired the debaucheries of the surrounding peoples. The spirit of God began to beat within the people once again and to awaken them to the true heights of the human soul. So too, they became aware once more of the Jewish people's spiritual potential… Their eyes and hearts, which were habitually cast heavenward, began to recuperate from the backslidings and sins of their national life.

The conflicts inherent in merging national sovereignty and morality is already described by the Prophets, who recognize the challenge. Rav Kook notes that exile specifically requires a lack of connection to a land, so the people may focus on their unique spiritual qualities, not having to juggle them amidst the various challenges of material wealth and maintaining a state. A quick look at the kings in biblical times demonstrates the difficulties of creating a Jewish government and commonwealth.

This is not to say that Jewish life at the mercy of foreign governments was secure; the people were often scapegoats and lived amidst terror and pogroms. However, for a nation not ready for the challenges, exile is a necessity. Rav Kook writes (*Maamarei Re'iya*, 1:174):

Indeed, observance of the general, national Torah is especially difficult, far more difficult than observing the Torah of the individual. For Torah and *mitzvot* come to purify mankind, and the process of purifying the entire people, as a society which requires national-governmental matters, is much more complicated than the purification of each individual as a specific person...

Though Rav Kook recognizes the challenge of developing moral character in the exile, he also states that our "obligation is not merely to be holy as individuals, but additionally and especially to be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’"

Indeed, in our last lesson, we cited Mark Twain's observations about the survival of the Jews and the obliteration of the ancient empires which once threatened and wreaked havoc upon them. This dovetails with Rav Kook's perspective. The Jewish nation can only find its complete self and fulfill its mission in the Land of Israel; when undeserving of the gift, the people can derive no benefit from inhabiting the Land of Israel. For this reason, every empire that has had its moment in history to usurp the throne and glory of the Jewish people has served its national purpose after destroying the land and dispersing the people. Thus, they shortly fade and disappear from the historical arena, while the Jewish nation, bruised and beaten, uses its time in exile to reconnect to its roots and focus on spirituality, until it longs to return to the land and build a society and a commonwealth based on the Torah's glorious principles.

**The Newfound Relationship to the Land While in Exile**

The reality of exile not only serves as a training ground for focusing on the spiritual aspects of the law; it also helps the Jews reshape their relationship with the land as well. Throughout the millennia of exile, there have been many golden ages of Jewry in many countries, when wealth, genius and political acumen catapulted the Jews to numerous positions of authority and protected status; yet none of these lasted. The results were often depressing, as the sense of insecurity belied the initial feelings of safety. For both practical and spiritual reasons, life in exile produces a longing for the ultimate return, as Rav Kook writes:

From the time they were separated from the land, they turned toward it — not with the greedy gaze of one who sits in his house and desires to reacquire the land that he had sold because it supplied him with bread and other physical needs, but rather with a look of holy love for its inner character, befitting the godly desire that had begun to return to the people….

The Jewish people will undergo a healing process in exile, until there will come a time when individuals will return to recreate the nation in the Land of Israel. In the process they will embrace *shemitta* and its message. Exile also gives the Jewish people the opportunity to realize what sort of society they must strive to build, as he writes elsewhere (*Orot Ha-milchama*, p.14):

We were forced to leave the international political stage, although there was an inner desire that we do so, until the glorious time when it would be possible to conduct a government without evil or barbarism; this is the era for which we long... Our souls have been sickened by the terrible crimes of governments during evil times. But now, the time has come; very soon the world will sweeten and we will be able to prepare ourselves, for it will already be possible for us to conduct our government on the foundations of goodness, wisdom, uprightness and clear, divine illumination... It is not worthy for the Nation of Israel to involve itself in government so long as governing has to be full of bloodshed, while governing requires the skill of evildoing.

**The Ultimate Sign**

Rav Kook continues in *Shabbat Ha-aretz*, allowing us to share his uncertainty: how do we know when the process of purification has been completed and the time to renew our national existence in our land has arrived?

To whom has been revealed the divine secret, to know when the nation and the land have been totally purified from their contamination? ... No one among us knows. Therefore, our eyes look to find the hidden secrets where they can be found - in the vision of the revealed time of redemption, of which our Sages said: “There is no clearer indication of the End (*ketz meguleh*) than this, as it is stated (*Yechezkel* 36:8): ‘But you, O mountains of Israel, shoot forth your branches and bear your fruit for my people Israel [for their return is near].’”

In a fascinating manner, Rav Kook explained the Sages’ statement connecting the redemption to the physical rebirth of the Land of Israel, as it arises from desolation and destruction to become an agricultural wonderland, not as a secondary sign but as a direct response to the essence of the need and purpose of exile. The passage he quotes (*Sanhedrin* 98a) is discussing a dispute between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer as to whether the redemption will come even if the nation does not repent. The Talmud concludes:

Rabbi Abba said: “There is no clearer indication of the End (*ketz meguleh*) than this, as it is stated (*Yechezkel* 36:8): ‘But you, O mountains of Israel, shoot forth your branches and bear your fruit for my people Israel [for their return is near].’”

Rashi explains Rabbi Abba’s statement as referring to the Land’s bringing forth fruit in abundance. Elsewhere (*Ketubot* 111b), the Talmud 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.

Rav Kook explains that this is not a secondary sign, such as the identifying marks used to prove ownership over a lost object, but rather it is inherently indicative of the renewed encounter between the nation and their land, the *ketz meguleh,* the clearest sign. The fact that the nation is able to resettle in the land and capable of letting it bring forth fruits in ways that no conquering nation has seen in the past is the divine proof that the promised time has arrived.

**Past Settlement during the Exile**

Within his analysis, Rav Kook mentions the fact that even amidst the exile, there was always at least a small Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. In fact, the Rambam indicates that the absence of Jews from Israel would be tantamount to destruction of our nation (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive 254). If so, one might wonder, what exactly changes with the establishment of the new settlement?

Rav Kook explains that those who come to live in the Land of Israel, do so in the face of great danger, but do so because they are drawn to the spiritual character of the land, recognizing its superiority, without any attempt to build it up physically.

After a long time, scattered individuals gradually began returning to the land, drawn there by God's hand and by the holiness of the land rather than by any concern with material wellbeing or with reestablishing national government… So long as the anger has not been assuaged, and so long as the sickness in the depths of the people's soul has not been fully cured, there was every reason for them to turn only to heaven for support. Because of the extent of the land's destruction, people were not interested in trying to live a life closely tied to the earth; if dreams of restoring political sovereignty had occurred to them then, their confusions and ancient corruptions would like have been to return and reawaken. So their spiritual vision was blocked, and most people forgot about the land, and the scattered individuals who were concerned with it related to it as a spiritual ideal rather than as a physical reality. (Sinclair 129)

In fact, Rav Yosef Karo, although a resident of the Land of Israel, did not record any of the *halakhot* of agricultural *shemitta* in *Shulchan Arukh*. Evidently, the majority of the *halakhot* of *shemitta* were not yet practically applicable for a nation who had returned to reside in the land, but not settle its farms. In his responsa, Rav Yosef Karo's analyzes the most applicable *halakha* of the day, regarded the status of produce in Israel grown by non-Jews and whether it is accorded the special sanctity of *shemitta* produce. The Jews then might have lived in the land, but they did not live off the land.

This was the painful reality for almost two thousand years, yet Rav Kook found himself in a different situation. The Jews of his day had awakened and begun to follow a dream calling not only for the physical return of seekers of spirituality, but a mass movement. There was even an attempt, and a successful one at that, to rebuild Israel physically, to revive its agricultural beauty, and to renovate the wasteland described so elegiacally by Mark Twain. The sign discussed in the Talmud, the *ketz meguleh,* symbolizes the people’s recognition of the need to merge the physical with the spiritual, that God has deemed the time for the return has arrived. He writes:

But with the fulfillment of the whole measure of God's rebuke (which refines not just individuals, who began to return from the early days of the exile, but also the spirit of the nation as a whole, which was uplifted along with the degraded spirit of the land), the mourning for Zion began to seek outlets in action.

Rav Kook continues with a passionate description of the people's recognition that a return to the land would allow for the healing of the nation both spiritually and physically. He defines the climate as indicative of the heart of the nation beginning to beat again, and though it was imperceptible to most at first, it became more and more apparent. He describes the corporeal desires of the people to settle the land and physically work it as expressions of the "exalted spirits of this long-suffering people that had generally forgotten the ways of physical existence…" He points out that for prophecy it is not enough to be intellectually wise and spiritually solid; one must also be strong and materially self-sufficient. If these are necessary components for an individual to merit divine revelation, the same applies on the national plane as well; the nation must be physically strong to merit the revelation it is waiting for.

Rav Kook's description of the nation awakening from its slumber and the initial effects being felt in the secular Zionist world's desire to physically return to the land and build it up may best be understood with an analogy. When one wakes up from a long rest, some parts of the body might be slower than others in arising. One might find that a leg or arm is still asleep and isn't yet ready to move. The heart is pumping, though, and it is just a matter of time before the whole body feels rejuvenated and ready to arise like a lion.

Rav Kook similarly sees the events in his lifetime as a sign that the Jewish heart — not only that of individuals, but of the collective — has started to pump again on its own. The nation has awoken from a medically-induced coma, but it initially shows movement only in some of the physical areas. The loved ones, looking for a display of restored brainpower and wisdom, are upset, yet the doctor is excited. If there is movement, even physical, that means that the heart is pumping and the brain is sending signals; it might take some time to see the expression of intellectual rejuvenation, but it is on its way. The brainpower, the intelligence, the Torah greatness of the nation will once again show itself, if we remain patient enough to let the body of the nation physically arise. In fact, the importance of physical restoration is more profound in the Land of Israel, as even prophecy itself is limited to the special land which allows for the bridging of the physical and the spiritual.

**The Beginning of the Redemption**

Rav Kook continues with a vivid description of the initial pioneers who started settling the land.

With souls that were paralyzed with shock, and with legs that stumbled from the evil and wearying oppression of enemies and with the humiliation of constant wanderings, as people without hope or comfort on foreign soil, there came to the Land of Israel a few survivors who had been scattered in the diaspora. Their eyes bleary from the darkness of exile after exile, they could no longer bear the full force of the great light that is implanted in the land. The backbone has not yet been straightened, the spirit has not yet revived, the divine soul has not yet become manifest in its full soaring flight. But a few single rays of light are scattered in all directions, the revealed end is becoming closer all the time, and all in whom the spirit of the Lord pounds hurry to be among the first builder who will build up the nation in the land of eternal delight.

Rav Kook, a man who exudes optimism, is not blind to the fact that this return is far more modest than what had been originally envisioned or expected. Yet at the same time Rav Kook sees this not as an end, but as the beginning of a process, which will be revealed step by step through the return and the observance of *mitzvot* like those of *shemitta*.

Just as the resurrection of our people upon the holy land is still young, so is what it has erected small and poor as compared with our great hope, which becomes strong with the help of the right hand of the Lord that is raised on high "to plant the heavens and to securely establish the earth, and to say to Zion: ‘You are my people,’” so is the spirit that is within us poor and weak from the high elevation of the land of desire. And the splendor of God that becomes manifest through the holiness of the *yovel* and of the *shemitta* on the holy land, which gives strength and might to the people, is only visible to us from afar.

Here again, Rav Kook informs us of the role which the mitzvot of *shemitta* and *yovel* play in this return, such that "the splendor of God" will become manifest. The question is how.

True, the return to the land will present the opportunity to fulfill all *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz,* but Rav Kook's presents this analysis as an introduction to *shemitta* and describes *shemitta*'s message as the antidote for the misplaced perspective that necessitates exile.

It is especially potent considering the fact that Rav Kook's view of *shemitta* is often directly associated with his rabbinic backing of the *heter mekhira,* allowing for the legal sale of some of the land to non-Jews to enable farming under certain conditions. The conclusion of Rav Kook's introduction addresses this point, continuing his line of reasoning that the return to Israel is a historical process, which in his day was only in its infancy. In that context, he tries to explain why *shemitta*'s message is a necessity but its full outright practice is not yet a reality. Only when *shemitta* can be fully fulfilled will this potential be realized, and the utopian society which *shemitta* engenders may be fully achieved.

Are we there yet? Next week we hope to find out (at least a little) why this return can only be appreciated in light of *shemitta* and what it means for us.