YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #18: *Torat Eretz Yisrael***

In this *shiur,* we turn to a contemporary theme: the uniqueness of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*. Why does the Torah of the Land of Israel occupy a unique position in the world of *talmud Torah*? What is the basis for this distinction? What does it mean? We will consider a number of sources that bear on our subject, while giving special attention to Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook’s seminal treatment of our topic.

A number of sources in *Chazal* point toward the unique status of the Land of Israel vis-a-vis *talmud Torah*. The term “*Torat Eretz Yisrael*” appears in *Bereishit Rabba* 16:2 and *Vayikra Rabba* 13:5:

“That there is gold” — these are words of Torah, which are more pleasant than gold and much finery. “And the gold of that land is good” — this teaches that there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel, and there is no wisdom like the wisdom of the Land of Israel.

Another *midrash* stresses the exclusivity of *Torat Eretz Yisrael.*

“*Tevel*” — this is the Land of Israel. Why is it called *Tevel*? Due to the spice *(tavlin)* in it. What is the spice in it? This is Torah, as it states, “Among the nations there is no Torah.” From here [we derive] that the Torah is in the Land of Israel. (*Sifrei*, *Parashat Ekev 37*)

The Babylonian Talmud suggests this motif in a few sources. It often cites “*Ma’arava*,” the West (which denotes Israel, which is west of Babylonia), as a source of wisdom. This may imply that the sages of Israel were given unique deference. In *Bava Batra* 158b, to which we will return, Rabbi Zeira remarks cryptically that “the air of the Land of Israel makes one wise.” Inversely, in *Sanhedrin* 24a, Rabbi Yirmeya, an Amora from the Land of Israel, refers derogatorily to the sages of Babylonia: “‘He placed me in darkness like the dead of the world’ (*Eikha* 3:6) — Rabbi Yirmeya said: this is the Talmud of Babylonia.”[[1]](#footnote-1) A number of *sugyot* (*Ketubot* 75a, *Yoma* 57a, *Bava Metzia* 85a) cite scholars from the Land of Israel who call their Babylonian counterparts “imbecilic Babylonians.” In the passage in *Yoma*, in regard to a detail concerning the sprinkling of the blood during the High Priest’s Yom Kippur Temple service, Rabbi Yirmeya again comments: “These imbecilic Babylonians! Because they reside in a dim land, their teachings are benighted.” Taken together, these sources suggest that the sages of Israel were, at least in some quarters, viewed as endowed with wisdom that their eastern colleagues could not achieve.

On the other hand, of course, the Babylonian Talmud is generally accepted as preeminent over the Jerusalem Talmud in regard to determining practical *halakha*. What is more, the curricula of nearly all *yeshivot*, from the Middle Ages through today, have emphasized the Bavli at the expense of the Yerushalmi. How are we to square the apparent preference for the Bavli with the concept of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*? To resolve this question, we must inquire as to the underlying logic for the special stature of the Torah of Israel.

**Basis**

In seeking to understand *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, we may cite an observation of Ritva (*Yoma* 57a, s.v. *Mishum*), who analyzes Rabbi Yirmeya’s comment in *Sanhedrin*. The citation of the verse in *Eikha*, which concerns the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, suggests that the preference for learning in the Land of Israel is a function of the diminishment of the Jewish community in exile. Rambam also feared that the trials and tribulations of his generation posed a grave danger to the Oral Law’s continuity, and exilic communities generally lack the peace of mind necessary to study Torah properly. In this view, the difference between Israel and elsewhere is not inherent but situational.

If we adopt this circumstantial interpretation, Ritva contends, it is logical to argue that in some periods, the Diaspora community can achieve sufficient stability such that it can rival and even eclipse the Torah of Israel. This explains the contemporary preference for the Babylonian Talmud. For a number of reasons, including persecution, the Yerushalmi was never subject to the same revision process as the Bavli, and it is far more difficult to decode. This demonstrates the superiority of the product eventually produced by the sages of Bavel, who ultimately achieved the stability necessary to create a superior body of work. For Ritva, the superiority of the Bavli is evidence of the circumstantial reading of the *Torat Eretz Yisrael* doctrine.

For an alternative explanation of the preference for the Bavli over the Yerushalmi, as well as a more intrinsic model of *Torat Eretz Yisrael,* we may begin with a classic passage of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (*Ha’amek Davar, Shemot* 34:1). In an extended analysis, Netziv contends that while Moshe’s shattering of the Tablets is tragic, nonetheless with the second set of Tablets, a new, more anthropocentric form of Torah study is born. Moshe fashions the Second Tablets on his own, indicating that the Torah scholar must now play an active role instead of relying on revelation. In such a context, critical analysis plays a crucial role. Netziv uses this insight to explain Rabbi Yirmeya’s view: while it is true that Babylonia is a place of darkness, nonetheless the uniqueness of its scholars is that, by way of analysis, they supersede their natural limitations and achieve profundity in their learning.

Although Netziv does not say so explicitly, his approach is supported by a previous line in *Sanhedrin* 24a, in which Rabbi Oshaya expounds a verse in *Zekharya* to refer to Babylonian scholars as *chovelim*, assailants. Whereas sages from the Land of Israel tend to engage in pleasant Torah discourse, the Babylonian rabbis tend to be far more critical in their approach to their colleagues’ positions, attacking each other. This dovetails neatly with Netziv’s thesis. Because they refuse to simply accept their colleagues’ words at face value, interrogating and sharpening their opinions instead, the scholars of Babylonia ultimately emerge as intellectually superior.

Netziv’s approach implies that *Torat Eretz Yisrael* is in fact inherently superior to that of Bavel. Nevertheless, taking their cue from the Second Tablets, the scholars of Babylonia achieve extraordinary levels of intellectual acuity. In doing so despite their inherent disadvantage, their powers of analysis enable them to compensate for their weakness and reach preeminence over the scholars of Israel.

Netziv’s interpretation therefore leads us to an alternative accounting for the uniqueness of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*: the Torah of Israel is inherently superior to that of other geographic locations. This second approach, as we will see, has proven especially attractive to devotees of the mystical tradition. This is particularly true for those who, based on *Kiddushin* 30a and other sources from the literature of *Chazal*, see Torah study as an echo, no matter how faint, of prophecy. For if we view *talmud Torah* as a form of revelation, it becomes apparent why we might be inclined to see *Eretz Yisrael* as particularly conducive to Torah study. After all, the Divine Presence is most robustly manifest in Israel. What is more, Rabbi Abba teaches that prophecy is uniquely tied to the Land of Israel (*Mo’ed Katan* 25a). As such, it makes sense to view *talmud Torah* along analogous lines.

In light of this analysis, it is unsurprising that Rambam, the arch-rationalist, never codifies or cites the preference for studying in Israel. Rav Kook, who not only lived in and loved *Eretz Yisrael* but was also steeped in the Jewish mystical tradition, by contrast, lays great emphasis on this theme.

A number of *midrashim* support the intrinsic reading of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*. In *Midrash Shocher Tov* (108) Rabbi Yosei bar Chalafta advises his son Rabbi Yishmael: “Do you wish to see the Divine Presence in this world? Engage in Torah study in the Land of Israel.” Less explicitly but more vividly, *Yalkut Shimoni* (2:988, *Shir Ha-shirim* 4:15) writes: “‘A well of living water’ — this is the Torah of the Land of Israel.” The imagery of the well, which is often associated with divine inspiration (see *Sukkah* 50b regarding *Simchat Beit Ha-sho’eiva*), works best with the view that Israel is inherently more fit for Torah study. Additionally, Rabbi Zeira’s remark (*Bava Batra* 158b) that “the air of the Land of Israel makes one wise,” seems to favor an intrinsic, mystically-oriented interpretation over an extrinsic, rationalist rendering.

This perspective works especially well with the worldview of the romantic medieval scholar-poet-philosopher, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi. Ha-Levi, a critic of Aristotelian philosophy who prefers to rely on revelation as a source of truth more so than pristine philosophical argumentation, makes the link between the Land of Israel, the Jewish people and divine revelation a centerpiece of his thought (*Kuzari* 2:9-24). It is only a small step, following Ha-Levi, to suggest something similar regarding *talmud Torah* and *Eretz Yisrael*. Rabbi Moshe of Trani (*Beit Elokim*, *Sha’ar Ha-ysodot* 34) extends this argument, arguing that the Land of Israel provides wisdom on account of *Adam Ha-rishon*, the first intelligent being, whosee head was created from the dirt of that Land (*Sanhedrin* 38a). From that time and throughout history, human wisdom becomes particularly associated with the Land of Israel. It is on this basis that *Kiddushin* 49b claims that while ten portions of wisdom were granted to the world, nine of those ten were given to *Eretz Yisrael*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, the thinker who most fully develops the contours of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* is Rav Kook, whose thought we will only briefly summarize here. As outlined in a number of texts, including Chapter 13 of *Orot Ha-Torah* (aptly entitled “*Torat Eretz Yisrael*”), the great Religious Zionist elucidates a theory that is consistent with his wider mystical-nationalist philosophy. For Rav Kook, echoing nineteenth-century nationalist thought, particularly of the German variety, the Jewish nation is only fully in tune with its own spirit when living in Israel, its organic source. Only with the return to Zion can the Jewish people recapture their essence and reconnect with God, Whose presence is manifest in the Jewish homeland. Through Torah study, mitzva performance, Zionism and cultural activity, the Jewish nation can achieve its national destiny.

Rav Kook applies these themes to the Torah study of Israel. For Rav Kook, learning is most organic in the Land of Israel (13:7); it is only there that we connect fully with God through *talmud Torah*. *Torat Eretz Yisrael* is a unifying force: study of one area in Torah illuminates another. Study in Israel begins not with details but from a wider view of the entire system of Torah, including both its revealed and hidden genres (13:1). The study of Torah in exile is an isolated experience; one simply studies the material at hand in an individualistic fashion. In Israel, by contrast, one’s learning is linked to the entirety of Torah and the entirety of the Jewish people. In *Eretz Yisrael*, *halakha* and *aggada* go hand-in-hand; one’s learning uplifts the entire Jewish people, spiritually reinforcing within the nation the values embodied in that learning (*Ein Ayah*, *Berakhot* p. 207).

Due to the clarifying nature of the Divine Presence, one who learns in Israel achieves a heightened clarity in one’s learning, not only in *aggada* but also in *halakha* (13:4).[[3]](#footnote-3)

For this reason, study of the Yerushalmi is to be preferred. Instead of seeing the abbreviated *shakla ve-tarya* in the Yerushalmi as a result of a lack of editorial process, Rav Kook sees the opposite, contending that the Yerushalmi intentionally avoids the Bavli’s sometimes-convoluted contortions. Following this theme of clarity, Rav Kook focuses much of his own Talmudic teaching on clarifying the basic meaning and practical halakhic ramifications of each *sugya*, launching his *Halakha Berura* project on the basis of this motif.

The study of *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, Rav Kook hastens to add (writing well before the Holocaust), takes on heightened significance for the generation of the return of the suffering people to Israel, who require the added fortitude and enlightenment afforded by the Land of Israel.

For Rav Kook, then, *Torat Eretz Yisrael* speaks not only to the centrality of the Land of Israel, but also to the wide-ranging impact of *talmud Torah*. Echoing themes we outlined in the opening *shiurim* of this series, Rav Kook reminds us that, far from being just an important practical obligation, Torah learning is a soaring spiritual experience that enables the individual members and entire Jewish people to more deeply connect with their deepest essence as well as the Divine.

1. For an incisive Chasidic reading of the Gemara, see R. Tzadok of Lublin’s *Likutei Ma’amarim,* p. 79. He suggests that the mental gymnastics of the Babylonian sages can have the inadvertent effect of obscuring the clarity of God’s presence, which ought to be clearly manifest in one’s study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also R. Moshe Isserles’s *Torat Ha-ola*, 3:38. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a similar motif, see Maharal’s *Netivot Ha-Torah*, *Netiv Ha-Torah* 13, who argues that since *Eretz Yisrael* is fully balanced, both geographically (in his scheme, Israel lies at the center of the universe) and spiritually, its scholars argue with calm demeanor. The scholars of Bavel, on the other hand, in line with the “uneven” quality of Babylonia, tend to study in a far more adversarial fashion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)