



THE PURPOSE OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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A PROGRAM OF aish HaTorah

We all understand that Israel plays a pivotal role in our identity as Jews. It's the land promised to us by G-d, imagined as a safe-haven for Jews escaping antisemitism, a place where we feel most "Jewish", and connected to G-d and spirituality.

Let's take a closer look at what connects the Jew to Israel:

The Land of Israel as a Place to Perform Mitzvos

Many mitzvos of the Torah, in particular those related to agriculture and to the Jewish kingship, can only be fulfilled while living in the Land of Israel.

Q: However, did you know that living in the land of Israel is according to many authorities a biblical commandment?

SOURCE 1: Chumash Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11:31 *Mitzvah to Live in Land of Israel*

"For you are crossing the Jordan river to come and possess the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives to you; **you shall possess it and settle in it.**" Devarim (11:31)

"You shall be careful to **perform all the decrees and the ordinances** that I present to you today" (Devarim 11:32)

כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבֹא לְרִשְׁתׁ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם נֹתֵן לָכֶם וּרְשַׁתֶּם אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁבְּתֶם־
בָּהּ

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים
אֲשֶׁר אֶנֶכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם:

We see from verse 31 above that there is a Biblical Mitzvah to live in the land of Israel. But it goes farther than that. In verse 32 above we are tasked with being very careful about performing the mitzvos of the Torah.

Q: Why do you think these two verses are presented side by side? Do you think there is a connection being made between performing mitzvos and living in the land of Israel?

According to many authorities there is a positive mitzvah to live in the Holy Land, where one is able to achieve a closer connection with God, precisely because in the Land we are able to fulfill His commandments at the highest level.

In fact, Nachmanides an early and extremely credible Rabbinic sage takes this once step farther:

SOURCE 2: Nachmanides (Ramban), Vayikra 18:25, – Performance of the mitzvos outside the Land of Israel is only a “rehearsal” for their performance in the Land.

The Sages stated in the Sifri: “[If your hearts lead you astray and you serve and bow to other gods] and you will quickly be banished [from the good land that God gives you]” (Devarim 11:17): Even though I [God] **am exiling you from the Land of Israel, you should still perform mitzvos so that when you return they will not be new and unfamiliar to you.**

אמרו בספרי (עקב מג), ואבדתם
מהרה (דברים יא יז), אף על
פי שאני מגלה אתכם מן הארץ
לחוצה לארץ היו מצויינין במצות
שכשתחזרו לא יהו עליכם
חדשים

Q: Why do you think Mitzvos are so important in a general sense, and even more central in the land of Israel?

SOURCE 3: Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, Set in Stone, p.31, Targum – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God ...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, “**commandment**,” closely related to the word צוותא, meaning **a connection or a binding.**

Certainly, one can connect to G-d through Mitzvos outside of Israel. But Israel offers a broader and deeper relationship.

Q: Why do you think this is so?

Israel is like litmus paper for the Jewish soul; With each mitzvah a different aspect of the Jew comes alive and is deeply attached to his/her Creator. Practically, more mitzvos are applicable in Israel than anywhere else, G-d’s presence (as we described in a prior class) is more palpable there, we have the potential to collectively focus our lives around Torah and Mitzvos in Israel, and there are less foreign influences to distract us from this lifestyle.

This is why we feel so spiritual and close to G-d in the Holy Land in the midst of Jews doing Jewish things, even though we are all, not yet on the same page. Imagine what it will feel like when we are?!

It’s no wonder that the Torah testifies that mitzvos were given by G-d to “benefit us”!:

SOURCE 4: Devarim 6:24 – God gave us the Torah for our own good.

God commanded us to perform all these decrees, to fear God our Lord, **for our own good for all time**, to give us **life as this very day.**

ויצונו ה' לעשות את כל החקים האלה
ליראה את יקוק אלקינו לטוב לנו כל
הימים לחיתנו כהיום הזה

With this source we understand why the Torah can testify that all the mitzvos are solely for our good. What greater good is there than a direct attachment to G-d?

But, let's look more closely at the source. The source describes mitzvos as "for our own good" "for all time", then one phrase later, "to give us life as this very day". Doesn't for all time include "this very day"?

Q: What does the Torah emphasize by stating, to give us life, "as this very day"?

Perhaps it is to underscore the concept that mitzvos are not just a way to get you into Heaven (for all time), but they benefit us in the here and now. (this very day!)

The Land of Israel as a Model Society for the World

SOURCE 5: *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Bereishis 48:3-4 – Individuals in Jewish society will play different roles, but all are bound by a common "spiritual and moral mission."*

The Jewish nation is to represent agriculture as well as commerce, militarism as well as culture and learning. The Jewish people will be a nation of farmers, a nation of businessmen, a nation of soldiers and a nation of science. Thereby, as a model nation, to establish the truth that the one great personal and national task which God revealed in His Torah is not dependent on any particular kind of talent or character trait, but that the whole of humanity in all its shades of diversity can equally find its calling in one common spiritual and moral mission and outlook in life.

Perhaps we can further suggest, that the 12 tribes of Israel with their various talents and inherited regions throughout the land of Israel (think of a State for each tribe), each with their own unique natural attributes, all combine to create the perfect mosaic which is "Israel" - Not just the Nation but the Ideal.

The sometimes-unfair critique by the nations of the world, in a perverse way, calls us to this higher purpose:

SOURCE 6: *Gateway to Judaism Rabbi Mordechai Becher – Expectations of a higher standard.*

The tremendous media scrutiny of Israel and the extraordinary amount of attention paid to this tiny country in the Middle East may well be due to the fact that, deep down, people expect something more of Israel and the Jews. There is a sense that the State of Israel should have higher standards than its neighbors and the rest of the world – and indeed it should. This idea is beautifully expressed in the following verses in the Book of Yeshayahu/Isaiah (2:3):

"And many nations will go and say, 'Let us go and ascend to the mountain of God, to the Temple of the God of Jacob; and we will be instructed in His ways, and we will walk in His paths'; for from Zion shall come forth the Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem."

Israel is supposed to be the place to which the people of the world look for guidance in moral behavior.

Israel is both a real land where the Jew finds his fulfillment and an ideal which calls the Jewish People and Humanity to perfection. Though we can be Jewish and achieve a connection to G-d anywhere in the world, all would agree that Israel stands head and shoulders apart as a means to fulfilling our special Jewish Destiny.

POSTSCRIPT BONUS SECTION – DAYS ARE COMING

The Nation of Israel has a unique, perhaps even supernatural relationship to their land from time immemorial. Consider the following sources which describe the strange connections between Jews and the Land of Israel:

SOURCE 1: *“The Jewish Wars” Josephus Book III 3:2 (first century)*

Fore the whole area is excellent for crops or pasturage and rich in trees of every kind, so that by its fertility it invites even those least inclined to work on the land. In fact, every inch of it has been cultivated by the inhabitants and not a parcel goes to waste....(pg. 192)

As part of the fertile crescent, we would actually expect Israel to be as fertile and good a land as Josephus suggests.

SOURCE 2: *Nachmanides Account of his travels to Israel (1260 CE)*

What shall I tell you about the land? There are so many forsaken places, and the desolation is great. It comes down to this: the more sacred the place, the more it has suffered – Jerusalem is most desolate, Judea more so than the Galil. Yet in all its desolation **it is an exceedingly good land.**

Perhaps we can pin it all on the natural decline the land would suffer through constant conquest? Yet would this thesis hold up for 2,000 years? Yet take a look at this prediction from the Torah in Leviticus:

SOURCE 3: *Chumash Vayikra (Leviticus 26:32-33)*

So devastated will I leave the land that your enemies who live there will be astonished...
Your land will remain desolate, and your cities in ruins.

Q: The Torah seems pretty clear, that the land will “remain” desolate! But, Why? If the land is so good, why couldn’t any foreign power cultivate it?

Take a look at these comments from Nachmanides, for the astonishing answer:

SOURCE 4: *Nachmanides, Commentary on the Torah (1194-1270)*

That which G-d states here, **“So devastated will I leave the land that your enemies...”, constitutes a good tiding**, proclaiming that during all our exiles, our land will not accept our enemies. This also is a great proof and assurance to us, for in the whole inhabited part of the world one cannot find such a **good and large Land which was always lived in** and yet is as ruined as it is (today). **For since the time that we left it, it has not accepted any nation or people, and they all try to settle it, to no avail.**

You really can’t say it any better nor clearer than Nachmanides, and his prescient words were uttered in the 13th Century. Take a look at a more modern recount of the same story in the inimitable words of Mark Twain:

SOURCE 5: *The New Pilgrim's Progress* Mark Twain (1867)

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds – a silent mournful expanse. A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action....We pressed on toward renowned Jerusalem...No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye as that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem....It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land....Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes...Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies.....And why should it be otherwise? Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? Volume II pp 216-359

Even scholars of the nations of the world have noticed this strange phenomenon:

SOURCE 6: *Modern Science in Bible Lands* Sir John William Dosson pp. 449-450. (1888)

Until today **no people has succeeded in establishing national dominion in the land of Israel...**No national unity or spirit of nationalism has acquired any hold there. The mixed multitude of itinerant tribes that managed to settle there did so on lease, as temporary residents. **It seems that they await the return of the permanent residents of the land.**

Yet, just as the Torah predicts our exile from Israel, it also predicts our more astonishing return:

SOURCE 5: *Ezekiel Chapter 11:17 (Also in Deuteronomy 30:3-5, Isaiah 41:18-20 and more)*

Thus says the L-rd, G-d, "I will gather you from the nations, and assemble you from the lands where you have been scattered, and I will **give you the Land of Israel.**

Other lands react to the natural occurrences of history, while the Land of Israel reacts to the deeds and actions of the Jewish People. **However, there is one tell-tale sign, the Rabbis explain, which will signal the dawning of the messianic era:**

SOURCE 5: *Rabbi Shmuel Eidels HaLevi ("Maharsha" -- 1555-1632)*

As long as Israel does not dwell on its Land, the land does not give of its fruits, as she is accustomed. **When she will begin to re-flourish, however, and give of her fruits, this is the clear sign that the end – the time of Redemption-- is approaching, when all of Israel will return to their land.**

This wasn't written in 1892 or even in the 1860's when the stirring of national identity was beginning to take form, but in 1600. How these words must have been ridiculed in Europe of the 16th century when the world had long dismissed the Jewish hope of return. Yet here we are in the 21st century, the land giving abundantly of her fruits, clearly fulfilling the words of the Prophets.

Days are coming when all the words of the Prophets will be fulfilled concerning the Jewish return to Israel and the Torah. Let's make sure we all heed the call!