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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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“When You Come into the Land”

Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l

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Thus said Moshe: Many precepts were commanded to Israel which can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel. I wish to enter the land so that they may all be fulfilled by me. (*Sota* 14a)

Which *mitzvot* did Moshe yearn to fulfill in this passage? The simple understanding is that this refers to the *mitzvot* that depend upon the Land of Israel, e.g., *terumot*, *ma'aserot*, *challa*, and the like. But upon further consideration, it seems more likely that Moshe is referring here to other *mitzvot* that are not defined as dependent upon the Land of Israel in the narrow sense of that term.

We read in *Parashat Shofetim*:

When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, and shall possess it, and shall dwell in it, and shall say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me. (*Devarim* 17:14)

One of the *mitzvot* that can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel is the *mitzva* of appointing a king. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* and the Rambam in *Hilkhot Melakhim* refer to three *mitzvot* that could be fulfilled only upon entry into Land of Israel, but which are not *mitzvot* of the soil: appointing a king, wiping out Amalek, and building the Temple (*Sanhedrin* 20b; *Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1). It seems that it was these *mitzvot* that Moshe yearned to fulfill.

The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* discusses which of these *mitzvot* is given priority, and it concludes that the *mitzva* of appointing a king must be fulfilled first. Why? It may be that appointing a king is most significant morally, but this understanding is not necessary, because from a technical perspective as well, the Temple cannot be built before an orderly system of government is established. The common denominator of these *mitzvot* is they are not incumbent upon every member of Israel on the personal level. Rather, these *mitzvot* touch upon the very essence of *Kenesset Israel*, the people of Israel, and the Land of Israel.

It may be assumed that Moshe yearned to fulfill these *mitzvot* no less than he yearned to fulfill the *mitzvot* of *terumot* and *ma'aserot*. He did not yearn only for them, but rather he longed for a time in which he could

complete the mission that he had started in Egypt and continued during his forty years in the wilderness.

What was this mission? We can discern it in a moment where Moshe, near despair, asks God rhetorically: "Have I conceived all this people? Have I brought them forth?" (*Bemidbar* 11:12). In response, God advises him as to how he should build a new leadership and continue fashioning the nation. Indeed, God implicitly says, you conceived this people and brought them forth; you carried them and you shall carry them as the nursing father carries the sucking baby. Moshe is portrayed as one who shapes the character of the nation.

This characteristic of Moshe is connected to his dual role. First, he was the spiritual leader who was responsible for teaching the Torah to the nation. On the other hand, he also possessed aspects of kingship, based, according to the Rambam, on the verse: "And there was a king in Yeshurun" (*Devarim* 33:5).

Already in the wilderness Moshe acted as king; entering into the Land of Israel was therefore his life's dream. His dream went beyond the desire to be in the Land of Israel because of its sanctity and special quality. Only in Israel could his mission be completed, for only there can the quality of *Kenesset Israel* find its full and perfect expression. A person is needed to lead the process. Optimally, Moshe wishes to complete the job himself; that same task he took upon himself in the exile of Egypt, and to which he dedicated his best years, he wishes to complete in the Land of Israel. Establishing a system of government is indeed a separate *mitzva* that stands on its own, but through it one can advance many other *mitzvot*.

But, as is well known, there is no king without a nation. Part of the *mitzva* of appointing a king involves building a nation. There is a reciprocal relationship between the king and his nation. A national foundation must be built, over which a fitting leader will be appointed, who will then use his leadership to further build the nation.

Moshe's connection to the Land of Israel is not limited to this. In *Parashat Kedoshim* the words "When you shall come into the land" are mentioned in a different context: "When you shall come into the land, and you shall have planted (*u-netatem*) all manner of trees for food, then you shall count the fruit thereof as forbidden; three years shall it be as forbidden unto you; it shall not be eaten" (*Vayikra* 19:23).

The letter *vav* in the word *u-netatem* ("and you shall have planted") has a double meaning. On the one hand, it introduces the second part of a condition that began with "when you shall come into the land." That is to say, if you come into the land and plant trees, you must do as follows with the fruit. On the other hand, the letter *vav* might not be part of the condition, but a command: "When you come into the land, then you shall plant fruit trees!" Surprisingly, this understanding is supported by a midrash that relates to planting trees as an imperative. According to the midrash, planting trees is not

only a way to fulfill a general need, but a mission of serving God at the highest level:

R. Yehuda the son of R. Simon opened: "After the Lord your God shall you walk" (*Devarim* 13:5). But is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to walk after the Holy One, blessed be He, about whom it is written: "Your way was in the sea, and Your path in the great waters" (*Tehillim* 77:20), and yet you say: "After the Lord shall you walk"?

"And unto Him shall you cleave" (*Devarim* 13:5). But it is possible for a man of flesh and blood to ascend to heaven and cleave to the *Shekhina*, about whom it is written: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire" (*Devarim* 5:24)? ...

Rather, from the beginning of the world's creation, the Holy One, blessed be He, occupied Himself first with planting. This is what the verse states: "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden" (*Bereishit* 2:8). You, too, when you enter into the land, occupy yourselves at first only with planting. This is what the verse states: "When you shall come into the land, [you shall plant]." (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:3)

In other places as well, *Chazal* tell us that we must imitate God, sometimes regarding His traits, and sometimes regarding His actions. But here the midrash gives a different answer as to how we can follow after God. Why is fulfilling this mitzva regarded as walking in God's ways?

It may be suggested that there is a special connection between planting trees, *orla* (the fruits forbidden for three years after planting) and entry into the Land of Israel. As opposed to the other *mitzvot* that depend upon the Land of Israel, *orla* applies even outside Israel. In order to fulfill the *mitzva*, then, it is not necessary to enter into the land. There are halakhic differences between *orla* in the Land of Israel and *orla* outside the land, but the distinction between the two types of plantings extends far beyond these halakhic considerations.

When God planted a garden in Eden, this was not just a grove of trees, but rather laying the foundations of the world. We are therefore commanded in the Land of Israel to develop agriculture and plant trees, not only to fulfill *mitzvot* like *orla* or *neta revai*, but also to build the nation and to ensure its viability. Just as God constructs the entire world on the basis of the planting of trees, we are commanded to plant trees in the Land of Israel, so that there will be a healthy economy and strong society in the Land of Israel.

Moshe's aspiration certainly included fulfilling the *mitzvot* of the Land of Israel. The *Rishonim* cite the passage in *Sota* as the source of a person's obligation to perform *mitzvot* even if he can get out of doing them. But there is a level here that goes beyond that. Moshe sets out to build an entire nation with a spiritual foundation. "Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, even as the Lord my God commanded me" (*Devarim* 4:5). This verse refers not only to the laws that Moshe taught the people of Israel, but also to the broader acquisition of values and Torah knowledge. The building of the nation must be founded on these values as well.

We are not in Moshe's situation. Moshe's task was to sanctify the land and the people, and to develop the connection between the people and the land, and between the people and the service of God. We, in our generation, on one level or another, have come to a land that is already developed.

The second sanctification of the Land of Israel (in the time of Ezra's return from exile) was forever. Nevertheless, until 5708 (1948) this sanctity lacked any practical expression. There was no national independence, and there was no mechanism or system of government. Even those who say that there is no *mitzva* to appoint a king today certainly agree that there is an obligation to build a system of government so that we do not come to the point that every man does as he pleases. This task awaited us and our ancestors.

In the century in which we were born, a task awaited us that had a dual nature. On the one hand, given that the state is still deficient from a spiritual perspective, we have to work to raise its level. On the other hand, we must preserve and protect what we do have. In *Parashat Kedoshim* and *Acharei Mot*, there appear time after time expressions that mention keeping and preserving: "And you shall keep My statutes." The keeping of the guard refers to *terumot* and *ma'aserot*, on the Torah level or the rabbinic level. It seems to me that in parallel fashion we can understand that the keeping and preservation about which we are commanded is not only in relation to one specific *mitzva* or another, but rather to an entire institution, as we find with regard to preservation of the *kehuna* (priesthood) in *Parashat Korach* (*Bemidbar* 18:1-7). This command applies first to the priests, but also to the rest of Israel – all must strive to preserve the institution of *kehuna*, which embodies the vision of "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It is impossible to guard this in passive manner. If the priesthood is to be preserved, there must be positive sanctification, development and nurturing.

Similarly, if you wish to preserve the sanctity of the people and the land it is not enough to sit on the sidelines. When you come into the land, you must roll up your sleeves and work, and try to preserve and raise the level of sanctity and leadership; you must plant trees and make sure that those trees don't become *asherot*.

This is the spirit in which a Jew – following in the footsteps of Moshe – yearns to fulfill the *mitzvot* in the Land of Israel, including those concerning the appointment of a king. We, who are residents both of the *beit midrash* and of the Land of Israel, and who are devoted both to the Torah and to the institutions that enable the realization of the destiny of *Keneset Israel*, are summoned to a mission. It is a mission focused on serving God, in both the narrow and the broad sense. This is the Torah, the Land and the State of Israel.

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