

EYE OF THE LAND

by Shlomo Katz

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Today's Learning:
Berachot 4:6-7
Orach Chaim 43:8-44:1
Daf Yomi: Yoma 19
Yerushalmi Yoma 12

At the very beginning of his Torah commentary, Rashi suggests that the Torah should have begun in the middle of our parashah (specifically with chapter 12). It is there that we find the first mitzvah that was given to Bnei Yisrael as a group, and what is the primary purpose of the Torah if not to convey the mitzvot?!

Rashi explains that the Torah begins with creation because (quoting Tehilim 111:6), "The strength of His deeds He told to His nation." Hashem wanted the world to know that He created the world and He is free to give Eretz Yisrael to whomever He chooses.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l observes that there is another lesson conveyed by the story that the Torah tells up to this point. It is how Yisrael came to be (in the words of the same verse), "His nation." Without that introduction, the coming story of the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai would have been incomplete or even unintelligible.

What does Avraham do in the Book of Bereishit that makes the Jewish people unique? Why, as we will read in the coming weeks, were Avraham's descendants chosen to receive the Torah? R' Soloveitchik explains that Avraham was the first person, and Judaism was the first religion, that progressed from recognizing the existence of G-d to recognizing an obligation to live according to His will. Many ancient societies recognized that there is a G-d, but no society concluded that that G-d cared how they lived their lives.

There is another, related lesson: G-d chose Avraham, but Avraham chose G-d. The Torah until now is a prelude to the giving of the Torah because it teaches that Hashem did not give us the Torah against our will. Rather, the Torah is the treaty which memorializes the covenant between Avraham's family and Hashem. (Quoted in Efneh Ve'eshneh p.137)

"It [the plague of locusts] will cover the surface [literally: the 'eye'] of the land so that one will not be able to see the land." (10:5)

Why are the words "the land" repeated? Why didn't the Torah say, "[S]o that one will not be able to see it"? R' Eliezer Zusia Portugal z"l (the "Skulener Rebbe") explains:

In Parashat Balak, the Jews are described as "covering the surface [literally: the 'eye'] of the land." Rashi explains that "the eye of the land" refers to Sichon and Og, who were supposed to protect the land of Moav from Bnei Yisrael but instead were killed in battle. Based on that interpretation, the "eye of the land" in our verse may be Pharaoh, and the Torah is foretelling that the locust will be so dense that Pharaoh, the protector of the land of Egypt, will be helpless against them. (Noam Eliezer)

"It is a Pesach offering to Hashem." (12:11)

Rashi explains that the name "Pesach" derives from the word "skipping." He writes: "For Hashem skipped over the houses of the Jews which were among the houses of the Egyptians. He jumped from Egyptian to Egyptian, and the Jew was in the middle. As for you, serve Him for the sake of Heaven."

What does Rashi's last comment mean and how is it related to his explanation of the word "Pesach"? R' Nosson David Rabinowitz z"l (whose 69th yahrzeit is tomorrow; grandfather of the present "Munkatcher Rebbe") explains as follows:

Sometimes a person witnesses a powerful event which inspires him to strengthen his service of Hashem. However, that is not the ideal. Rather, we should serve Hashem because, and only because, that is His will.

Moshe was concerned that the plague of the firstborn would have an undesirable effect on Bnei Yisrael. This is why, according to Rashi, Moshe instructed them: "As for you, do not serve Hashem

because you will see Him skipping over your houses. Instead, serve Him for the sake of Heaven."

In this light, we can understand why the Korban Pesach is referred to (in verse 12:43) as a "chok" - a mitzvah whose reason is unknown. Although the Korban Pesach (whose blood was placed on the doorposts to identify a Jewish house) recalls the great miracle that Hashem performed and our gratitude to Him, that should not be our reason for performing the mitzvah. Rather, we should observe the mitzvah of Korban Pesach as if its reason is unknown to us.

The Torah tells us (12:50), "All of Bnei Yisrael did as Hashem had commanded Moshe and Aharon, so did they do." The Torah is informing us that Bnei Yisrael took Moshe's message to heart and they sacrificed the Korban Pesach solely for the sake of the mitzvah. (Ve'eileh Ha'davarim She'ne'emru L'David p.101)

"It shall come to pass when Hashem will bring you to the land of the Canaanites . . . And it shall be a sign upon your arm and an ornament between your eyes . . ." (13:11 & 16)

The gemara (Kiddushin 37b) asks: Why are the entry into Eretz Yisrael and the mitzvah of tefilin mentioned in the same paragraph? The gemara answers: It was taught in the yeshiva of Rabbi Yishmael, "Do this mitzvah so that you will enter the Land."

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (died 1935; first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Palestine) explains the connection between tefilin and Eretz Yisrael as follows:

Tefilin, by virtue of where they are worn, parallel the heart and the mind, the organs through which the neshamah and the intellect reveal their powers. However, the heart and the mind, being physical, are subject to man's will, and the powers of the neshamah and the intellect can be lessened by the choices man makes. Therefore, Hashem commanded that we wear tefilin, a crown which is separate from the body and which therefore will be unaffected by man's will. To the contrary, the holiness of the tefilin causes that rays of "light" to spread out over the entire body and reach the heart and the mind. As a result, the power of the intellect predominates over the power of the will.

R' Kook continues: The gemara (Menachot 44a) states: "One who wears tefilin lengthens his life." Why?

Long life usually is dependent on having a healthy constitution. Thus, the person who lives long is not necessarily the most fortunate, for the stronger and healthier a person is, the more likely he is to be challenged by physical desires and other destructive traits. The exception is a person who wears tefilin, because the external "mind" and "heart" which the tefilin are, rein in this person's desires and reinstate his intellect to its proper place. For such a person, long life is a true blessing.

The uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael lies in the fact that there a Jew can reach such a lofty level that the

bounty of the land enhances, rather than challenges, his spiritual growth. This explains why the Torah repeatedly promises material blessings, the very things that a wise person avoids. When a Jew is under the influence of his tefilin, he can live in Eretz Yisrael and enjoy its bounty without being challenged thereby. (Chavash Pe'er, Drush 1)

Letters from Our Sages

The following is an excerpt from an open letter by R' Zvi Hirsch Shapira z"l just after Yom Kippur 5666 (1905/06). The author was the "Munkatcher Rebbe" and an important posek/halachic authority. The letter appears in Igrot Shappirin, page 120.

To our dear brothers, Bnei Yisrael, believers the sons of believers, "Hashem said about them, 'They shall live'." [Yishayah/Isaiah 38:16]

A rumor has spread in the camp of the Hebrews and among the multitudes, that the year that has come upon us for good is the year of the redemption and the arrival of mashiach without a doubt. This is said because they found some books that hint that this is the year of the redemption. Based on this they have publicized rumors, booklets, pamphlets, and proclamations promising for certain that this is the year. My spirit ailed me and my heart was sad because of this, the ruination of the daughter of my people, G-d forbid, for from this can come greater heresy, a desecration of G-d's Name, embarrassment for those of our brothers Bnei Yisrael who are believers, and incitement by our enemies against our holy and true beliefs. Therefore, I have found myself obligated to proclaim and announce in public - listen to me and the good Hashem listen to you.

Firstly, Chazal said in Sanhedrin (Our Sages said in the Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin -- 99a, discussing Yishayah 63:4): "For a day of vengeance is in My heart and the year of My redemption has come." Rabbi Yochanan interpreted, 'I have revealed [the time of the redemption] to My heart, but not [so-to-speak] to my other organs.' R' Shimon ben Lakish interpreted, 'I have revealed it to My heart but not to the angels.' Similar teachings appear in the Zohar in several places. If He has not revealed the year of the redemption to the angels - rather it is a secret concealed and sealed in the heart of the One Whose Name Is Blessed alone - how can we say that it is revealed to humans in This World, even to tzaddikim? . . .

[Regarding the many sages who have predicted that mashiach would come in a certain year, R' Shapira explains as follows:] There is no contradiction, for it all depends on repentance, and when our deeds merit, then Hashem will send the year of the redemption. However, there is no foundation to the dates that are foretold in books, whether early or late, for in reality, the true date is sealed in His heart alone. Those tzaddikim [who foretold a year] did so in order to plead for mercy, that is, as a prayer. The hints that they found in Tanach merely tell us that these times are more suited to the redemption if we repent . . .

Therefore, 'Do this and live' [Bereishit 42:18]. Do not think in particular about this year; rather, let us wait for him whenever he comes and let us believe that we will merit the coming of mashiach soon in our days, with mercy. In the merit of observing the words of Chazal who cautioned us not to be among those who calculate the End, may Hashem help us to return to Him truthfully among the Congregation of Israel . . . [Signed] Zvi Hirsch Shapira

P.S. Please publicize this letter and post it on the walls of the shuls and study halls.

Sponsored by Martin and Michelle Swartz in memory of Martin's grandmother, Elise Hofmann a"h

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