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The Secret Sanctity of the Land

Rav Yeshayahu Shapira (1895-1945), belovedly known as the *Admor HaChalutz*, compiled the teachings of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook zt"l in a small sefer he titled, *Eretz Chefetz*. Rabbi Shapira was a Chassidic Zionist pioneer, the brother of the famed Rabbi Kalonimus Kalman Shapira Hy"d, often known by his sefer, the *Aish Kodesh*. Rabbi Yeshayahu Shapira settled in Eretz Yisrael in 1920, leaving behind the glory of leading a great Chassidic court in order to physically help build up the Land.

The following is the first entry in his profound volume (*Eretz Chefetz* 1:1):

"Eretz Yisrael is not an external entity, [it is not] an external acquisition for the nation, [it is not] a means to achieving a collective whole, [it is not intended to] strengthen the nation's physical existence, or even its spirituality. [Rather,] Eretz Yisrael is an essential unit which is eternally bound to the life of the nation; united by inner characteristics to its existence"

In the above passage Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook is teaching that the Land of Israel carries singular importance for the Jew and the Jewish people. It is unlike any

other mitzvah. The Holy Land is integral to the very life and existence of the nation. Rav Kook, throughout his lifetime, passionately taught that we are entering a unique era in our nation's revitalization with the return to the motherland.

Indeed, the deep spiritual significance of Eretz Yisrael has its roots in the Jew's first encounter with the Land. The mystical work of the Zohar teaches that when our forefather Avraham was introduced to the Land of Israel for the very first time Hashem informed Avraham that there is an inner dimension of the Land that even he cannot comprehend. "The power of the Land is deep and concealed" (*Zohar*, 1:78a).

The following statement once uttered by the Gerrer Rebbe beautifully captures the idea expressed in the Zohar: *B'nei Yisrael tzrichin le'Eretz Yisrael, ve'Eretz Yisrael tzricha le'benei Yisrael*", "*The people of Israel need the Land of Israel and the Land of Israel needs the people of Israel.*" (*Sfat Emet. Parshat Maasei*, תרמז-ח).

When we speak of the intrinsic bond that exists between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel, Rashi's first teaching on the Torah is vital. Rashi cites Rav Yitzchak who says that since the Torah is primarily a book of laws, it should have commenced with the commandment of the new moon (Shemot 12:2), the first law that was addressed to all of Jewry as a nation. He explains that the reason for the Torah's narrative of Creation is to establish that God is the Sovereign of the

universe: *He declared to His people the power of his works in order to give them the heritage of the nations (Psalms 111:6)*. If the nations accuse Israel of banditry for seizing the lands of the seven nations of Canaan, Israel can respond, “The entire universe belongs to God. He created it and He granted it to whomever He deemed fit. This was His desire to give it to them and then it was His desire to take it from them and give it to us.” (*Rashi, Bereshit 1:1*)

Rav Kook’s eminent disciple, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, expounded on the verse in Tehillim quoted above by Rashi: “He declared to His people...”. The verse does not say that God announced this axiom to the world. Rather, it is most important for the Jew to know and be convinced that the Land of Israel is our chosen Land and then, and only then, will the world follow suit. Regrettably, we as a people often forget the Land’s centrality and its spiritually-saturated composition. (*Mei Marom, Nemukei Mikraot, Parshat Bereshit*)

Rashi, once again towards the end of the five books of the Torah, makes a remarkable assertion concerning the Land of Israel. In the paragraph we recite daily as part of *Kriat Shema* (Devarim 11:18), Rashi cites the *Sifre* that the juxtaposition of these commandments with the threat of exile (v.17) is meant to teach the Jew that he should observe the commandments even when in exile, so that when the redemption occurs, they will not have forgotten how to perform them. This comment plainly implies that the commandments do not have their complete significance when they are observed outside of the Land. Only in the Land do the observance of mitzvot have their magnitude of holiness.

In a similar vein, Rav Kook offered an

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exquisite interpretation regarding the talmudic episode of the sage Rabbi Abba, who was born and schooled in Babylonia, kissing the rocks of Acre upon arriving in the Land of Israel (Ketubot 112a). Rav Kook found meaning in the fact that Rabbi Abba pressed his lips specifically to the stones. Had he kissed the earth, we might have thought that he was enamored by those mitzvot that are outgrowths of the soil, such as bringing the first fruits to the Temple or separating tithes from fruits and vegetables. To put it in the terms above, one might have said that he expressed his recognition of the Land’s manifest holiness. But a gesture of love to rocks cannot possibly carry this meaning. Rabbi Abba’s love for the Land of Israel was unconditional and based on its essential holiness. (Raz, *Angel Among Men*, p. 272)

A similar episode is reported on the final page in Tractate *Ketubot* (112b): Rabbi Chiya bar Gamda would roll in the dust of the Land as it is stated, “For Your students take pleasure in her stones, and love her dust” (Psalms 102:15). Rashi, who typically offers his elucidation in order to clarify the text, in this case simply repeats the verse verbatim from Psalms without any further explanation. This seems strange.

Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook says that Rashi duplicates the verse without adding any information, to emphasize the importance of ‘her stones’ and the intrinsic *kedusha* of the Land, in and of itself (‘Torat Eretz Yisrael,’ Samson, p. 229).

Another answer to the above question points out that Rashi actually omitted one word, *sh’ne’emar* (‘as it says in the verse’) - which is found in the text of the Gemara. Thus, Rashi is teaching that Rabbi Chiya bar Gamda did not engage in the practice simply because he felt compelled based on the command expressed in the verse. Rather, he was naturally drawn to the Land. He felt a deep love and attachment which fused him with the Land itself. (Cited in the name of The *Imrei Emes*, the fourth Gerrer Rebbe, see ‘The Talmudic Sages Love for Eretz Yisrael,’ Eretz Yisrael Yomi, Arutz Sheva).

Today, ushering in the 76th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, we should feel inspired to express thanks and be filled with wonder seeing our nation’s growth and achievements in the Holy Land. In the early 1900’s, still quite a few years before the founding of the State, Rav Kook communicated his profound gratefulness for playing a distinctive role in helping to rebuild Eretz Yisrael:

“Blessed is the Lord who made for me this soul, and through His supernal maneuverings brought me to work - with my limited power - on the mountains of Israel at this fortunate time that the flow of life for the people of the Lord upon its soil is being gathered in; to be one of those aiding in the work of Heaven; to be one of those orchestrating the holy work, to “establish in Zion a fortress, a costly cornerstone” (Isaiah 28:16). (*Eretz Chefetz* 8:8).

May each one of us merit to discover our distinct role in strengthening the people of Israel in the Land of Israel and assist in reaching the desired and ultimate goal of the *geulah shleimah*. ■

Rabbi Goldscheider is the author of the newly published book ‘Torah United’ (OU Press), featuring divrei Torah on the weekly parasha from Rav Kook, Rabbi Solovetichik, and the Chassidic Masters.

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