

Parashat Masei

Appreciating Our Promised Land

Ingathering the Exiles in the Merit of Working the Land

It never ceases to amaze me that we have the privilege to live on the Holy Land, and enjoy her fruits. The other day the students of B'erot harvested a huge crop of figs, from the blessed tree that we planted about 15 years ago, which has now assumed incredible dimensions. In our current Torah & Gardening Summer Session, I teach about how we can show appreciation for Hashem's great gift of the land by working it. We develop a relationship with the land when we enrich and loosen the soil, plant seeds, add compost and weed out undesirables. Then, we mustn't forget to enjoy just sitting in our garden on Shabbat and delighting in its gifts. The Vilna Gaon teaches how the ingathering of the exiles occurs through the merit of working the land and keeping the mitzvot dependent on the land (*Kol HaTor* 3:7). The mitzvot that we fulfill when we work the land such as keeping *Shemita* (the sabbatical year for the land), taking tithes, separating different crops to avoid *kelayim* (hybrids), not benefitting from the fruits of a tree during its first three years etc. speed up the redemption process and bring about the ingathering of the exiles. In *Parashat Masai*, which concludes the *Book of Bamidbar*, the Israelites have reached the end of their 40-year journey in the wilderness, ready to enter the Land of Israel. This final leg of their journey, the last of 48 stops enumerated in our *parasha*, parallels our own transitional era. We are now at the verge of redemption, when we must complete conquering the land of Israel and rebuild our Temple. The mitzvot given to the Israelites when they were about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Land of Israel, therefore pertain particularly to our time.

Eternal Entirety of the Land of Israel

The main mitzvah given to the Children of Israel in *Parashat Masai*, is far from being politically correct at our current time. Hashem commands Moshe to tell the Israelites that not only must they conquer the land of Israel, they, moreover, are to dispossess the prior inhabitants of their land, and drive them out:

ספר במדבר פרק לג (נא) דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: (נב) וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם אֶת כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנִיכֶם וְאַבְדֶתֶם אֶת כָּל מַשְׁכֵּי־תָם וְאֶת כָּל צִלְמֵי מַסַּכְתֶּם תִּאבְדוּ וְאֶת כָּל בְּמוֹתָם תִּשְׁמִידוּ: (נג) וְהוֹרַשְׁתֶּם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְיִשְׁבְתֶם בָּהּ כִּי לָכֵן נִתְּנִי אֶת הָאָרֶץ לְרִשְׁתָּ אֹתָהּ:
 “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When you cross the Jordan [River] into the land of Canaan, then you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land from before you. You shall destroy all their figured objects, and destroy all their molten images, and demolish all their cult places. You shall drive out the inhabitants of the land, and settle in it; for I have assigned the land for you to possess” (*Bamidbar* 33:51-53).

Hilltop youth and other ‘zealots’ try to take this command into their own hands, whereas the Israeli government goes to the other extreme of negotiating with the ‘Palestinians’ to allow them to possess land within the proper boundaries of the Promised Land – Divinely granted to the Children of Israel. It is incredible how the political melody has changed since the beginning of the State of Israel. Then, the most leftist party was more hawkish than the rightwingers of today. The early secular Zionists understood the indisputable eternal Jewish right to the Land of Israel. While

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chairman of the Jewish Agency, David Ben Gurion said the following in a speech at the Twentieth Zionist Congress in Basel: “No individual Jew is able to give up his rights to the existence of the Jewish nation and to Eretz Yisrael. No Jewish entity has the authority to do this. Even all the Jews living today do not have the authority to surrender any specific portion of the land. This is a right that has been preserved for the Jewish nation, throughout its generations... The Jewish nation is not obligated or bound by any such surrender. Our right to this land, in its entirety, is valid for eternity, and until the complete redemption we will not abandon this historic right.” I do not follow politics much, but it's clear to me that our security depends on our firm belief in the eternal Jewish right to the entirety of the Land of Israel, without compromise.

Peaceful Means of Taking Possession

Regarding the mitzvah to drive out the nations from the Land of Israel, Rashi explains, YOU SHALL DRIVE OUT THE LAND –This means that you shall dispossess it of its inhabitants, and then YOU MAY SETTLE IN IT, i.e. you will be able to remain in it. However, if not, you will not be able to remain in it (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 33:53). Rashi's point is evident from every terrorist attack that Israel has suffered. Yet, many contemporary Rabbis rule that this mitzvah does not apply in our time, because the other nations now living in our land are not idol-worshippers. Moreover, righteous nations who are neither Canaanites nor Amalek may live peacefully side by side with us in the Land of Israel as long as they keep the Seven Mitzvot of B'nei Noach, and recognize Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel. All contemporary halachic authorities agree that there is a need to distinguish between non-Jews who are faithful to the State of Israel and abide by the law, and the enemies of the State of Israel who seek its demise and encourage terror against its citizens. However, I believe that even with the enemies whose residence in the Land of Israel threaten our very existence, we must deal in the most peaceful way possible. As Rav Kook writes, “We pay the full price for every piece of property in our own land, even though our rights to the holy land never ceased... As much as possible, our taking possession is only through peaceful means and purchase... so that the nations of the world will have no claims against us” (*Ma'amarei Ha'Re'aya* 252).

The Boundaries of Israel and the Purpose of Creation

The Torah recognizes the importance of delineating the borders of the land, in order to know the exact parameters of the mitzvah to conquer the land. Chapter 34 of *Bamidbar* therefore gives the detailed borders of the land. The same word (*totzotav*), “its limit,” describes the border in each of the four directions:

סַפֵּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פֶּרֶק לַד (ה) וְנִסַּב הַגְּבוּל מֵעֶצְמוֹן נַחֲלֵה מִצְרַיִם וְהָיָה תוֹצְאוֹתָיו הַיָּמָה:

“The border shall turn from Atzmon towards the Brook of Egypt, and its תוֹצְאוֹתָיו/totzotav –its limits shall be at the Sea” (*Bamidbar* 34:5).

Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh explains that the numeric value 913 of the word תוֹצְאוֹתָיו/totzotav is identical with the first word in the Torah: בְּרֵאשִׁית/bereishit – in the beginning. The boundaries of the Land of Israel are intrinsically linked to the very purpose of creation – establishing a place for Hashem to dwell within the physical world.

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Rashi asks why does the Torah begin with the account of creation rather than with the first mitzvah? He explains that in the future the nations will accuse the Jewish people of stealing the Land of Israel. Therefore, the Torah begins by establishing that Hashem is the One Who created the entire world. He decided to grant the Land of Israel to the Jewish people (Rashi *Bereishit* 1:1). This commentary is quite prophetic today – since the founding of the modern state of Israel – much of the world indeed accuses us of having robbed the Holy Land.

Israel's Expanding Borders

The boundaries of the land are described several times in the Tanach, with slight differences between each description. Just as the journeys and the encampments in the desert were part of an ongoing process of change and growth, so too, are the borders of Israel. Rabbi Trugman writes beautifully about how our right to live in the Holy Land is a privilege directly dependent on our actions and the moral and ethical fiber of the Jewish society created in the Land. The same holds true for the physical borders of the Land: the greater the Jewish people's merit and degree of holiness, the more the holiness of the Land will increase and its borders will expand accordingly. Ultimately, in the Messianic era, the holiness of Israel will radiate throughout the world. Then the borders of the Holy Land will expand to encompass the entire world.

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