

*Parashat V'Etchanan*

**Do We Need to Make a Favorable Impression on the Gentiles?**

**Supreme Settlements**

I had the privilege to grow up in a very organized and clean country. In Denmark, all the trains arrive and depart exactly on time! The people rarely throw candy wrappers in the street, and no one pushes anyone or takes his place in the supermarket lines. If you drop your wallet, someone will make great efforts to return it to you even if they have to run up myriads of winding steps after you. The Jewish people still have what to learn from this kind of *Derech Eretz* (good manners). Our longwinded exile, with its countless prosecutions, pogroms and terrorism has kept us traumatized and submerged in suffering. All these predicaments have deterred us from becoming the perfected community we have the potential to be. During exile, the focus has been on achieving individual perfection, but now that we have finally returned to our own holy land, it is time to create spiritual communities that shine their light to the entire planet. I believe that the settlements of Gush Katif served as exemplary communities, where harmonious families lived together in unity on their clean, green, treasured land. We are now mourning eleven years since the traumatic expulsion from Gush Katif, known in the Jewish world for its bug-free greens and in the entire world for making the desert bloom with cherry tomatoes and geraniums. A great percentage of Israel's produce export derived from Gush Katif. For example, 65% of organic produce; 90% of bug-free leafy vegetables; 95% of cherry tomatoes; and 60% of herb exports. We will never fathom how our nation could be so misled as to demolish its supreme settlements, especially since this cruel expulsion only caused more terrorism and brought us further away from attaining true peace. We will never know why Hashem allowed the communities of Gush Katif – which accomplished so much in only 38 years – to be utterly overturned. Perhaps, it was in order that the accomplishments of these communities could be diffused into all of Israel, as the people of Gush Katif brought their radiant relic to the rest of Israel wherever they relocated. We surely have much to learn from them.

**Why Do We Care What the 'Goyim' Say?**

As Moshe prepares the Children of Israel for their forthcoming settlement in the Holy Land, he teaches them Hashem's rules and regulations for building perfected communities in the Land of Israel:

**ספר דברים פרק ד**

(ה) ראה למדתי אתכם חקים ומשפטים כאשר צונו השם אלהי לעשות כן בקרב הארץ אשר אתם באים שמה לרשתה: (ו) ושמרתם ועשיתם כי הוא חכמתכם ובינתכם לעיני העמים אשר ישמעו את כל החקים האלה ואמרו: רק עם חכם ונבון הגוי הגדול הזה: (ז) כי מי גוי גדול אשר לו אלהים קרבים אליו כהשם אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו: (ח) ומי גוי גדול אשר לו חקים ומשפטים צדיקים ככל התורה הזאת אשר אנכי נתן לפניכם היום:

“See, I have imparted to you statutes and laws, as Hashem my G-d has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who on hearing all these *chukim* (statutes) will say, ‘Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.’ For what great nation has a G-d so close at hand as is Hashem our G-d whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Torah that I set before you this day?” (*Devarim* 4:5-8).

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Moshe emphasizes that we need to observe Hashem's laws "for that is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations." Why is it so important to make a favorable impression upon the non-Jewish nations? Many vehement Zionists raise justified objections regarding excessive concern with what the *goyim* (Gentiles or non-Jews) will say. True, in the political arena, we have witnessed that it is impossible to please the nations – "We give them a finger and they demand the hand." So why does our Torah emphasize the importance of being a light unto the nations? We can find a clue to this question in the words of the prophet that reflect Moshe's message: "...I will also make you a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (*Yesha'yahu* 49:6). The role of the Jewish people is to be the ambassador and light-bearer for Hashem, facilitating the Divine redemption reaching to the four corners of the earth and encompassing every single creature. Therefore, it is vital for those who keep Hashem's Torah meticulously to radiate wisdom and morality to the rest of the world.

### The Importance of Secular Scholarship & Agriculture in Israel

Commentators ask why the Torah expects the nations to be impressed by the statutes of the Torah that do not make sense to limited human understanding? When we experience a person's wisdom and righteousness, we learn to trust this person to the extent that we will comply with his wishes, even if he asks us to do something irrational. Likewise, when the nations see that Israel keeps the *mishpatim* (laws that do make logical sense), which are organized in beautiful order, they will accept that even the *chukim*, whose rationale is unknown, have deeper hidden reasons. Ultimately, by experiencing positive interactions with Jews and Israel, nations will become ready to trust the instructions of the final Mashiach. For this reason, the Vilna Gaon emphasized the obligation to learn the seven scientific wisdoms, which sanctify Hashem's name and bring the redemption closer. He also noted that this knowledge is vital for perceiving the depths of the wisdom of the Torah. It was in order to fulfill the Torah directive, "To make you high above all nations... in praise, and in fame, and in glory..." (*Devarim* 26:19), that the Vilna Gaon studied secular subjects and authored books on Hebrew grammar and geometry (*Kol HaTor*, Chapter 5b, *Sha'ar Be'er Sheva*). Whenever the Torah mentions the word תְּהִלָּה/*tehilah* – praise in connection with Israel or the land of Israel it is referring to the wisdom of Israel in the eyes of the nations (*Ibid.*). The Vilna Gaon also emphasized cultivating the land of Israel and making it fruitful as a way of becoming a light to the nations. As it states, "For as the earth brings forth her growth, and as the garden makes her seeds spring forth; so will Hashem, G-d, cause to sprout forth righteousness and תְּהִלָּה/*tehilah* – praise before all the nations." The nations will recognize the wisdom of Israel when we dwell on our land and work it so that it produces great blessings" (*Kol HaTor*, *ibid.*). This prophesy was actually fulfilled when the neighboring Arabs applauded Gush Katif's first cherry tomatoes sprouting forth in the desert.

### Torah Ethics and Litter-Free Environment

What can we do to become "a light to the nations" in the case that we are unable to engage in productive agriculture or secular scholarship? The Torah teaches us moral integrity. The development of kindness, generosity, compassion, forgiveness and gratitude are main tenants of the Torah. Immersing ourselves vigilantly in the keeping of the minutiae of the laws regarding kosher foods, Shabbat observance etc. must go hand in hand with strictness in keeping the ethics of the Torah in interpersonal relationships. There is no such thing as, "religious Jews cheat in business!" If someone is dishonest in business then he is transgressing the precepts of the Torah, and certainly doesn't

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deserve the title: 'religious Jew.' Our power of speech is what defines us as humans. The woman of valor only "opens her mouth in wisdom and the Torah of kindness is on her tongue" (*Mishlei* 31:26). So let us think carefully before we let those slippery words of complaint, judgement, anger or resentment slither out of our lips. We also show consideration for others by keeping our noise level down. There is nothing more annoying than when people yell, scream or honk unnecessarily in the street. The Torah teaches that our voices should not be heard outside of our homes (*Tehillim* 144:14). So if you have a fight with your husband, at least make sure to close your windows! I cannot emphasize enough the importance of personal cleanliness and keeping our environment litter free. It is essential to educate our children and grandchildren from an early age never to throw garbage on the ground, and especially not on the holy earth of Israel. If the Danes can show self-restraint and hold on to their ice-cream wrapper until they pass a garbage can, certainly no less is expected of every Torah Jew!