

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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Parashat Shemini

Why Does Eating Kosher Food Mindfully Help Us Merit Living in The Holy Land?

Why Were Many Newcomers to Torah Vegetarian Before Embracing the Torah Path?

My husband and I were both vegetarians for a period before joining a yeshiva and returning to the Torah path. We soon discovered that many other ba'alei teshuvah shared a similar experience – instinctively cutting out meat a while before embracing the Torah path. Looking back, it's clear this wasn't a coincidence. For many of us, abstaining from meat was an unconscious preparation for spiritual sensitivity – a distancing from the unrefined in pursuit of the pure. Returning to meat wasn't easy. It was even more challenging for us environmentalists who cared deeply about animal life and found the concept of animal sacrifice especially difficult to accept. It took heartfelt guidance from our beloved teacher, Rabbi Goldstein zt"l, who explained that sacrifices are not merely ritual slaughter but acts of elevation. The animals, he said, willingly stretched their necks – not as victims, but as offerings ascending to a higher spiritual state. "When a Jew eats meat mindfully," he taught us, "the animal becomes part of something far greater – not just a human being, but a holy Jew." This is especially true at a Shabbat table where the food's energy is directed toward singing holy tunes, sharing words of Torah, and mitzvot. Rabbi Goldstein encouraged us to print menu cards for our Shabbat meals that proclaimed: "Our table is a *mizbeach* (altar), and our food is a *korban* (sacrifice)." We would joyfully recite this sentence each time we broke bread, transforming our meals into a form of *avodah* (spiritual service). I believe our temporary abstinence from meat helped purify our hearts and made us more receptive to the truth of Torah. Our yearning for holiness led us to intuitively reject impure, non-kosher meat, which is a spiritually numbing food that dulls the soul and clouds inner perception. After learning the laws of kashrut, most of us gradually returned to eating meat, this time with reverence and discernment, understanding that kosher meat – consumed with mindful intention – is not a descent into the physical but a pathway for spiritual elevation.

How is the Responsibility of Holiness Distinguished in the Land of Israel?

Parashat Shemini centers on the sanctity of the Mishkan and the strict requirements for Divine service. For many of us who returned to Torah observance, the process of spiritual growth began with refining what we ate and how we lived here in the Holy Land. It is no coincidence that the Torah places great emphasis on holiness in physical acts, especially in eating. The sanctity of the Mishkan – the dwelling place of the Shechinah – required preparation, purity, and boundaries. Likewise, the sanctity of the Land of Israel depends on how we live within it and sanctify the physical, Eretz Yisrael, even the physical becomes spiritual. Being careful to eat only kosher food – from which the blood of the animal has been removed – is one way to merit living in the holy land.

ספר ויקרא פרק יא פסוק מג

אַל תִּשְׁקְצוּ אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם בְּכָל הַשָּׂרֵץ הַשָּׂרֵץ וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ בָהֶם וְנִטְמַתֶּם בָּם:

"You shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping creature that creeps, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, that you should become impure through them" (*Vayikra* 11:43).

The Ramban explains that the holiness of the land is bound to our actions. The mitzvot were primarily given to be fulfilled in the Land of Israel, and it is only here that the Shechinah can truly dwell. Since the Land of Israel, the center of the inhabited world, is the inheritance of Hashem, and specially designated for His Name, when dwelling in His Land we must be sanctified in our conduct, to be worthy of His presence.

This is especially so in matters of forbidden relationships and other mitzvot tied to the purity of body and soul. That is why the Torah warns: “Keep all My statutes and ordinances... so that the Land does not vomit you out” (*Vayikra* 20:22). Eretz Yisrael does not tolerate impurity. Outside the Land – even though all belongs to Hashem – purity is never complete due to the ruling spiritual forces, and nations assigned their own celestial guardians. But in the Land of Yisrael, Hashem alone is our G-d, and we are uniquely bound to Him. The fullness of Divine service is meant to take place specifically in the Land of Israel (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25).

What is the Connection Between the Holiness of the Mishkan and the Land of Israel?

Eretz Yisrael is not just a backdrop for holiness – it is a living participant in the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people. The Torah teaches that the land will “vomit out” those who defile it (*Vayikra* 18:28), emphasizing that Eretz Yisrael cannot tolerate sin. The *Sifra* elaborates that the land itself becomes defiled through immoral behavior and, as a consequence, expels its inhabitants (*Sifra Acharei Mot* 13). This spiritual sensitivity distinguishes the Holy Land from all other lands. Entering Egypt was optional, but entering the Land of Israel is a Divine obligation. In Egypt, whether or not Bnei Yisrael followed Hashem’s will, they were allowed to remain. But Eretz Yisrael is different. If you fulfill the will of the Creator, then the land of Canaan is given to you. But if not, you are exiled from it. As it states: “Let not the land vomit you out for defiling it” (*Vayikra* 18:28); (*Sifre Parashat Ekev Piska* 2). This makes living in the Land of Israel not just a privilege, but a responsibility. Holiness is not an automatic consequence of being in a holy place – it must be cultivated through Torah, mitzvot, and inner refinement. The connection between the Mishkan and the Land is rooted in this shared sanctity. Just as the Shechinah only rested in the Mishkan when Israel was purified, so too does it rest in the Land only when its inhabitants live with spiritual integrity. As Rav Moshe Cordovero teaches, the desert generation experienced the spiritual reality of Eretz Yisrael even before entering its borders – for the air, atmosphere, and angels of the Land accompanied the Shechinah wherever it rested. “... the air of the Land of Israel went with the generation of the desert... with the Shechinah, which traveled with them... until the entry into the Land of Israel, to its appropriate place. There is the resting place of sanctity, for there is the gateway to heaven” (*Pardes Rimonim* 25:2). Thus, the Land of Israel is not just the destination of our national journey – it is the vessel for Divine presence. Its holiness responds to our behavior. When we live with purity and intention, the Shechinah dwells among us. But when we defile the Land, it recoils. Just as the Shechinah departed the Mishkan when sanctity was breached, so too does the Land expel those who abandon the path of holiness.

Why is Eating in Holiness the Kosher Pathway to Divine Awareness?

Parashat Shemini includes the foundational laws of kashrut, distinguishing between pure and impure animals. “For I am Hashem who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your G-d – you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (*Vayikra* 11:45). Rashi notes that this verse implies the very act of keeping kosher elevates us to holiness (Rashi, *Vayikra* 11:45). Eating is one of the most physical and earthly acts – yet the Torah teaches that it can become an act of holiness. The food we ingest becomes part of our bodies – and thus, part of the vessels through which we serve Hashem. The *Zohar* notes that **וְנִטְמָתוּ בָם** “You shall become impure through them” (*Vayikra* 11:43) is written defectively, without an *alef*, to imply a state of sealed impurity from which there is no easy purification. Whoever defiles himself with unkosher foods is considered as if he worships idols. One who serves idolatry departs from the realm of holiness and enters the realm of impurity. So too, one who eats forbidden foods is drawn into spiritual defilement – in this world and the next. Therefore, it is written: “Do not make yourselves abominable through the animal and the bird and all that creeps on the ground, which I have set apart from you to regard as impure” (*Vayikra* 20:25); (*Zohar* III, 42a). Non-kosher food cannot be elevated; it dulls the soul and causes spiritual insensitivity that

prevents us from fully experiencing closeness with Hashem. On the other hand, eating kosher food in sanctity with the right intention can be spiritually transformative. It allows us to elevate the physical world and turn it into a vehicle for Divine service. When we bless with kavanah, eat mindfully, and use that energy to serve Hashem, we elevate the physical and transform it into an experience of spiritual connection (*Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, Chapter 7). This has particular resonance in the Land of Israel. Only kosher food – ideally grown or prepared with mitzvah-consciousness – resonates with the spiritual frequency of the Land. Eating in holiness becomes a pathway for aligning with Eretz Yisrael's inherent sanctity.

Which Efforts Can Help Us Live in True Shalom in the Holy Land?

Parashat Shemini reminds us that holiness is not about otherworldliness – it is about elevating the world we live in. Whether it is fire brought to the altar or food brought to our lips, the way we live and what we consume matter deeply. The Land of Israel magnifies this truth. It is a land that responds to the spiritual level of its inhabitants – and demands their moral and spiritual refinement. In the place where the Shechinah resides, we are invited to uplift the physical through mindful mitzvah performance. Here, eating kosher food in holiness is not only a mitzvah but a key that unlocks deeper alignment with the land's essence. The *mitzvot hateluyot ba'aretz* – agricultural commandments unique to the Land – illustrate this unity between body and soul, sustenance and sanctity. Tithes, *Terumot*, *Ma'aserot*, and the *Shemita* year remind us that even our eating must be done in covenant with Hashem. May we merit to eat in holiness, dwell in holiness, and uplift every corner of our physical lives, especially in the holy atmosphere of Eretz Yisrael. May our endeavors to live holy lives in the holy land bring about lasting shalom to the Land of Israel and the world! May our efforts to sanctify the mundane empower our holy soldiers to liberate the Land in its entirety. May our sincere service return the Shechinah in her full glory to her sacred resting place.