



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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# The Jew and His Land

*A Contemplation Likrat Yom Ha'atzmaut*

This Land has always been a part of who we are... from the very first words that launch our story...

*"Lech lecha,"* God says to Avraham, the progenitor of the Jewish People, *"mai'artzecha, mi'moladetecha, u'mi'beit avicha; el ha'aretz asher ar'eka."* "Go for yourself, from your Land, from your birthplace, and from the home of your father; to the Land that I will show you."

With this directive, two synchronous journeys are launched: the spiritual journey of the Jew across history and his physical journey, a continuous passage towards the Land of Israel. For while most of us have lived, for most of our history, in exile; we have never left the Land behind. We have dreamt of, prayed for, and steadfastly believed in, our ultimate return. That belief sustained us through the darkest of years; the certainty that our destiny will ultimately be fulfilled in the Land of Israel.

We have never been, we could not be, completely without the Land....

But, if we have needed, at the very least, the dream of the Land to survive as a nation; the Land has needed us, as well. *The relationship is symbiotic.*

Physically, this truth can be seen today in the flourishing of Israel's countryside under Jewish hands; in the greening of the deserts, in blossoming of the former swamps, in the burgeoning fields, orchards and groves.

Our contribution to the Land, however, is not relegated solely to the physical realm. Conceptually, we are taught that, *just as we need the Land to fulfill our national destiny, the Land needs us to fulfill its destiny.*

This truth is reflected in a powerful halachic phenomenon...

*At what point in history, the Rabbis ask, does the Land of Israel acquire its sanctity?*

Their answer is startling. For although the Land of Israel, according to Rabbinic thought, is "chosen" for greatness from the dawn of Creation; it is not "sanctified" until centuries later. Even Avraham's seminal journey to the Land does not trigger the Land's consecration.

Sanctification will have to wait. It will wait until the family of Hebrews becomes a nation; it will wait until we are shaped through the combined experiences of slavery, Exodus and Revelation; it will wait until our forty wilderness years have passed. *The Land of Israel is only sanctified, the rabbis maintain, with the entry of the Israelite Nation into its borders.* The Land of Israel can only be sanctified through the participation of the Nation in partnership with God.

But, even with the recognition of this principle, complications emerge...*The rabbis chronicle not one, but two, sanctifications of the Land.*

*Kedusha Rishona*, the first sanctification emerges upon the nation's first entry into the Land, under the leadership of Joshua. This sanctification is temporal, according to most authorities, dissipating with the dual exile: of the ten Tribes of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians and of the remaining tribes at the hands of the Babylonians.

The Ten Tribes disappear into the mists of history, while the Babylonian Jews retain their identity in exile. In the nation's absence, however, the sanctity of the Land of Israel dissipates. All that remains is the isolated holiness of the city of Jerusalem.

*Kedusha Shenia*, the second sanctification, unfolds with the return of a small portion of the Babylonian exiles to the Land. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nechemia, these returnees rebuild the temple and lay the groundwork for the Second Jewish Commonwealth. In the process, they sanctify the Land to a level the first sanctification could not achieve. *Kedusha Shenia* consecrates the Land in perpetuity. Even when the bulk of the Jewish nation is again exiled from Israel, this time by the Romans, the Land remains holy.

At face value, the distinction between these two courses of sanctification seems counterintuitive. Of the two national entries into the Land, the first would appear to be

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the more decisive. Why does the sanctification attained by a modest returning remnant, in the days of Ezra and Nechemia, surpass that achieved by the powerful conquest of the Land under Joshua?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggests that the answer may lie in the procedural difference between the two entries into the Land.

The conquest in Joshua's time begins in the peripheries of the Land and moves inward. Only generations later, is the heart of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, conquered by King David.

Those returning from Babylon, in contrast, journey immediately to Jerusalem and, thus, strike directly to the Land's core. The sanctification of the Land then moves outward, allowing Jerusalem's enduring holiness to infuse its surroundings.

The Rav's suggestion serves to remind us that our relationship with the Land of Israel must be based upon a spiritual foundation, if it is to achieve permanence...

An additional explanation might be offered, however, for the superiority of the second national entry into the Land under Ezra and Nechemia.

Joshua and the Israelites enter the Land of Israel when the nation is still in its infancy and is able to operate under God's direct guidance and command. The return of the exiles from Babylon, centuries later, unfolds at a very different time. The non-prophetic period of Jewish History is dawning, and no longer will God

communicate directly with His people.

Those who follow the lead of Ezra and Nechemia, as well as those who immediately precede them, must discern God's will and act upon it through their own devices. Their difficult decision to leave the comfort of the Babylonian community and face the overwhelming challenges involved in a return to their Land, thus transcends the actions of Joshua's time in value and strength.

The sanctification created through the initiative of this returning remnant, in accordance with what they believed to be God's will, therefore becomes permanent.

Emerging from the mists of history, a clear symbiotic relationship between the Jew and his Land. From the dawn of our story, *we have needed the Land and the Land has needed us. Each achieves its ultimate destiny only when paired with the other.*

The great fortune we enjoy, living in a time when the Land is once again in our hands-should never be taken for granted. Those of us who have returned home, can take pride in the fact that we, like the remnant from Babylon, have seized the initiative. Now, however, our task remains... to take full advantage of the historic opportunity granted to us. We are challenged to strike to the sanctified core of our relationship to the Land; to seek greater *kedusha* in our own lives and in the society that we create...so that, this time, *b'eizat HaShem*, our presence on the Land of Israel will bring about our full redemption. ■



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Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."