

Staking our Claim to the Land

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Perhaps the most well-known comment of Rashi among all his writings is his first comment on the Torah.

R. Yitzchak said: The Torah should have begun with [the verse] "This month shall be for you [the first month]," it being the first precept the Israelites were commanded. Why, then, does it begin with "In the beginning..."? This is because "He declared the power of His actions to His people in order to grant them the inheritance of nations (Psalms 111:6)" For, should the nations of the world say to Israel, "You are robbers, for you have taken by force the lands of the Seven Nations" they will respond to them: "All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He, He created it and gave it to whomever He saw fit. It was His will to give it to them and it was His will to take it from them and give it to us."

Rashi Bereishit 1:1

אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל [את] התורה אלא (שמות יב ב) מהחודש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו [בה] ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית, משום (תהלים קיא ו) כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים, שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:
רש"י בראשית א:א

In its most simple form, Rashi is establishing that the Torah was not intended as a record of history, but as a compendium of mitzvah obligations. Hence, the Torah should logically have begun with the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people, that of the sanctification of the New Moon in Parshat Bo.

There is, perhaps an alternate understanding of this statement of R. Yitzchak. Perhaps what he is trying to say is that there are two distinct beginnings of the calendar. There is "Bereishit barah" which describes the first moments of the very first day of God's creation, which marks the beginning of the Universal calendar. There is, however, another calendar, that of "Hachodesh hazeh lachem" which marks the beginning of the Jewish calendar. Hence, one may understand R. Yitzchak's question as: Why did the Torah choose to commence with the time frame of "Breishit barah" when it ought to more appropriately have begun with the Jewish calendar of "Hachodesh hazeh lachem." His answer is that the narrative of Sefer Bereishit helps us stake our claim to Eretz Yisrael.

While this seems like it should be an obvious selling point, we know that we have attempted to deliver this message to the nations of the world for millennia without any positive results. In what way, we may ask, has Sefer Bereishit helped us legitimize our claims to the land of Israel?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik⁶⁴ writes that there are two fundamental dimensions of kedusha, of holiness, that of time and that of place. With regards to time, the Rav determines that there is a critical fundamental distinction between qualitative and quantitative time. There are some people and cultures who live in quantitative time, measuring time by the clock and the calendar. Every day is like every other. Time moves along, but is not dynamic. The contrast to this perspective is those who live in qualitative time, measuring it not by minutes and hours but by meaningfulness. Hence, the statement of Rabbeinu Hakadosh,⁶⁵ upon witnessing a man who died in a highly heroic fashion, that “there are those who acquire their world in but a single moment.”

Viewed in this light, we can well comprehend R. Yitzchak’s statement. The time frame of Hachodeh hazeh lachem, which speaks of the holiness of time,⁶⁶ is far more suited as the starting point of the Torah than the time frame of the beginning of creation, where man wasn’t even yet created to vest the world with meaning. Its quantitative time frame is effectively captured in the closing verse of each day of creation: There was evening and there was morning, one day. There was evening and there was morning, day two, etc.

What, then, is indeed the function of the narratives of Sefer Bereishit? R. Yitzchak, in essence, suggests that there is yet a second dimension of holiness, that of place. The purpose of Sefer Bereishit is to establish the holiness of place of the land of Israel. If we were thieves who had acquired the land unlawfully, the holiness of Israel, so central to Judaism, wouldn’t possibly be viable.

There is, however, far more at stake in establishing the holiness of the land of Israel than simply being the rationale for the mitzvot hatluyot ba’aretz. As Rabbi Soloveitchik points out in his essay, civilization is primarily the product of landed people. The nomad who lacks a mental bond to his land also lacks the necessary motivation to properly cultivate it. Only the established resident of the land enjoys a symbiotic relationship with it that motivates him to till and cultivate it properly, to pray for its rain, and to combat all the elements that seek to drive him from his land. He alone can experience true holiness of place.

Even in those moments of history when God had chosen to remove us from the land of Israel, our sense of kedushat makom, or the lack of it, will determine our mental state in exile. Will we see ourselves, as Haman did, as a people spread and dispersed amongst the nations, hardly worthy of existence? If so, we will perceive our task as having to integrate not only culturally, but

⁶⁴ “Sacred and Profane: Kodesh and Chol in World Perspective” (Gesher 3:1, June 1966; Hatzedek, June 1945)

⁶⁵ Avodah Zarah 18b

⁶⁶ It is the qualitative nature of kedushat zman that allows man to extend the sanctity of Shabbat prior to and after Shabbat. From a quantitative time perspective, this would be impossible since Shabbat marks the precise beginning and end of the Seventh Day of creation. Similarly, it is the Beit Din that sanctifies Rosh Chodesh as the beginning of the new month, even if their declaration doesn’t match up, due to error or conscious intent, to the actual beginning of the new month.

even spiritually with our host nations. If, however, we retain our appreciation of the holiness of the land of Israel, we can stand proud in exile and retain our identity as a nation, feeling assured that our exile is but a temporary, even if prolonged, state of existence. Even if we are left incapable of performing the mitzvot hatluyot ba'aretz, identifying with them by incorporating them into our study and prayers will effectively replace the oxen (sacrifices) we used to offer in the temple.

Our attitude towards the holiness of place will also determine our attitude towards our present-day return to our land. When the nations of the world do indeed, as R. Yitzchak said they would, accuse us of robbing the land, will we react with suppressed guilt, or will we confidently stand vindicated of such claims, knowing that we have an innate right to our land, because it is God who has chosen to reunite us with the land he had long ago picked out for us?⁶⁷

Moreover, if Eretz Yisrael is ours as an expression of God's will, we may choose to ask if we have the right⁶⁸ to give up any portion of it? What the nations of the world claim must not determine our attitude. If we believe in our destiny, then we must be ready to state the ultimate truth regarding Israel, even if it falls on deaf ears. Just read the Bible. Is it not clear that the same God who, in the Bible's opening verses, created the world, also granted the land of Israel to us in the ensuing narratives?

Clearly, there is much at stake in our belief in the holiness of the land of Israel. It certainly serves to establish the kedushat hamakom framework for much of the body of mitzvot which have no validity without it. Equally important, it helps shape our identity even in exile, and determines our ethical validity and national consciousness throughout all of history.

Hence, argues R. Yitzchak, the Torah's opening with the calendar of "Bereishit barah" is most appropriate. Surely, without it there can be neither the holiness of place nor of time that helps provide not only the framework for mitzvot, but forms the basis of our national psyche throughout the ages.

⁶⁷ Of course, our argument has little bearing on the nature of our obligation to ease the plight of those who suffer as a result of our conquests.

⁶⁸ Except for possible issues of pikuach nefesh, as determined by halachik authority.