

Practicing Jew?

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Yeshivat Lev Hatorah

I once walked into a shul in Yerushalayim and was greeted by a friendly older gentleman. He asked where I was from and upon hearing that I was from the United States, asked, “So you’re a practicing Jew?” I thought my appearance and the fact that I was in shul made it pretty clear that I was observant, and must have looked puzzled. He continued by explaining that since I lived in *chutz la-aretz*, all the mitzvot I had ever done were just practice for when I would eventually make *aliya*. I was shocked and insulted that someone would have the audacity to suggest that whatever I had done in *chutz la-aretz* did not really count, and I was extremely confident that the older gentleman was mistaken. After all, the Mishna⁷² states explicitly that non-agricultural *mitzvot* apply outside of Eretz Yisrael.

And yet, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein⁷³ reports that Rav Yitzchak Hutner, upon arriving in Eretz Yisrael, would put on *tefillin* even if he had put them on earlier that day while travelling. He would explain that he was putting on *tefillin* again because this time they were Eretz Yisrael *tefillin*. So what, in fact, is the relationship between Eretz Yisrael and *chutz la-aretz* regarding the performance of mitzvot? Is there a qualitative difference between mitzvot done in Eretz Yisrael and those done elsewhere?

The primary source in this regard is a *Sifri*, which states as follows:

Alternatively, “You will be swiftly banished ... And you shall place these words of Mine etc.”; even though I will exile you from the Land to outside the Land, be excellent in [your performance of] mitzvot so that when you return they will not be new to you. This is comparable to a king of flesh and blood who became angry at his wife and banished her to her father’s house. He said to her: “Adorn yourself with your adornments so that when you return they will not be new to you.” So said the Holy One, He is blessed, to Israel: “My sons, be excellent in [your performance of] mitzvot so that when you return they will not be new to you.”

Sifri, Devarim 43

דבר אחר ואבדתם מהרה, ושמתם את
דברי אלה וגו', אף על פי שאני מגלה
אתכם מן הארץ לחוצה לארץ היו
מצויינים במצות שכשתחזרו לא יהו
עליכם חדשים, משל למלך בשר ודם
שכעס על אשתו וטרפה בבית אביה
אמר לה הוי מקושטת בתכשיטיך
שכשתחזרי לא יהו עליך חדשים כך
אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל בני
היו מצויינים במצות שכשתחזרו לא
יהו עליכם חדשים.

ספרי, דברים פסקא מג

⁷² Kiddushin 1:9.

⁷³ *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, p. 297.

This *Sifri*, which clearly assumes that Eretz Yisrael is the primary location of mitzva performance, is cited by Rashi in his commentary to the *pesukim* that the *Sifri* expounds.⁷⁴ Rashi, however, adds examples to the *Sifri* and writes that Hashem said to the Jewish people: “Even after you are exiled, be excellent in mitzvot: [Continue to] wear *tefillin* and place *mezuzot* [on your doorposts] so that [these mitzvot] will not be new to you when you return.”

It is instructive to note that these are examples of mitzvot that are *chovot ha-guf* (actions upon the body) and therefore apply, fully, outside of Eretz Yisrael. In fact, that is the whole point of the *Sifri*: Perhaps one might have thought that one should be exempt from all mitzvot in *chutz la-aretz* because of the difficulties they may entail in a foreign context or because our relationship with Hashem has been severed, God forbid; the *Sifri* therefore derives, based upon the juxtaposition of two *pesukim*, that we must fulfill mitzvot in *chutz la-aretz* as well.⁷⁵ Yet at the same time, the *Sifri* makes it clear that performing mitzvot in *chutz la-aretz* is a preparation for doing mitzvot in Eretz Yisrael. Thus, even mitzvot that apply in *chutz la-aretz* are meant as preparations for our being able to perform them in the optimal setting, in Eretz Yisrael. How are we to understand this in light of the clear halachic policy that non-agricultural mitzvot are obligatory in *chutz la-aretz* just as in Eretz Yisrael?

The Ramban,⁷⁶ quoting Rashi, asserts that this Midrash represents a “deep secret” and alludes to his lengthy commentary elsewhere,⁷⁷ where he writes that “עיקר כל המצוות ליושבים בארץ ה’”, all mitzvot apply principally to those who dwell in the land of God.” But how exactly does this clarify our issue?

The Maharal⁷⁸ quotes the Ramban and writes that “I will reveal the secret.” He explains that certainly all mitzvot that are *chovot ha-guf*, actions that do not have to do with the land, apply in *chutz la-aretz* as well as in Eretz Yisrael. However, the reason they were commanded in *chutz la-aretz* is so that they will not be new to us when we return to Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman⁷⁹ explains this idea in greater detail. He writes that each mitzva contains two elements: 1) The inherent, natural spiritual benefit to the person that the mitzva brings, which is the reason it was commanded to begin with. 2) The command of Hashem itself. The *Sifri* and Ramban are teaching that in *chutz la-aretz*, the command exists and one who fulfills *mitzvot* fulfills *tzivui Hashem*, the command of God. This is something of great importance that cannot be minimized and which itself is spiritually rewarding. But the natural spiritual benefit that mitzvot bring is unique to Eretz Yisrael and applies only there.

With this in mind, Rav Elchanan explains why the Ramban⁸⁰ says that the *Avot* only fulfilled mitzvot in Eretz Yisrael. They had not yet been commanded to fulfill the vast majority of the

⁷⁴ Devarim 11:18.

⁷⁵ *Shu"t Radvaz*, 6:2154.

⁷⁶ Devarim 11:18.

⁷⁷ Vayikra 18:25.

⁷⁸ *Gur Aryeh*, Devarim 11:18 note 24.

⁷⁹ *Kovetz Shiurim, Kiddushin* 141.

⁸⁰ Vayikra 18:25 and Bereishit 26:5.

mitzvot and did so only because of the inherent benefit that *mitzvot* bring. However, this natural benefit is unique to Eretz Yisrael. Therefore, in *chutz la-aretz* there was no reason to fulfill mitzvot at that time.

The Ramban himself explains⁸¹ that this also clarifies *Chazal's* statement⁸² that living in Eretz Yisrael is comparable to fulfilling all the *mitzvot*. This is not meant to assert that the mitzva of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* is as valuable as all other mitzvot combined, but is rather an expression of the fact that it is only in Eretz Yisrael that one can fulfill any of the mitzvot in the optimal fashion.⁸³

Yom Ha'atzma'ut is certainly a time to thank Hashem for the modern miracle of the creation of the State of Israel and the important step it represents in the process of *ge'ula* (redemption). However, it is also a time to reflect upon the important role that Eretz Yisrael can play in every aspect of our religious lives and its status as the ideal place to fulfill mitzvot.

⁸¹ Vayikra 18:25.

⁸² *Sifri*, Devarim 80.

⁸³ See Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar*, Shemot 20:12, who writes that this applies equally to interpersonal mitzvot. See also *Ha'amek Davar*, Devarim 8:1 and 30:6 regarding the important role of Eretz Yisrael in achieving a close relationship with God. Additionally, see *Shu"t Maharsham* 3:188 who explains why we do not blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana that falls on Shabbat, nowadays, based on the *Sifri* that we have used as the basis of our discussion.