

Kedushat Eretz Yisrael

וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ...
שמות יט:

*You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests
and a holy nation...*

Shemot 19:6

This is the essence of the Jewish nation, its “mission statement.”

What is the meaning of a *goy kadosh*, a holy and sanctified nation? And how does it define the quality of our Judaism?

The Maharal¹ gives an explanation of the special nature of Eretz Yisrael, which can enrich our understanding of our relationship with our land as a “holy land.” Connecting this understanding to other areas that are identified with *kedusha*, sanctity, will highlight why Eretz Yisrael is such a central element in Judaism.

תניא רשב"י אומר שלש מתנות נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל וכולם לא נתנו אלא על ידי יסורים ואלו הן התורה ארץ ישראל ועולם הבא... וביאור דבר זה מה שאלו שלשה דברים נתנו על ידי יסורים, מפני שכל אלו ג' דברים הם קדושים, כי ארץ ישראל היא הארץ הקדושה אשר הארץ הזאת היא נבדלת יש בה השכל יותר משאר ארצות, ואם לא כן שהיה לארץ ישראל מעלה זאת לא היה אוירא דארץ ישראל מחכים ביותר משאר ארצות ולא היה בארץ ישראל דוקא הנבואה... ומפני זה נקראו אלו ג' דברים מתנות כי המתנה היא מה שאינו שייך לאדם מצד עצמו ונתן לו מזולתו וכן האדם היא בעל גוף חמרי ואין מצדו הדברים האלו שהם דברים נבדלים א-לקיים, ולכך לא נתנו רק על ידי היסורים שהם ממעטים את החומר וגוף האדם ומסלקים את פחיתתו עד שהאדם ראוי אליו דברים הא-לקיים...

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai teaches: "G-d



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gave the Jewish people three presents, and each of them was only given accompanied with 'yisurim' (physical sacrifice and difficulty). The three presents are Torah, the Land of Israel, and The World to Come...² The reason why these things were given specifically accompanied with difficulty is that each of these is sanctified (kedoshim). The Land of Israel is holy and unique, having in it more spiritual intelligence than any other land, as evidenced by the fact that "the atmosphere in Israel makes one wise,"³ as well as the fact that prophecy occurs only in Israel...

It is for this reason that these are called matanot, gifts. A "gift" is something given to a person for which he has no access on his own, coming from an independent source. Since man is [basically] a physical body, and he has no direct access to things that are Divine and transcendent, they must be given to man through physical sacrifice and difficulty, which diminishes the physical dimension of man and enables man to assimilate these holy and Divine presents.

This explanation sheds light on the difficulties constantly encountered by people trying to make aliya. From the pioneers in the late 19th century, undergoing constant life-threatening situations, through the early years of the State, with its weak economy and food shortages, to the frustrating

cultural norms that made aliya so difficult for Western olim post Six Day War, and up to the present security dangers we face on a daily basis — there are always exceptional difficulties that must be overcome if one is committed to assimilating the unique, holy nature of Eretz Yisrael. A Jew's true connection to Eretz Yisrael can't be built on a materialistic quest. That connection requires one to transcend standard materialistic dependencies, enabling him to access *kedusha*.

The covenant between G-d and Avraham, which included the promise of the Land of Israel to his descendants, revealed the transcendent nature of that land. That promise was inseparably linked to *brit milah*,⁴ representing man's ability to transcend his physical instincts and dependencies, fashioning a life of *kedusha*, sanctity.

The consequences of contaminating that *kedusha* are demonstrated by the special standards of moral behavior placed on the inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael. After detailed and strict warnings against immoral behavior, the Torah concludes:

אֵל תִּשְׁמְאוּ בְּכֹל אֲלֹהֵי כִּי בְּכֹל אֲלֹהֵי נִטְמְאוּ
הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם: וְתִטְמְאוּ הָאָרֶץ
וְאִפְקֹד עֲוֹנָה עָלֶיהָ וְתִקְאָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׁבֵיהָ ...

ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם בטמאכם אתה כאשר
קאה את הגוי אשר לפניכם:

Do not become defiled through any of these [immoralities], for through these the nations who are being expelled (from Eretz Yisrael) became defiled. The land became defiled, and I recalled its sin, and the land disgorged its inhabitants... And the land should not disgorge you, by your defiling it, the way it disgorged the nations that preceded you.

Vayikra 18:24, 25, 28

The Ramban⁵ explains this spiritual sensitivity as the result of the unique and direct connection G-d has with Eretz Yisrael, and with the Jewish people as recipients of that land. Despite the commandments of moral behaviors being applicable to Jews worldwide, not part of the “land dependent” commandments, their violation in the Land of Israel is viewed as a particularly serious violation of our special relationship with G-d.⁶

Another commandment that the Torah connects to *kedusha* numerous times is Shabbat.⁷ This can help clarify how and why *kedusha* is manifest in Eretz Yisrael.

Shabbat is a mini-representation of *Olam Habah*, the World to Come, one of the three presents given to us through a minimization of our physicality. The *kedusha* with which Shabbat is endowed, the intimate connection with G-d that can exist during Shabbat, elevates physical activities to spiritual ones. Indulgences that could border on the hedonistic during the week become “*oneg Shabbat*” pleasures undertaken for the honor of Shabbat.

The Gaon of Vilna, based on the verse in Tehillim⁸ ויהי בשלם סוכו ומעונתו, connects sitting in the sukkah with living in Israel. Both of these commandments are done with no special rituals, but simply by living normally, whether in the sukkah or in the Land of Israel. Every mundane action is imbued with spirituality.

There is a Chassidic saying: “Sukkah is the only mitzvah in which a person enters with muddy boots.” We can add that Eretz Yisrael is one, too.

Kedusha demands the ability to minimize the control of the physical, creating great challenges, but also

offering unparalleled opportunities. Physical activities done in an environment of *kedusha*, whether that environment is one of time (Shabbat) or place (Eretz Yisrael), with proper motivation, become elevated, holy acts, bringing us closer to G-d.

This is the potential inherent in Eretz Yisrael. We should appreciate it, as we fulfill the mitzvah of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, unlocking the *kedusha* available in every activity.

Notes

1. Introduction to *Derech Chaim*, commentary on *Pirkei Avot*.
2. T.B. *Brachot* 5a.
3. T. B. *Bava Batra* 158b.
4. See *Breishit* 17:7-11; *Breishit Rabba* 46:9.
5. Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25.
6. It is in this context that the Ramban continues with his famous statement, based on *Sifrei Eikev* 43, that כי עיקר כל המצות ליושבים בארץ ה, the root of all commandments is for those living in the land of G-d (Israel).
7. *Breishit* 2:3, which is the first time the word is mentioned in the Torah; *Shemot* 16:23; 20:8,11; 31:14,15; 35:2; *Vayikra* 23:3; *Devarim* 5:12.
8. *Tehillim* 76:3.

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