

What's So Important About Eretz Yisrael?!

People often ask why religious Zionism and/or Rav Kook make such a “big deal” about Eretz Yisrael? We’ll answer concisely:

1. Just as the Chafetz Chaim explains why he dedicated a significant part of his life to revive the neglected mitzvah of lashon harah, for a *meit mitzvah* (neglected corpse) supersedes other mitzvot because nobody else can do it, so too a forgotten mitzvah that others aren’t fulfilling should take priority.¹ For 2,000 years aliya wasn’t practical and accordingly, was not on the agenda for many observant Jews.

2. Chazal declare indisputably that “Living in Eretz Yisrael is equated with all of the other mitzvot combined!”² This clear Tannaic oral tradition from the *Sifre*, the Tannaic midrash halacha, is explicitly referring to all periods, even when there is no Beit HaMikdash.³ As such, the issue of whether living in Eretz Yisrael is officially counted as one of the 613 mitzvot (Bamidbar 33, 53) or whether it is included in another mitzvah, or if its importance stems from its *kedusha*,⁴ is academic.⁵ This uniquely places aliya in the category of “super” actions, like Talmud Torah and Shabbat.⁶ It is superior to most other mitzvot, and there are many ramifications to her unique halachic status.⁷ How much more so should we publicize this issue, when there is an opportunity to increase observance of this super-mitzvah.



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3. The Rambam writes about the obligation to live in a Jewish State.⁸ Indeed, everyone is influenced by his environment, and therefore must decide by who he is going to be influenced by — Jews, Judaism, her values and culture — or by gentiles. There is no doubt that religiously, Israel today is the Torah center of the world — whatever gauge you use — whether it is quality (the caliber of communities that provide a Torah environment) or quantity (the number of religious Jews living in Israel).

4. Rav Ya’akov Moshe Charlap, predecessor of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach as rav of Sha’arei Chesed in Y’rushalayim, recalls the tradition that every historical period has its special mitzva. We can identify it by what the gentiles try to prevent us from fulfilling (e.g. in certain periods they prohibited teaching Torah, circumcision, *kiddush hachodesh*), for they’re “sent” to help us focus on what is “The” mitzvah of our generation.⁹ Today, even in Russia or Iran, there is freedom of religion and no persecution against teaching Torah

or laying tefillin. The only mitzvah that they and many nations (even the U.N.) wish to deny us today is the return of the nation of Israel to resettle Eretz Yisrael and Y’rushalayim. Accordingly, in our historic period of *kibbutz galuyot* (ingathering of the exiles), Israel is “The Mitzva” of our generation and requires special attention.¹⁰

The question remains: “Why” is this mitzvah equal to all the others combined, and “why” does the Holy Land’s revival and *kibbutz galuyot* begin the redemption?¹¹

A. The *Torah T’mina* likens aliya to learning Torah, that both are equated with the rest of the mitzvot because they enable you to perform additional mitzvot.¹² Just as Torah knowledge facilitates observing the other mitzvot, similarly living in Israel significantly increases the quantity of mitzvot one can observe, whether agricultural, national (e.g. serving in the army, speaking Hebrew); going to work is a mitzvah, and surprisingly even “every moment and second that you are in Eretz Yisrael one fulfills this mitzvah (of settling the Land).”¹³ Additionally,

the many interactions with each and every person in the street, any operator on the phone, and everyone waiting in line at the bank provide opportunities to connect us with other Jews. These interactions often take on religious significance as we fulfill many interpersonal mitzvot or share Torah thoughts.¹⁴ Even my all-too-high taxes in Israel fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah, paying for the medical, educational, health, security, religious, social, and economic needs of our fellow Jews.¹⁵

B. Chazal explain that in addition to the greater quantity of mitzvot here, their quality is also much greater, for the Torah and mitzvot were given to be observed in Israel.¹⁶ As is often the case, the rabbis here are not innovating but rather embellishing explicit verses:

ראה למדתי אתכם חוקים ומשפטים...
לעשות כן בקרב הארץ אשר אתם באים שמה
לרשתה.

*Behold, I have taught you commandments ...to do in the Land where you are going to possess.*¹⁷

The Chafetz Chaim figures that the very same mitzvah when done in Israel brings 2,000 percent more reward.¹⁸

C. The Chatam Sofer extols living in Israel not only because of the mitzva, but because here we are living in *kedusha* (holiness).¹⁹ It is clear from the Torah that living in Eretz Yisrael provides holiness in all aspects of life. Not only are your neighbors holy (*Yisrael goy kadosh*), but your language (*lashon hakodesh*), army (*tziv'ot Hashem*),²⁰ coin (*shekel hakodesh*), and even fruit, mud and rocks²¹ should be holy as well. Similarly the Vilna Gaon says that only regarding two mitzvot is a Jew 100 percent totally immersed:

Sukka and living in Eretz Yisrael.²²

D. The Rivash²³ explains that the superior halachic status of settling in Israel²⁴ is because it is not a short-term mitzvah for the individual (e.g. I shake a lulav and then put it down), but rather an eternal and national mitzvah for all of Israel in your generation and for all future generations. When we chose to move our family tree to its final destination, it's one of the few resolutions in life where our decision has everlasting ramifications, even 5,000 years from now. When we decided to settle in the Shomron and serve in Tzahal, we are helping define, enlarge, and defend the borders of Israel, not as individuals, but for all Am Yisrael, both present and future. This adds special significance today.

E. Growing up in America, Judaism was my religion, but in Israel my Judaism has doubled, for it's also my nationality, giving significance to the mundane and harmonizing the fragmented.

May I warmly suggest seriously considering what I think most olim regard as the most significant and greatest decision of their lives. Not only for religious, but for national, historic, and more spiritual priorities as well, come benefit and contribute and be part of the future of Am Yisrael.

It's time to come home.

Notes

1. *Shmirat HaLashon*, Epilogue, ch. 3, cites the *Sefer Charedim*, but it may be a typographical error for the idea is found 400 years beforehand in *Sefer Chasidim*, 105, and beforehand in *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Shmot* 16.

2. *Sifre* on *Dvarim* 12 and *Tosefta Av.Z.* 5,2, cited by the *Pitchei Tshuva Ev.H.* 75,6.

3. The narrative of the *Sifre* occurred about 60 years after the destruction of the Beit

Hamikdash and nevertheless ends off with those Tannaim turning around and returning to Eretz Yisrael. Similarly, the *Tosefta*, *ibid*, demonstrates that *aliya* is equal to the other mitzvot combined even during *galut*, when one must live there among gentile idolaters. How much more so today, when Israel is the world Torah center.

4. As the Chatam Sofer explains in the Rambam, see note 19.

5. The Vilna Gaon, *Ma'alot Hatora*, Jerusalem 5751, p. 66, says that there are more than 2,000 mitzvot *d'oraita*, and there is no significance whether a mitzvah is officially listed as "one of the 613" or not. The Rambam's statement, *Hil. M'lachim* 5, 12, "A person should always live in the Land of Israel," clarifies any doubt that the Rambam may be minimizing the importance of *aliya*, see A. Shvat, "Frequent Questions about Mitzvat Yishuv Eretz Yisrael," <http://www.yeshiva.co/midrash/shiur.asp?id=20085> that various Achronim suggest six possibilities under which mitzvah the Rambam may count it.

6. Also equated with the rest of the mitzvot combined, *Peah* 1, 1, *Y'rushalmi Brachot* 1, 1 respectively, as are *avodah zara- Horayot* 8a, *milah- N'darim* 32a, *tzitzit- N'darim* 25a, and *tzedaka- Baba Batra* 9a.

7. See Rivash, note 23, e.g., *Gittin* 8b and Rambam, *Shabbat* 6, 11, that only for *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* is one allowed to ask a gentile to do a *m'lacha d'oraita* on Shabbat; *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer* 75, 3, one of the few cases where a woman can force a get is if her spouse doesn't want to make *aliya*; *ibid* and *Tosefta* (above note 2), one should surprisingly prefer to live among gentile idolaters in Israel rather than among religious Jews outside of Israel; *Resp. Mishpat Kohen* 327 citing *Minchat Chinuch*, 425, the only mitzvah where one charges a cannon and doesn't try to avoid giving his life is to conquer Eretz Yisrael. See A. Shvat, "Defining the Excuse of Parnassa (Livelihood) to Exempt from Aliya," *Tchumin* 22, pp. 355-368, that the Achronim agree that accordingly, *aliya* is not bound by *Takanat Usha*, which limits the expense to fulfill mitzvot to 10 percent of your possessions, *Y'rushalmi Peah* 1, 1.

8. *Ma'amar Kiddush Hashem, Igrot HaRambam*, Jerusalem 5741, p. 64. See also R. Chasdai ibn Shiprut, cited in introduction to *Kuzari*, Vilna 5665, p. 3, who wants to ascertain the rumor that the Kazars have a

Jewish State, for if so, all Jews should move there. Theoretically, this may also apply to a Jewish State in Uganda, but Baruch Hashem, the only Jewish State today is in Israel, so we don't have to choose between the Jewish Land and the Jewish State.

9. R. Sh. N. Barzofsky (the Slonimer Rebbe), *Netivot Shalom*, Shmot p. 152. See next footnote.

10. R. Y. M. Charlap, *Mimaynei HaY'shua*, p.196.

11. *Megilla* 17a, explains that the order of the brachot of Shmoneh-Esreh, from the ninth bracha on, were arranged according to the process of *ge'ula*, first the revival of the Land (*Barech Aleinu*), than the exile ingathering (*T'ka b'Shofar*).

12. *Torah Temima*, Dvarim 12, 114.

13. *Sefer HaCharedim*, ch. 59.

14. It should be noted that this is the answer to the oft-asked question, why the moral obligations in the Torah are directed toward Jews alone. The reason is that the natural situation to which the Torah is addressed is to Jews, living among Jews, in the Jewish State, in the Jewish Land. Similarly, the directions of the world as found in the Torah, צפונה ונגבה, קדמה, ימה, (Breishit 28, 14) are only logical when read in Eretz Yisrael where the sea (ימה) is in the west, and the desert or Yemen (תימנה or נגבה) are in the south. Even in Egypt, where the Mediterranean Sea is in the north, a western wind is still referred to as "רוח ים" (Rashi Shmot 10, 19), because the reader is meant to be located in Israel. So too, the term עבר הירדן, "the other side of the Jordan," refers to the east bank, even when the speaker in the Tanach is located on the east bank (e.g. Dvarim 1, 1-5; 3, 8), because the reader is meant to be in Israel, on the west bank. For more examples see A. Shvat, "Everyone Serves in the Obligatory Wars - On the Conflict Between Loyalty to Family and to Israel," *Minchat Sapir*- In Honor of Dr. Yitzchak Sapir, pp. 633-653.

15. *Resp. Tzitz Eliezer* IX, 1,5,(2).

16. *Sifre*, Rashi, Ramban, and R. B'chaye on Dvarim 11, 18. It should be stressed that this idea is often mistakenly attributed to the Ramban, while the true source, as mentioned above, is in the Torah itself, and in the Oral Law of Chazal, in the Midrash Halacha (*Sifre*). See also the Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar*, Shmot 20:12, that even non-agricultural related mitzvot, e.g. honoring one's parents, are especially unique when practiced in Israel.

17. Dvarim 4, 5. See similarly Dvarim 4, 14; 5, 28; 6, 1.

18. *L'Netivot Yisrael*, p.202.

19. *Resp. Chatam Sofer* II, Y.D. 234.

20. Shmot 12,41, Shmuel I 10, 17 and 26.

21. Rambam, *Hil. Milachim* 5, 10, the generally rational Rambam, uncharacteristically cites in his halachic *Mishneh Torah*, that the greatest sages would kiss her borders and her rocks, and roll in her dust, based upon Tehilim 102, 15 and *Ktuvo* 112b.

22. Cited in *Kol HaTor*, Jerusalem 5730, p. 470. Mikveh isn't mentioned because purification is only upon leaving the mikveh.

23. *Resp. Rivash*, 101.

24. See note 7.



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