

Why Israel Matters: Ramban and the Uniqueness of the Land of Israel

Our generation merits the great gift of the state of Israel. We are afforded the opportunity to visit the land, dwell there temporarily, and even make it into our permanent home if we so choose. As an *olah*, I feel privileged to live and raise my family in this holy land. Yom Ha'Atzmaut provides a special opportunity for reflection on this unique gift.

Many great Jewish thinkers and commentators have explored the significance of the Land of Israel. Its relative status is assessed from numerous perspectives; Biblical commentators, Jewish philosophers, and great halachists all question and analyze the role of Eretz Yisrael. From different vantage points, they offer insights into the unique religious, national, and spiritual opportunities that are an organic part of the Land of Israel.

The purpose of this article is to explore the view of the Ramban on the holiness and status of Eretz Yisrael. The Ramban is among a small group of Rishonim whose writings impact and relate to a broad array of Torah realms. Ramban often weaves together insights relating to Biblical exegesis, Jewish thought, and halacha, and his writings on Eretz Yisrael are no exception. Indeed, few thinkers offer such a wide-ranging perspective on Eretz Yisrael. Further, many contemporary discussions relating to Eretz Yisrael, focus, at least partially, on the Ramban's positions.



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The passionate words of the Ramban paint a striking picture of the power and potential of Eretz Yisrael.

Inhabiting the Land of Israel

Many Rishonim discuss the nature of the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisrael. Is there, in fact, such a mitzvah? If yes, does that mitzvah apply today or is it limited to a particular time period? The Rambam, who is usually fairly equivocal in his halachic positions, is somewhat ambiguous on this issue. By contrast, the stance of the Ramban is exceptionally clear. Included in the Ramban's tally of the 613 mitzvot is the requirement to dwell in Israel. In addition to writing this in his halachic work,¹ the Ramban also states this position in his commentary on Chumash (Bamidbar 33:53):

והורשתם את הארץ וישבתם בה כי לכם נתתי את הארץ לרשת אתה — על דעתי זו מצות עשה היא, יצוה אותם שישבו בארץ ויירשו אותה כי הוא נתנה להם ... כי הכתוב הזה היא מצות עשה. ויחזיר המצוה הזו במקומות רבים. *And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land for you to possess — In my opinion, this is a positive commandment. He commands them to settle in the land and*

inherit it because He gave it to them ... this verse is a positive commandment. It is a commandment that recurs in many places [in the Torah].

What makes the Ramban's position particularly noteworthy is that not only does he maintain that such an obligation exists; the Ramban is of the opinion that this obligation continues to apply throughout our time in exile. Further, as is well-known, the Ramban personally made the incredibly challenging journey to move to Israel. While some scholars have discussed the impact of his move on his commentary on Chumash, the Ramban's journey can also serve as a powerful model of religious commitment.

Thus far, the Ramban's position on the halachic status of moving to Israel has been established: moving to Israel is a fulfillment of a positive commandment. A further question relates to the status of this mitzvah as compared to other positive commandments. The Ramban seems to challenge the notion that all mitzvot are created equal, and seems to suggest that the mitzvah of inhabiting the Land of Israel has an elevated status. While in general, one

is forbidden to ask a non-Jew to do a melacha on Shabbat, even for the sake of enabling one to fulfill a *mitzvah mid'oraita* (Torah level obligation), the Ramban points out an exception to this rule.² Based on the Gemara in *Gittin* (8b), the Ramban explains that it is permissible to ask a non-Jew to perform melacha on one's behalf if it is in order to buy land from a non-Jew in Eretz Yisrael. As Rabbi Howard Jachter explains,³ the position of the Ramban is based on the axiom that securing Jewish presence in and proprietorship of our holy land is a fulfillment of an important national and religious tenet.

This orientation may explain a unique position of the Ramban in his commentary on Chumash. When a famine plagued the Land of Israel and Avraham opted to descend to Egypt, the majority of commentators endorse Avraham's decision as an appropriate and pragmatic step. Remaining in Israel was dangerous, and we are advised to act with prudence rather than relying on miracles. Migrating to Egypt to procure food for his family was the responsible thing to do.

Yet the Ramban (Breishit 12:10) critiques Avraham for moving to Egypt. In fact, as part of his broader understanding of “*ma'aseh avot siman l'banim*,” the acts of the forefathers are a sign for their children, the Ramban argues that the Jewish people were forced to go into exile in Egypt as a *result* of Avraham's decision to leave Israel and go to Egypt! While there are various factors influencing the Ramban's approach, one may suggest that underlying the Ramban's fairly severe critique of Avraham is the enormous value he places on inhabiting the Land of Israel. His love for Israel and the great import with which he believes the land is endowed may

shape the way the Ramban interprets Avraham's behavior and the subsequent outcomes of Avraham's decision.

A Unique Characteristic of Eretz Yisrael

Until this point, the Ramban's position that inhabiting the Land of Israel is a bona fide mitzvah, as well as his view that this mitzvah holds a uniquely prominent status, have been established. The pressing question that emerges is, Why? What is it about Eretz Yisrael that impels the Ramban to regard the land with such veneration and appreciation?

The Torah's prohibition of *arayot*, illicit relations, is operative regardless of one's geographical location. Yet at the end of the Torah's description of this prohibition, the verse in Vayikra (18:25) states:

וַתִּטְמָא הָאֶרֶץ וְאֶפְקַד עֲוֹנָהּ עָלֶיהָ וַתִּקָּא הָאֶרֶץ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants.

The Ramban points out that this verse highlights a connection between the prohibition of *arayot* and the Land of Israel. The Ramban finds this connection somewhat perplexing, given that the *arayot* are a “*chovat haguf*,” a law that is binding on the individual, applying equally within and outside of Eretz Yisrael.

In order to clarify the connection between the *arayot* and the Land of Israel, the Ramban shares an important distinction regarding how God controls Eretz Yisrael, as opposed to all other lands. The Ramban notes that when God created the world:

ונתן על כל עם ועם בארצותם לגוייהם כוכב ומזל ידוע כאשר נודע באצטגנינות.

And He placed over each and every people in their lands according to their nations a star and a specific constellation, as is known in astrology.

While God is undoubtedly in control of what happens everywhere in the world, He does not deal with the other nations and their lands directly, rather through intermediaries. Hashem appoints angelic emissaries to manage and deal with the other nations. By contrast, the Ramban poetically describes Hashem's unique relationship with the Land of Israel and the people of Israel:

והנה השם הנכבד הוא א-לקי הא-לקים ואדוני האדונים לכל העולם, אבל ארץ ישראל אמצעות הישוב היא נחלת ה' מיוחדת לשמו, לא נתן עליה מן המלאכים קצין שוטר ומושל בהנחילו אותה לעמו המיוחד שמו זרע אוהביו. *And behold the honored God is the God (Power) of powers and the Master of masters of the whole universe, but upon the land of Israel—the center of the [world's] habitation, the inheritance of God [that is] unique to His name—He did not place a captain, officer or ruler from the angels, in His giving it as an inheritance to his nation that unifies His name—the seed of His beloved one.*

Ramban writes that in contrast to all other nations and lands, G-d Himself deals directly with Eretz Yisrael. This special Land is the crucible for the development of the relationship between G-d and his beloved nation. Rather than employ an intermediary, G-d opts to involve Himself in the direct management and oversight of Eretz Yisrael, pointing to the special and close relationship that G-d desires, so to speak, with the nation of Israel.

Through this lens, it is possible to explain the connection between the *arayot* and the Land of Israel. Because of God's more direct involvement with Eretz Yisrael, and because of

the elevated status that adorns Eretz Yisrael, the Land has a heightened level of purity and sanctity, which brings with it a degree of sensitivity. The Land is unable to withstand spiritual contamination. A sin performed in the Land of Israel is more severe, as it is an affront to the holiness and dignity of the Land.

Ramban elaborates on this idea in an additional context. The Torah records G-d's especially harsh punishment of the people of Sodom. The Ramban (Breishit 19:5) describes the moral depravity of the people of Sodom, but also shares an additional dimension in clarifying why G-d's reaction was so swift and severe. The ethical corruption, the Ramban explains, was intolerable to the Land of Israel. The holy Land of Israel, the Land that is referred to as "*nachalat Hashem*," the portion of Hashem, simply cannot bear sin and corruption.

The Status of Mitzvah Performance Inside and Outside of Israel

A further dimension of the distinctiveness of Eretz Yisrael relates to the performance of mitzvot in and out of the Land. In the same way that sinful behavior may be more egregious when performed in the Land of Israel, so too, fulfillment of mitzvot in the Land of Israel may possess a special quality. In order to better understand this issue, we will first explore the views of other Jewish thinkers and we will then return to the unique approach of the Ramban.

The Torah commands us to perform 613 mitzvot. The mishna in *Kiddushin*⁴ distinguishes between two kinds of mitzvot, those that are dependent on the Land of Israel (*mitzvot*

hat'luoyot ba'aretz), such as shemitta and teruma / ma'aser, and mitzvot whose fulfillment have no inherent dependence on the Land (*mitzvot she'aynan teluyot ba'aretz*), such as Shabbat observance, tefillin, and prayer. While some ambiguity exists regarding how to categorize certain mitzvot, the Talmud makes it clear that there is a subset of mitzvot that one is only obligated to fulfill inside of Israel. On a basic level, Israel is significant because it is a Land in which one has the opportunity to fulfill a greater amount of mitzvot.

The *Sifrei*⁵ extends this concept in a fairly drastic manner. The *Sifrei* states the purpose of mitzvah fulfillment in chutz la'aretz is to prepare us for our eventual return to Israel. The startling perspective that emerges from this *Sifrei* is that mitzvah performance outside the Land of Israel has no intrinsic value. If that is the case, why, according to the *Sifrei*, must Jews continue to observe mitzvot when in chutz la'aretz? The *Sifrei* explains that it is important for Diaspora Jewry to flex their religious muscles so that when the time comes that mitzvah observance actually matters, i.e. when we return to Eretz Yisrael, we will be religiously "in shape" and capable of meticulously performing mitzvot.

Needless to say, the extent to which the *Sifrei* downplays the significance of mitzvah observance in chutz la'aretz is quite surprising. Indeed, many statements of Chazal seem to suggest that mitzvah performance in chutz la'aretz is absolutely valuable. Many commentators attempt to mitigate the implication of the *Sifrei*, as they perceive it inconceivable that the *Sifrei* actually intends to so significantly downgrade the value of mitzvot outside of Israel.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l on the Value of Ramban's Commentary on the Torah

לו אבד הספר "מורה נבוכים", היה זה הפסד אבל לא כביר; עם ישראל היה מחזיק מעמד. אבל אם פירושו של הרמב"ן לתורה היה הולך לאיבוד אני מרגיש שהייתה קטסרופה ... דמותו של הרמב"ן ופירושו לתורה מעמידים את עולמו הרוחני של עם ישראל ... מבחינה היסטורית, הרמב"ן הוא חיבור של תורת אשכנז ותורת ספרד, חיבור של רש"י ואבן עזרא, חיבור של כל מיני מקומות. אבל לא זו בלבד. יש בו גם סינתזה מורכבת הרבה יותר, סינתזה מבחינת התחומים.
מתוך ספר "מבקשי פניך" - שיחות עם הרב אהרן ליכטנשטיין, עמ' 40

If the *Guide for the Perplexed* (and never published), it would have been a loss, but not a huge loss. The [Torah theology of the] nation of Israel would have been sustained. However, if the commentary of Ramban on the Torah would have been destroyed, I feel that it would have been catastrophic ... The image of the Ramban and his commentary to the Torah support the spiritual world of the Jewish nation ... From a historical perspective, the [commentary of] Ramban is an amalgamation of the Torah of Germany and the Torah of Spain, of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, of all different places. But this is not all. It also contains a multi-layered synthesis, a synthesis of disciplines....

From Mevakshei Panecha: Sichot Im HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein p. 40

Rabbeinu Hillel⁶ suggests that the *Sifrei*'s comment is limited to *mitzvot*

hat'luoyot ba'aretz. Even though technically these mitzvot are only binding in Eretz Yisrael, the Jewish people should continue to observe them even in chutz la'aretz in preparation for our eventual return to Israel. Other mitzvot, though, do have inherent value outside of Israel, as their performance is not tied to a particular geographical location.

Radbaz⁷ offers an alternate explanation.⁸ According to the Radbaz, the obligation to fulfill the Torah's mitzvot applies universally. However, the *Sifrei* is highlighting a technical reality that may have implications for our ability to perform mitzvot in chutz la'aretz. Due to the hardship of the exile, it may be challenging for Jews to keep all the mitzvot. We may therefore acquire the status of *ones*—one who is unable to perform mitzvot due to factors beyond his/her control. Therefore, this distinction between mitzvah performance in and out of Eretz Yisrael has no bearing on the intrinsic value of the mitzvah fulfillment; rather, it points to a difference in pragmatic realities, which, in turn, affects one's level of obligation.

In contrast to Rabbeinu Hillel and the Radbaz, who unequivocally mitigate the ideas expressed by the *Sifrei*, the Ramban on Vayikra 18:25 embraces the simple reading of the *Sifrei* as expressing an important element of truth. The Ramban quotes the idea that mitzvot in chutz la'aretz serve as practice for when we return to Eretz Yisrael, and connects this to the notion that the Land of Israel has a higher degree of Divine providence and closeness:

כי עיקר כל המצות ליושבים בארץ ה'.
ולפיכך אמרו בספרי (ראה פ), וירשתם אותה
וישבתם בה ושמרתם לעשות (דברים יא לא
לב), ישיבת ארץ ישראל שקולה כנגד כל
המצות שבתורה.

Since the essence of all of the commandments are for those who are dwelling in the Land of the Lord. And therefore they said in Sifrei "And you shall possess it and you shall dwell in it. And you will guard to keep."—Dwelling in the Land of Israel is equal to all of the [other] commandments in the Torah."

The Ramban himself admits that yes, on a technical level, all mitzvot that are not dependent on the Land of Israel are binding wherever in the world one may find oneself.⁹ But on a metaphysical level, one cannot compare mitzvot observed in Israel with mitzvot observed in chutz la'aretz. The same technical behavior assumes a completely different spiritual status, depending on whether it is performed in the Land of Israel. The holiness of the Land alters and elevates each mitzvah that is observed on its soil.¹⁰

The Communal Impact

Rav Michael Rosensweig¹¹ offers an additional perspective on the aforementioned *Sifrei*, one that while not explicitly stated by the Ramban, certainly dovetails nicely with the Ramban's overall perspective. As noted above, the Ramban maintains that one is permitted to ask a non-Jew to perform a melacha on Shabbos in order to secure land purchase in Eretz Yisrael. This, as Rabbi Jachter notes, is reflective of the significance of Jewish presence in Israel, not only at the level of the individual fulfilling a mitzvah, but as benefiting the collective Jewish nation. Rav Rosensweig explains the *Sifrei* based on a similar observation:

The Sifrei in parshat Eikev (also cited by Rashi and Ramban Devarim 11:18) strongly implies that our performance of halakhic norms outside of Eretz Yisrael serves a preparatory function as

we await a return to a more ideal life in our national homeland. This perspective seems puzzling, as the mitzvot cited as examples—tefilin, mezuzah—do not have any obvious link to Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, the Gera (Kol Eliyahu, Eikev) and others (Beit ha-Levi 3:1) proposed alternate explanations of the Sifrei. However, it is possible that the Sifrei needs to be understood precisely within the context of the second section of Keriyat Shema where it appears. It is evident as Rashi (11:13) also notes that this section (contrasted with the first part of Shema in Vaetchanan), which focuses on kabbalat ol mitzvot (Berachot 13a—the commitment to implement the Torah's norms), is addressed collectively to the entire nation. Even mitzvot that devolve upon individuals are enhanced in a national-collective setting. The Sifrei declares that this communal dimension of personal mitzvot is primarily attained only in Eretz Yisrael, although as individual performances there is no particular link to the Land.

Some explain the limitation that the *Sifrei* places upon mitzvot performed in chutz la'aretz as referring to mitzvot *hateluyot ba'aretz*; others refer to the pragmatic limitations when living under foreign rule. Rav Rosensweig highlights an additional limitation on mitzvah performance in chutz la'aretz, or, concomitantly, an additional benefit to performing mitzvot in Israel. While the individual can perform mitzvot on a personal level anywhere in the world, there is a communal dimension to mitzvah performance that only exists in Eretz Yisrael. Fulfillment of mitzvot in chutz la'aretz contributes to one's own personal religious development, while mitzvah performance in Israel imbues a national significance into the personal fulfillment of mitzvot.

Conclusion

The Torah is unequivocal in attributing Eretz Yisrael with an elevated spiritual status. The Ramban uncovers and elaborates on the unique holiness associated with Eretz Yisrael. From a halachic perspective, the Ramban decisively rules that inhabiting the Land of Israel is a fulfillment of a positive commandment, one that may have a higher degree of import than other mitzvot. On a metaphysical plane, the Ramban describes the elevated degree of Divine providence and spirituality, one that enhances the quality of mitzvot performed within the Land of Israel. Finally, the words of the Ramban suggest that inhabiting the land and observing mitzvot within its borders achieve a national-collective objective that is not attainable anywhere else in the world.

In the view of the Ramban, no place allows us to better experience the Divine presence and more effectively actualize our individual and national spiritual potential than the Land of Israel. Reflecting upon an interaction with Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt”l in 1962, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein¹² beautifully recounts an encounter that highlights this perspective:

In the course of my initial visit to Israel, during the summer of 1962, I went to visit mori verabbi, Rav Y. Hutner zt”l, who, prior to his aliya, often spent the summer at Pension Reich in Jerusalem. After reproaching me gently for having left my wife in the United States (אזא כתרובה האסטו געשריבען?), he began to question me regarding my impressions—particularly, about what had struck my notice especially.

As, at that stage, I had focused upon the Torah world in Israel, I noted a number of phenomena which had struck me

favorably, as compared to the American scene: widespread popular talmud Torah, the interaction of the Torah and general communities in the implementation of Hoshen Mishpat etc. Every reply was rebutted with the comment that its subject could have been found in Eastern Europe as well, and so was neither endemic nor unique to Eretz Israel. When he sensed that I had exhausted my material, he pressed on, inquiring as to what indeed was special about my visit, and, when it became clear that I could, at best, only respond feebly, the Rosh Yeshiva opened with a volley of sources and dicta—the description of Eretz Israel as ‘ארץ אשר ה’ א-לקיך דרש אתה (a land that Hashem your God cares for), or as that to which Moshe and Aharon had been barred access, which was now open to us (דוכתא) all trumpeting forth the sacral, metaphysical, and historical uniqueness of the land and all causing me to realize, in a flash, that I had missed the boat entirely. As he railed on, as perhaps only he could, against tourists he had met on the plane, acting and talking as if they were en route to vacation in California, the sense of failure cut deeper and deeper. I walked out into the Beit Hakerem evening air like a beaten dog. But I knew I had been beaten justly; and today, almost forty-five years later, I remain deeply grateful to the Rosh Yeshiva for opening my eyes and for opening my heart.

Rav Hutner zt”l was emphasizing the qualitative and categorical difference between the Land of Israel and all other lands. Additionally, he was alluding to the covert nature of this unique status. Seen through the lens of casual eyes, one may see rocks and shrubs and deserts like in many geographical regions of the world. But when viewing Eretz Yisrael through spiritually astute eyes, one sees G-d’s presence and closeness and endowment of spiritual opportunity.

Endnotes

- 1 Hasagot to Sefer HaMitzvot, Pos. Mitzvah no. 4.
- 2 See the Ramban’s commentary to *Shabbat* 130b.
- 3 Jachter, H. (2003). Living in Yesha During Dangerous Times, *Kol torah: A student publication of the Isaac and Mara Benmergui Torah Academy of Bergen County*, 12(14).
- 4 36b.
- 5 *Parshat Ekev* no. 43, cited by Rashi on *Devarim* 11:18.
- 6 *Sifrei* ad loc.
- 7 *Shut Radbaz* 6:2154.
- 8 Maharal (Gur Aryeh *Devarim* ad loc) offers a similar suggestion to Radbaz.
- 9 See the Ramban on *Devarim* 4:5.
- 10 These ideas relate to the Ramban’s position on the famous question regarding whether the Avot and Imahot observed the Torah as we know it. The Ramban (*Bereishit* 26:5) maintains that they only fully kept the Torah in the Land of Israel. The Ramban points to certain instances in the lives of the Avot and Imahot that support this notion. For example, when Yaakov is entering Eretz Yisrael, he instructs his family members to divest themselves of any possessions that are associated with idolatry (*Bereishit* 25:2). Wouldn’t propriety of such items be inappropriate at any point in time? The Ramban explains that because they were on the cusp of entering Eretz Yisrael, they augmented their meticulousness in mitzvah observance. Similarly, the Ramban sheds light on the time and place of the death of Rachel Imeinu. The Torah prohibits a man from marrying two sisters. If so, how could Yaakov Avinu have been married to two sisters? The Ramban explains that this was only the case in *chutz la’aretz*, as Rachel Imeinu passed away immediately upon entering the Land.
- 11 Rosensweig, M. (2004). *The central role of Eretz Yisrael in Torah life*. Retrieved from: https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2004/parsha/rros_beraishis.html.
- 12 Lichtenstein, A. (2008). Diaspora Religious Zionism: Some current reflections. In C. A. Waxman (Ed.), *Religious Zionism post engagement: Future directions* (pp. 31-56). Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc.