

Aspiring With the Ramban

The centrality of the Land of Israel in the thought of the Ramban is self-evident. Most notably are the facts that he counts the mitzvah to live in Israel in his *Book of Mitzvot*, as well as the fact that he personally moved from Spain to Israel towards the end of his life, where he founded the “Ramban Shul” in the 13th Century. Maimonides does not consider “*yishuv Eretz Yisrael*,” settling Israel to be one of the 613 mitzvot in his *Book of Mitzvot*, while the Ramban argues that this is a mistaken omission. There has been much speculation as to the rationale of the Ramban, but the Ramban’s inclusion clearly demonstrates the centrality of the Land of Israel in his halachic thought. In this essay, I would like to explore more precisely how the Ramban defines this aspect of Jewish religious life. What exactly is the religious meaning of the Land of Israel and the experience of living in that land? I believe that a consistent approach can be developed by looking at a series of passages in his writings on the Torah.

The Meraglim

In the episode of the *Meraglim*, the sin of the spies, the Ramban demonstrates that everything about the report of the spies was honest and accurate, and conformed to Moshe’s instructions for them. Their sole sin was the use of the word “*efes*” (13:28), which indicated that the possibility of the Jewish conquer of the Land of Israel was out of reach



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and impossible for them. This lack of faith, and self-doubt in their abilities even with the help of God was the heart of their failure.

Rav Soloveitchik (as cited in the introduction to *Shiurei HaRav* on *Masechet Challah*) noted that the mitzvah of *hafrashat challah*, tithing dough, is introduced at the end of the parsha of Shlach, subsequent to the account of the *Meraglim*, while the other agricultural laws of *terumah* and *maaser* tithes are taught at the end of Korach, immediately preceding the story of the *Meraglim*. Rav Soloveitchik suggested that this division can be explained based on the comments of the Ramban. *Terumah* and *maaser* reflect the sanctity that is inherent in the land. This sanctity is manifest in the fact that immediately after the produce is grown it has a halachic status that triggers special mitzvot. *Challah*, however, is a mitzvah that is initiated only after a human being takes the raw materials produced by the earth and actively processes them into something much greater. Only after the wheat is ground, sifted and kneaded into dough does this mitzvah take effect. Thus *Challah* represents

the incredible capacity and potential that Man possesses to improve God’s world. In direct response to the fear of the spies, God counters with the mitzvah of *challah* to emphasize the abilities that they indeed had, though they did not realize it.

If we will consider this thought in light of other comments of the Ramban about the sanctity of the Land of Israel, we can achieve an even deeper insight into the mistake of the *Meraglim* and the response of the Torah.

Torat HaAretz and Torat Chutz LaAretz

The Ramban (Bereishit 26:5 and Devarim 11:18) asserts that the entire Torah was given to be fulfilled specifically in the Land of Israel. While it is true that only agricultural mitzvot are specific to the Land of Israel and “*chovot haguf*,” mitzvot that depend on the person (not the land) apply even outside of Israel, in truth all mitzvot were designed specifically for the Land of Israel. The Ramban dramatically suggests that the ultimate purpose of the mitzvot that we do outside of Israel is merely to remember as practice, so

that the Jewish People will remember these *mitzvot* when we ultimately return to Israel. Since the Jewish People were destined to be sent into exile, the Torah sought to ensure the continuation of our traditions through the generations. If *mitzvot* would be limited to the Land of Israel, then they would be long forgotten by the time of our return from our long exiles. The prophet Yirmiyahu (31:20) instructed the Jewish People to make signs on the roads as we leave Israel that will point towards our return to Israel. The Ramban quotes the Midrash that says the same of *mitzvot* in exile: we must perform them in exile so that we will remember them upon our return. We must pave the road to our redemption even in the midst of our exile, from both a spiritual and physical perspective.

In the same vein, the Ramban (Vayikra 18:25) accepts the midrashic view that the Avot fulfilled the *mitzvot* of the Torah even though it was not yet given. Avraham was taught the *mitzvot* of the Torah by God and fulfilled them along with his children and grandchildren. They voluntarily performed the *mitzvot* because they understood the incredible spiritual opportunity that the *mitzvot* offered. However, the Ramban believes that this was limited to the time that they were in the Land of Israel, where the *mitzvot* were ultimately designed to be kept. It was unnecessary for them to volunteer to practice their *mitzvot* while in exile. That was only needed for the nation while in actual exile. [This

reconciles their commitment to the *mitzvot* with seemingly serious violations, such as Yaakov who was married to two sisters until he returned to Israel.]

This concept sheds light on a problematic verse that the Ramban himself analyzes. In Sefer Vayikra (18:25) the Torah reminds us to comply with all of the commandments and threatens that if we fail to comply with the *mitzvot* then the Land will “spit us out into exile.” The Ramban notes that in context, the threat in this verse is linked to non-agricultural laws that are seemingly unrelated to the Land of Israel. In particular, the Torah is referring to the *arayot*, forbidden sexual relationships. Why then will the Land of Israel spit out the violators of these *mitzvot*? This sin is equally wrong in all lands.

The Ramban responds that the Land of Israel is particularly sensitive to Godliness and sanctity. God is intimately connected to the Land of Israel and directly guides its destiny. In respect to the other lands of the world, God leaves a distance between Himself and Man and, therefore, tolerates sin. The elevated sanctity of the Land of Israel makes sin intolerable and the Land literally spits out those who defile it through sin. This is especially logical in light of the previous thesis of the Ramban that all of the *mitzvot* were designed uniquely for the Land of Israel. The Torah and the Land of Israel were designed for one another and the Land cannot tolerate the defilement of the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

Meraglim Revisited

Based on this understanding, we can add a new layer of understanding of the sin of the *Meraglim*. The spies testified to the greatness of the Land, but claimed that the Jewish People would be unable to conquer it. It is possible that they did not merely underestimate their military ability; perhaps they underestimated their spiritual worthiness. Possibly they understood these lessons of the Torah (Vayikra 18:25, according to the Ramban) and realized that if they would not properly comply with the *mitzvot* they would be spat out. They feared that they would not be worthy of inheriting the land and thus would lose their battles. According to the interpretation of Rav Soloveitchik, God responded with the mitzva of *challah*. This mitzva, that revolves around human innovation, does not merely symbolize the physical and military potential of the new fledgling Jewish army; the mitzva of *challah* also represents the spiritual potential that this new nation possessed. Man will not only follow the *mitzvot* that exist, but will create opportunities for more *mitzvot* and new challenges that will continue to elevate us through our spiritual journey. We must certainly engage in the challenge and not seek to avoid the spiritual challenges out of our fear. We will take the “risk” of a spiritual life in the Land of Israel even though it can threaten to spit us out, because if we succeed, it will elevate us to unimaginable heights.

