

Geulas Yisrael #25

Toldot: Constructing Cities in Israel

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A famine has descended upon the land of Israel, and Yitzchak is caught right in the middle of it. Seeking food provisions elsewhere, he looks beyond the famine-parched lands of Israel for greener pastures. Unlike his father Avraham and his child Ya'akov, each of whom sought famine-relief in Egypt, Yitzchak is instructed by Hashem to remain "put" in Israel. Ideally, our founding fathers were not meant to depart from the land of Hashem. Amidst all the commotion of the book of Bereishit, it is vital that at least one of those founding fathers spend their entire life in Israel. Yitzchak, having been designated as a sacrifice mustn't travel. Instead of journeying to Egypt, Yitzchak seeks supplies by visiting Avimelech, his father's coastal-dwelling ally.

Hashem's instructions for remaining in Israel are delivered through an intriguing word- **שכן בארץ**- which, literally, translates into a command to "reside" in the land of Israel. This word **שכן** isn't a common term and the midrash senses in this peculiar phrase the deeper meanings of life in Israel.

Initially, the midrash associates the term **שכן** with the concept of shechinah/ **שכינה** or the presence of Hashem. Yitzchak is challenged to convert Israel into an epicenter for the presence of Hashem on this world. Hashem's ubiquitous presence spans all reality- irrelevant of time and space. Yet, despite this omnipresence, the concentrated presence of Hashem- the shechinah- coheres in specific locations. It is felt more deeply in the land of Israel and, within Israel, it is concentrated more intensely in the Mikdash and its surrounding city of Yerushalayim. Having been nearly sacrificed upon that mountain of shechinah, Yitzchak is now mandated to more deeply fasten the shechinah to the general landscape of Israel. Presumably, through religious teachings, devoted prayers and personal example, the shechinah will be more strongly anchored to the broader country of Israel. Since Yitzchak must spiritually re-landscape the country he cannot depart Israel.

Switching gears, the midrash also associates the term שֶׁכֶן with the word שְׂכוּנָה or "neighborhood". In addition to expanding the shechinah, Yitzchak was directed to design and establish neighborhoods in the land of Israel. Cities and social infrastructure are each crucial for populating the land of Israel. It is interesting, that the Torah doesn't record much of Yitzchak's civic activity. He does preserve the reservoirs and waterways which Avraham had founded and which had been sealed by hostile neighbors. Presumably, his sustained presence in Israel enabled him to contribute to the broader development of Israeli cities and neighborhoods. Perhaps the Torah doesn't narrate much of this civic activity because it is generally undramatic. Either way, Yitzchak's "stay-at-home" mission was geared toward the establishment of cities and societies in Israel.

These two missions- to entrench the shechinah in the land of Israel and to form neighborhoods, are very different projects. While augmenting the shechinah requires passion and idealism, designing and establishing neighborhoods can oftentimes feel tedious and wearisome. Moreover, these two agendas of שְׂכוּנָה and שְׂכִינָה aren't just different but contradictory. An environment of shechina demands moral piety, spiritual focus and religious aspiring standards. Potential corrupting influences must be filtered to preserve the purity of the shechinah presence. By contrast, and unlike the exclusiveness of a shechinah-center, a neighborhood is meant to be expansive and inclusive, incorporating a diverse grouping of peoples. The agendas of shechinah and of shechunah are not easily merged: shechinah is homogenous, shechunah is heterogenous. Shechinah is focused, shechunah is radial. Never the less Yitzchak is expected to unify them.

For thousands of years we were precluded from attempting this merger. The shechinah can be experienced in any place and at any time, and, for centuries, we successfully forged shechinah-centers in a darkened world. Shechunah construction was more elusive. Of course, we assembled stable and rich Jewish communities. Additionally, on a broader scale, as the vanguard of humanity, we tirelessly contributed to our surrounding host-societies. However, our best efforts could only produce itinerant

Jewish communities- sometimes lasting decades or even centuries- but fundamentally transient.

Having returned to our homeland, the shechinah/shechunah challenge has been resurrected. For some, Israel is solely a terrain of shechinah- sacred sites and holy landscapes. Resources should be invested almost exclusively in shechinah construction- namely direct "religious" experiences. Broader shechunah interests cannot compete with the surpassing agendas of shechinah.

For others, shechunah construction has autonomous value, independent of short-term shechinah goals. We now enjoy the privilege and the duty to actually craft cities and public services necessary for modern life. For the first time in centuries we must provide law enforcement and social welfare, enable political organization and medical administration, and support culture and other areas of public interest. In the past, these areas of the public commons weren't Jewish interests. Tragically, about ten years ago, a terrible fire in the Carmel forest took the lives of 37 prison guard trainees who had been drafted into emergency fire-fighting service. I heard the story of an old man in Yerushalayim who was grieving over this tragic loss. After describing his pain, with tear-filled eyes he remarked "at least it is our fire department". For two thousand years we lived on the margins of society, contributing to social order but not carrying the full weight of shechunah. We delegated firefighting, policing, politicking and many other areas of public life to the gentiles, with whom we shared our neighborhoods. We have now returned home and with that return we once again face the glorious burden of Yitzchak: Can we construct neighborhoods of shechunah while shaping centers of shechinah. This is a challenge we have forgotten about for centuries.

In his famous ode to Zion entitled **ציון הלא תשאלי לשלום אסיריך** the great 11th century Spanish philosopher and poet Yehuda Halevi dreamed of this blending. Most Ashkenazi communities recite this poem toward the conclusion of Tisha b'av kinot. In this elegy, he lovingly and wistfully yearns: **שם השכינה שכונה לך** dreaming of a land in which the presence of Hashem is fastened to permanent Jewish neighborhoods. We have never been closer to fulfilling this vision. So close, yet sometimes so far.