

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

DEVARIM

VAETCHANAN

EKEV

RE'EH

SHOFTIM

KI TEITZEI

KI TAVO

NITZAVIM

VAYELECH

HAZINU

VZOT
HABRACHA

NITZAVIM

FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

AND BACK AGAIN

51

There is an enigmatic passage in the midst of *Parashat Nitzavim*: If your dispersed ones shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there He will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your forefathers inherited and you shall inherit it, and He will do good for you.¹

Why would God gather individuals from the holiest of all places - the heavens - to bring them to the land? Surely, the ingathering of the Jews to Israel is something that will take place from less lofty points, like earth?

Rav Saadia Gaon interprets this as a metaphor.² The Torah paints a picture of a people who, albeit in exile, will live holy and devout lives, who will 'return unto God, listen to everything He commands' and serve Him wholeheartedly.³ Throughout our history, Jewish people strove to fulfil this imperative. They

formed insular communities of piety, where study houses were full and adherence to Jewish law was systemic. These were times of education and spiritual self-growth, and the scholarly achievements that resulted were extraordinary.

But, much like one's time at university, study is a lofty ideal in and of itself, but also a means rather than an end alone. We acquire knowledge in order to apply it. In the World to Come, or heaven, Torah study may be exclusively viewed as an end, but our role here on earth is to sanctify the mundane, to live a life of holiness, and in doing so, to elevate the world into a sanctified, heavenly place.

It is fine, in our private lives, to retreat from societal influences and to create a holy space where we can focus on our own personal spiritual journey. However, all too often people get stuck in this inward focus, losing sight of the

ultimate goal - **our responsibility to bring the world with us on our path of spiritual growth.**

Perhaps, therefore, by saying that God will gather the people from 'the ends of the heavens', the Torah is implying that God will draw the people back from their solely spiritual pursuits, and bring them 'to the land', back to reality. By specifically mentioning the land, the Torah teaches that God will indeed bring the people to deal with the nitty-gritty practicalities of planting seeds and working the physical land.

There is a kabbalistic tradition that each verse in the Torah alludes to a specific year in world history.⁴ Incredibly, the verse under discussion, 'and the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your forefathers inherited and you shall inherit it...' is verse number 5,708 in the Torah. The year 5708 in the lunar calendar corresponds to the year 1948 in the secular calendar,

which is when the State of Israel was established. It is particularly poignant, then, that this verse is invoked in the prayer for the State of Israel.

For the first time in two thousand years, we have been afforded the opportunity to build a Jewish homeland. **Israel is ultimately meant to be built into a beacon for the world, as an inspiration nation** so that they will be able to say, 'this great nation is a wise and understanding people!'⁶ In order to actualise this, each one of us needs to recognise our responsibility of applying our Torah knowledge to the real world. Each one of us has a role to play in building this great nation, a thread to weave in the creation of our national and even international fabric.

This message applies even beyond the building of a national homeland. The Talmud teaches that before a person is born, we are taught the entire Torah while still in the womb.⁷ And at the end of our lives, we pass on to another idyllic spiritual existence - heaven. **While our lives are bookended by these two blissful realms of elevated holiness, our *parasha* reminds us that the Torah itself is 'not in the heavens.'**⁸ It is not meant to be confined to the study house, but must be constantly implemented, to shape every facet of our day-to-day lives.

There are those who build a spiritual 'cocoon' around themselves. They attempt to connect to the untainted pre-life (womb) and post-life (World to Come) spiritual heights. This pursuit of purity may indeed be admirable, but the world, from which they seek to separate,

needs them urgently at least at some stage in their lives. Between the womb and the tomb, the Torah commands us to find the courage to rise to the challenges of this world. **The miracle of the State of Israel, the return of our people to its ancestral home despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, is the ultimate example of this.**

Though we may be susceptible to failure along the way, it is incumbent upon us to embrace the real world and apply our Torah; in other words, as it says at the end of the *parasha*, 'choose life so that you may live!'⁹



Notes

¹ Deuteronomy 30:4-5.

² Rav Saadia Gaon on Deuteronomy 30:4.

³ Deuteronomy 30:2.

⁴ This tradition can be traced to the Vilna Gaon - Rabbi Elijah Ben Solomon Zalman of Vilna - as taught at the end of *Nefesh HaChaim* ('Living Soul'), the major work of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, his foremost disciple.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:5.

⁵ Deuteronomy 4:6.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Nidda* 30b.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:12.

⁹ Deuteronomy 30:19.

Next week in Vayelech:

Millennia ago people travelled in encampments. Today they travel in airplanes. Millennia ago people communicated by word of mouth. It could take weeks or months to get a message to someone on the next hilltop. Today, they share messages in an instant. Millennia ago the most sophisticated tools might have been a chisel and a ploughshare. Today, with the development of the hi-tech field, the possibilities are endless. In this context of an ever-evolving world, one could understandably think that our world bears no resemblance whatsoever to that of our forefathers. And yet, as the baton of leadership is passed from one great to the next, in the Torah encounter eternal lessons that are perhaps even more relevant today than ever before.

Parasha Fact:

The people are told emphatically by Moses that the Torah 'is not in the heavens'. Every person is endowed with dignity and the ability to learn and understand the Torah, we look to spiritual leaders for guidance but not to be spiritual for us.