

Likutei Divrei Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

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Covenant & Conversation: R. Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Holy People, Holy Land - I had been engaged in dialogue for two years with an Imam from the Middle East, a gentle and seemingly moderate man. One day, in the middle of our conversation, he turned to me and asked, "Why do you Jews need a land? After all, Judaism is a religion, not a country or a nation."

I decided at that point to discontinue the dialogue. There are 56 Islamic states and more than 100 nations in which Christians form the majority of the population. There is only one Jewish state, 1/25th the size of France, roughly the same size as the Kruger National Park in South Africa. With those who believe that Jews, alone among the nations of the world, are not entitled to their own land, it is hard to hold a conversation.

Yet the question of the need for a land of our own is worth exploring. There is no doubt, as D.J. Clines explains in his book, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, that the central narrative of the Torah is the promise of and journey to the land of Israel. Yet why is this so? Why did the people of the covenant need their own land? Why was Judaism not, on the one hand, a religion that can be practised by individuals wherever they happen to be, or on the other, a religion like Christianity or Islam whose ultimate purpose is to convert the world so that everyone can practise the one true faith?

The best way of approaching an answer is through an important comment of the Ramban (Nahmanides, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman Girondi, born Gerona, 1194, died in Israel, 1270) on this week's parsha. Chapter 18 contains a list of forbidden sexual practices. It ends with this solemn warning:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. The land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep My decrees and My laws . . . If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Lev. 18:24-28

Nahmanides asks the obvious question. Reward and punishment in the Torah are based on the principle of middah kenegged middah, measure for measure. The punishment must fit the sin or crime. It makes sense to say that if the Israelites neglected or broke mitzvot hateluyot ba'aretz, the commands relating to the land of Israel, the punishment would be exile from the land of Israel. So the Torah says in the curses in Bechukotai: "All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it."

Its meaning is clear: this will be the punishment for not observing the laws of shemittah, the sabbatical year. Shemittah is a command relating to the land. Therefore the punishment for its non-observance is exile from the land.

But sexual offences have nothing to do with the land. They are mitzvot hateluyot baguf, commands relating to person, not place. Ramban answers by stating that all the commands are intrinsically related to the land of Israel. It is simply not the same to put on tefillin or keep kashrut or observe Shabbat in the Diaspora as in Israel. In support of his position he quotes the Talmud (Ketubot 110b) which says:

"Whoever lives outside the land is as if he had no God" and the Sifre that states, "Living in the land of

Israel is of equal importance to all the commandments of the Torah."

The Torah is the constitution of a holy people in the holy land.

Ramban explains this mystically but we can understand it non-mystically by reflecting on the opening chapters of the Torah and the story they tell about the human condition and about God's disappointment with the only species – us – He created in His image. God sought a humanity that would freely choose to do the will of its Creator. Humanity chose otherwise. Adam and Eve sinned. Cain murdered his brother Abel. Within a short time "the earth was filled with violence" and God "regretted that He had made human beings on earth." He brought a flood and began again, this time with the righteous Noah, but again humans disappointed Him by building a city with a tower on which they sought to reach heaven, and God chose another way of bringing humanity to recognise him – this time not by universal rules (though these remained, namely the covenant with all humanity through Noah), but by a living example: Abraham, Sarah and their children.

In Genesis 18 the Torah makes clear what God sought from Abraham: that he would teach his children and his household after him "to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." Homo sapiens is, as both Aristotle and Maimonides said, a social animal, and righteousness and justice are features of a good society. We know from the story of Noah and the Ark that a righteous individual can save themselves but not the society in which they live, unless they transform the society in which they live.

Taken collectively, the commands of the Torah are a prescription for the construction of a society with the consciousness of God at its centre. God asks the Jewish people to become a role model for humanity by the shape and texture of the society they build, a society characterised by justice and the rule of law, welfare and concern for the poor, the marginal, the vulnerable and the weak, a society in which all would have equal dignity under the sovereignty of God. Such a society would win the admiration, and eventually the emulation, of others:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws . . . so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will be your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" . . . What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

A society needs a land, a home, a location in space, where a nation can shape its own destiny in accord with its deepest aspirations and ideals. Jews have been around for a long time, almost four thousand years since Abraham began his journey. During that period they have lived in every country on the face of the earth, under good conditions and bad, freedom and persecution. Yet in all that time there was only one place where they formed a majority and exercised sovereignty, the land of Israel, a tiny country of difficult terrain and all too little rainfall, surrounded by enemies and empires.

Jews never relinquished the dream of return. Wherever they were, they prayed about Israel and facing Israel. The Jewish people has always been the

circumference of a circle at whose centre was the holy land and Jerusalem the holy city. During those long centuries of exile they lived suspended between memory and hope, sustained by the promise that one day God would bring them back.

Only in Israel is the fulfilment of the commands a society-building exercise, shaping the contours of a culture as a whole. Only in Israel can we fulfil the commands in a land, a landscape and a language saturated with Jewish memories and hopes. Only in Israel does the calendar track the rhythms of the Jewish year. In Israel Judaism is part of the public square, not just the private, sequestered space of synagogue, school and home.

Jews need a land because they are a nation charged with bringing the Divine Presence down to earth in the shared spaces of our collective life, not least – as the last chapter of Acharei Mot makes clear – by the way we conduct our most intimate relationships, a society in which marriage is sacrosanct and sexual fidelity the norm.

This message, that Jews need a land to create their society and follow the Divine plan, contains a message for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. To Christians and Muslims it says: if you believe in the God of Abraham, grant that the children of Abraham have a right to the Land that the God in whom you believe promised them, and to which He promised them that after exile they would return.

To Jews it says: that very right comes hand-in-hand with a duty to live individually and collectively by the standards of justice and compassion, fidelity and generosity, love of neighbour and of stranger, that alone constitute our mission and destiny: a holy people in the holy land.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Be Passionately Moderate! - "And God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they came near before the Lord and died." Which is the greater evil in God's eyes – hot sins of passion or cold sins of apathy? Rabbenu Zadok HaKohen of Lublin (1822–1900), in his masterful work *Pri Zaddik* on the portions of the week, cites a famous midrash of an individual walking on a road (life's journey), seductively being summoned either by fire to his right or snow to his left. The wise traveler understands that he must remain at the center, avoiding both extremes of either fanatic passion (fire) or disinterested apathy (snow).

But which of the two extremes is more problematic?

A sin of apathy – symbolized by snow – could well describe the infamous transgression of the scouts, tribal chiefs sent by Moses to bring back a report about the land of Israel. Although they did not conceal the positive aspects of the Promised Land (flowing with milk and honey, and grapes so huge eight men were required to carry each cluster), ten of the scouts nonetheless stressed the negative: a race of people descended from giants who would be impossible to conquer. At the end of the day it was their (and the nation's) apathy toward Israel and disinterest in the religious and political challenge and potential of national sovereignty, which led them to take the path of least resistance and either return to Egypt or remain in the desert. Their sin was one of

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coldness and disillusionment, a lack of idealism bordering on cynicism.

In contrast to the apathy of the spies, the classic example of a sin of passion may be ascribed to Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons who died when they brought an unauthorized offering of "strange fire," referred to in the beginning of this Torah portion. The initial event describes the dedication of the Sanctuary, amidst all of the pomp and circumstance of the priestly ritual, which achieves a climax when the Almighty sends down a fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice of the Israelites and to demonstrate His acceptance of their service. The people become exultant, fall on their faces in worship! And in this moment of ecstasy Nadav and Avihu, sons of the high priest and major celebrants at this consecration, express their passion for God in bringing a "strange fire which had not been commanded." They are immediately killed by God in a fire from above. It seems clear that here is the prototypical "sin of fire," excessive ecstasy which – if not tempered by divine law – can lead to zealous fanaticism which must be stopped in its tracks.

Nevertheless, I would argue that in the scale of transgression, "sins of fire" are generally more forgivable than are "sins of snow." Even if Nadav and Avihu committed a transgression in bringing their strange fire, Moses mitigates their crime when he communicates God's reaction to his bereft brother: "I will be sanctified through them that come near to me, and before all the people will I be glorified."

The sense of the verse is that although the transgression had to be punished, the perpetrators of the crime are still referred to as being "near" to the divine. In contrast, the apathy of the spies leads to major tragedies throughout the course of Jewish history, starting with the punishment of the entire desert generation. "They will therefore not see the land that I swore to their ancestors."

Moreover, the self-imposed passion of Nadav and Avihu, although it leads to the tragic deaths of these two ecstatic celebrants, does not go beyond the "transgressors themselves"; the Bible adds a further commandment several verses after the description of their death: "Drink no wine or strong drink...when you go into into the Tent of Meeting, that you die not..."

In effect, the Bible is forbidding unbridled ecstasy within divine service. But this is a far cry from the punishment of the Ninth of Av tragedy (the day of the scouts' report) which portends Jewish exile and persecution for thousands of years!

Finally, one most striking feature of this portion's opening verse, which refers back to the transgression of Aaron's sons who "came near before the Lord and died," is the absence of the names of Nadav and Avihu. Could the Torah be distinguishing the act from the actors, the crime from its perpetrators? Passion that can lead to fanaticism must be stopped and condemned, but the individuals, whose motives were pure, remain close to the Almighty even in their moment of punishment! And despite the fact that excessive passion resulted in the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the service in the Temple goes on. Once again, in contrast, when the ten tribal heads refuse to enter the land, they are in effect saying no to the entire plan of God; Jewish history comes to a forty-year standstill because of the apathy, and faithlessness of the scouts.

Rabbenu Zadok goes one step further in his interpretation, explaining the root cause of sins of apathy. Why do people or nations fall prey to the snow of icy coldness and disinterested paralysis? What gives rise to a cynical dismissal in place of an idealistic involvement? It is the individual's lack of belief in his capability to succeed in the activity; cynical nay-saying can often serve as a protection

against failure and disappointment. Remember how the scouts described the giant inhabitants of Canaan: "We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes."

The majority of the scouts began with a poor self-image, and since they cannot possibly imagine defeating the Canaanites, they decide not even to attempt it.

This connection between cold apathy and low self-image is hinted at in a verse of the song of praise, Eshet Hayil – "Woman of Valor" sung at the Friday evening Sabbath table. Most of the verses praise the initiative and lovingkindness of a woman "who considers a field and buys it" and "stretches out her palm to the poor". But how are we to understand the following verse? "She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet."

Had the verse mentioned warm, woolen garments I would have understood the reference, but how does being clothed specifically in scarlet garments protect from snow?

If we consider snow as a metaphor for sins of apathy, then the verse is telling us a simple truth: the woman of valor is not afraid that her household will suffer from apathy and disinterestedness, a paralysis of action such as that which afflicted the generation of the scouts, because she imbues in them deep feelings of self-worth; she dresses her household in the royal garb (scarlet). If you wish your children to emerge as kings, then bring them up like princes!

Now, if too much fire leads to death, then it might be better to choose snow over fire, and do away with the unique priestly garments which are liable to produce the exaggerated emotion of zeal! After the double deaths of Nadav and Avihu, one might speculate that if the voltage in the holy Temple is so high, the danger involved may not be worth the risk. With the death of his sons, it would have been natural for Aaron to question his capacity to serve as high priest. Maybe he even blamed himself for the deaths of his sons because of his involvement at the debacle of the golden calf – thinking that he had not done enough to dissuade the Israelites from succumbing to their idolatrous tendencies. At that time, most of the Israelites went wild and off-course with ecstatic abandon, and now his own sons went too far with their "Holy Temple" passion.

But apparently that is not the biblical perspective. After the reference to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, this Torah portion continues with a description of the special garments Aaron must wear in order to officiate on the Day of Atonement.

"He must put on a sanctified white linen tunic, and have linen pants on his body. He must also gird himself with a linen sash, and bind his head with a linen turban. These are the sacred vestments."

I would submit that here the Torah is emphasizing that we dare not throw out the baby with the bathwater. National and religious pride must still be nurtured and fostered despite the fiery fanaticism which can sometimes emerge from special unique garb and inspiring divine service. What we see from this discussion is that although both passion and apathy have inherent dangers, the results of apathy can be far more devastating in the long run.

However, in the final analysis, if we return to our midrash about the individual who must walk in the middle of the road, neither falling prey to the fire – to the successive passion – nor to the snow, to the apathetic loss of idealism, we realize that to remain in the center is not to take a path of least resistance; it is rather the Golden Mean of Maimonides, "the truest path of sweetness and road of peace" as demarcated by our holy Torah, whose "tree of life is in the center of the garden." The traveler must zealously guard against either extreme.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Yes, the Hassidic Kotzker Rebbe taught: "Better a 'hot' misnaged (opponent of the Hassidic movement) than a 'pareve' hassid!" But best of all is one who is passionate in his moderation, and understands that either of the extremes can lead to disaster.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Have you ever been asked to take 'shliach mitzvah' money? If you have, you'll be familiar with the idea. The Talmud teaches, "Shluchei mitzvah einan nizokin." – "People who are on a mission to perform a good deed on behalf of others will come to no harm."

With this in mind, sometimes when people are going on a journey, family or friends might give them some money, asking, "When you reach your destination please give this to charity." With this they're giving the traveller their blessing that no harm will befall them.

This is one of many examples of the concept of 'shlichut', where we ask people to carry out good deeds on our behalf. The Talmud teaches, "Shluchei shel adam kemoto," – "One's representative is just like oneself."

That person becomes your 'yada arichta' – your extended arm. The concept of shlichut therefore has numerous blessings. It's great for those who are asking others to perform good deeds because it means that their output of goodness is increased. They don't have to carry out every single deed themselves, and those who carry out the deeds are blessed as a result.

The Torah, in Parshat Acharei Mot however, gives one notable exception to the concept of shlichut, of delegation. We're presented with laws concerning inappropriate sacrifices and the Torah tells us that somebody who brings such a sacrifice, "Dam yechasheiv laish hahu," – this wrongdoing "will be considered to be the act of the person who carried it out."

Says the Talmud: "Hu velo sholcho," – "It's that person's wrongdoing and not the wrongdoing of anyone who asked them to carry it out."

Here the Torah is letting us know that 'ein shliach lidvar aveirah,' – you cannot have a representative to carry out something which is wrong. If you're performing a wrongdoing – it's on your own head. You can't blame anyone else for it.

So therefore let us take advantage of the concept of shlichut; let's ask people to perform good deeds on our behalf; let's increase all the output of the kindness and good that we perform in this world; let's increase blessings for our society – but let's never forget that when it comes to wrongdoing, no person should ever be allowed to give the excuse "I was only doing my duty. I was only obeying orders."

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's

Derashot Ledorot [Excerpt]

...Just as in matters of prayer or observance or religious experience, so in matters of charity we must grow Jewishly. Here too there must be something different for a change. Today must not be the same as yesterday, tomorrow not the same as today, this year not the same as last year.

Perhaps all that I have been saying is summed up in the last will and testament of one of the greatest Jewish translators of the Middle Ages, Rabbi Judah Ibn Tibbon, when he left the following advice to his son, Rabbi Samuel: "Of what good is life if my actions today are no different from what they were yesterday?" And conversely, how wonderful can life be if every day is new, if every day is different, if every day there is a change for the better.