YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

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**Shiur #18: The Jewish Ethic of a Redeemed Economy  
in the Land of Israel, Part 2**

**Israel, Egypt, the Garden of Eden, and Sodom**

We concluded our previous *shiur* with Moshe’s contrasting the terrain of Egypt, whose economy depended on the hard work of distributing the Nile’s water throughout the country, and the Land of Israel, which is sustained by the “rain of heaven” (*Devarim* 11:11), requiring less physical work as long as its inhabitants merit rain.

Due to this difference, the Egyptians were much less conscious of God than individuals living in the Land of Israel can be. Like Egypt, Sodom of old was situated adjacent to a river and developed a Godless economy and depraved social norms. These societies stand in marked distinction to the economy of the Land of Israel, whose dependence upon heavenly rain facilitates the development of an economy that is aware of God, devotes itself to Him, and maintains its interpersonal focus.

As we mentioned previously, the city of Sodom is compared not only to Egypt, but also to “the Garden of God” (*Bereishit* 13:10), i.e. the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, man picked fruit without need for work; only after man ate from the Tree of Knowledge was he cursed to work the ground with difficulty (*ibid.* 3:17–19). A number of commentators opine that when Adam was initially commanded to tend to and protect the garden (*Bereishit* 2:15), the intent was only that he occupy himself with spiritual pursuits, through which the garden would grow. There was to be no need for physical work: the garden’s plants would grow as a response to spiritual efforts.

That was before the curse. After the curse, man was required to work the field, and was liable to think that the physical growth of the field was due to his valiant efforts. Thus, after the Jews witnessed an extreme form of this outlook in Egypt, God corrected their perspective by subjecting them to its opposite, feeding them manna, so that their sustenance entailed no physical work.

The manna let the Jews clearly recognize God as the provider of bread, and allowed them to occupy their time with spiritual pursuits rather than physical needs. It is no surprise that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai – whom we quoted previously as advising the Jew to spend all his time studying Torah, while relying on God for his physical needs – had a very positive view of the Jews’ time in the desert:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: Interpretation of the Torah was given only to those who eat manna. How so? One sits and expounds [Torah] and does not know from where his food and drink will come, or from where his clothing will come. This is [the meaning of the statement that] interpretation of the Torah was given only those who eat manna, and second to them are those who eat *teruma*. (*Mekhilta*, *Vayissa* 2)

Rabbi Shimon advises that man focus all his energies on Torah and rely on God to provide for him in the same manner that He provided manna. It seems from the excerpt above that this is how the *kohanim* lived. They did not own land, but were designated as the teachers and spiritual voice of the people, and were sustained by the *teruma* that was provided to them by others.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Notwithstanding the view of Rabbi Shimon, the Gemara seems to rule otherwise, at least for most people.[[2]](#footnote-2) It prefers the opposing opinion of Rabbi Yishma’el: in order to provide for himself in the Land of Israel, man must engage in at least a minimum of agriculture.

**Rain from Heaven**

Rabbi Yishma’el surely was cognizant of the spiritual dangers of working the land, but he realized that the time for manna from heaven ceased when the Jews entered the Land. An economy based on “bread from heaven” (*Shemot* 16:4) is neither the reality nor the ideal for the masses settled in the Land of Israel. The experience of the desert allowed the Jewish people to forge their identity as a people, with all their needs provided. In the Land of Israel, though, the people would live a natural existence. Man would work the field. Instead of receiving bread from heaven, he would recite a blessing over bread from the earth.

This begs the question, though: How is man to till the ground, get mere sheaves of wheat for his hard work, proceed to thresh and winnow and knead and bake before any bread appears, and still remember God in the process?

Moshe provides the answer in his description of the topography of the Land of Israel:

The land to which you are passing over to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys; it drinks water from the rain of heaven. (*Devarim* 11:9)

Yes, in the Land of Israel you will work to obtain bread from the earth, asin Egypt – but not in the same way. The Egyptians worked hard to amass manpower to support an economy that did not see the divine hand in its activities, enslaving people to work the land as hard as possible and to distribute water from the Nile River through canals and irrigation systems. The Land of Israel is different, not because it is fed heavenly bread, but because it is irrigated with heavenly rain. When there is natural rainfall, it benefits without any need for excessive work. “It drinks water from the rain of heaven”: rain will come from heaven if the people deserve to receive bread from the ground.

Unlike the manna, which was rained down (*mamtir*) from heaven, in the Land of Israel, the bread of the earth is nourished by rain (*matar*) from heaven*.* Man does work the field, which is a spiritual act in its own right,[[3]](#footnote-3) but he is to recognize that nothing grows without heavenly intervention. In the Land of Israel it is clear that even earthly bread comes from God.

Rabbi Yishma’el may even have reasoned that this recognition, far more than the manna, provides for a deep appreciation of God’s hand in our physical sustenance, positing as it does a partnership between man and God.

**God and Man: Agricultural Partners**

Man’s responsibility for bringing rain from heaven was an essential element of Creation. Before any plant grew in the Garden of Eden,

no shrub of the field was yet on the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not brought rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the ground. (*Bereishit* 2:5)

Rashi (s.v. *ki*) comments:

“For the Lord God had not brought rain,” and what is the reason he had not brought rain? Because “there was no man to work the ground”: there was no one to recognize the goodness of rainfall. When Adam came and realized that rain is essential for the world, he prayed for rain, it came down, and the trees and vegetation of the world sprouted.

The first rain in history resulted from man’s prayers. With this initial experience, man learned that physical growth on Earth is a product of heavenly grace, to be deserved through spiritual pursuits.

Life in the Land of Israel is a return to the Garden of Eden. Just as God’s presence was apparent in the Garden of Eden, it is apparent in the Land – “a land for which the Lord, your God, cares: the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (*Devarim* 11:12).

As part of the people’s natural existence in the Land of Israel, its climate reacts to their spiritual condition.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the words of Rashbam (*Devarim* 11:10): “This land is better than all other lands for those who observe His commandments, and worse than all other lands for those who do not observe them.”

The Mishna (*Ta’anit*) prescribes fast days when rain is lacking in the Land of Israel, because physical drought is but an expression of God’s hiding His face from His people. The local weather thus serves as a kind of religious feedback mechanism. With drought or famine, God can indicate that people must change their ways to avert a more drastic punishment. Natural existence, fed by heavenly rain, is actually a prerequisite for healthy spiritual existence in the physical Land.

**Faith in Hidden Miracles**

In light of this connection between spiritual and physical existence in the Land, we can understand why the Gemara (*Shabbat* 31a) views the agricultural section of the Mishna (*Seder Zera’im*) as epitomized by faith*:*

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written, “The faith [*emunat*] of your times shall be a strength of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; fear of the Lord is His treasure” (*Yeshayahu* 33:6)? “Faith” – this is the section of *Zera*’*im* …[[5]](#footnote-5)

The farmer knows that all of man’s efforts in the field are mere attempts at sustenance, in the hope that weather conditions will not destroy the crop. Only the One who gives life can determine whether physical crops will grow. Nevertheless, explain the Tosafot (s.v. *emunat*), the farmer “puts his faith in the One who gives life to the world, and plants.”

The superiority of faith in God’s hidden agricultural miracles over a manna-based existence is further evident from a key essay of Ramban in his commentary to *Shemot* (13:16). Noting that God performed many manifest miracles when bringing the Jews out of Egypt and through the desert, he explains that such miracles served as proof of the Creator’s existence and the truth of the Torah. Nevertheless, God does not want to prove His existence anew in every generation, and therefore issued numerous *mitzvot* requiring man to remember the Exodus and transmit its memory to his children:

All these [commandments] are intended to bear witness to the wonders throughout the generations, so that they will not be forgotten, and so that the heretic will not have any justification for rejecting the belief in God …

Yet manifest miracles are not the ideal, as they demonstrate God’s existence only at the moment they happen. The overarching goal is that man forge a relationship with God and constantly recognize Him:

As a result of the great manifest miracles, one grants the truth of the hidden miracles, which constitute the foundation of the entire Torah, for no one can have a part in the Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu without believing that all things and events that befall us are entirely miraculous, not in any way natural or inevitable, whether public affairs or individual affairs. (Ramban, *ibid.*)

So it was that the entire period the people sojourned in the desert and were fed manna, bread from heaven, the goal was that they one day arrive in the Land of Israel, where they would eat natural bread, yet recite the blessing recognizing God as Him who brings forth bread from the earththrough the hidden miracle of rain from heaven. The Land of Israel blooms (see [*Shiur* 15](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/15chavero.htm)) in response to the actions of the people; it is the perfect setting for an economy permeated with the recognition of God’s hidden hand in every facet of human existence.

This is the backdrop a Jewish interpersonal paradise that stands in stark contrast to the Sodomite ethic. Unlike that Godless society, Jewish society must be premised on the unification of the people as a single nation, expressed through the mutual responsibility[[6]](#footnote-6) that the Jews accepted upon entering the Land, in the covenant at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival.

Because of the intimate connection between Jewish peoplehood and Jewish agriculture, a number of agricultural *mitzvot* are applicable only when the majority of the Jewish people reside in the Land of Israel. As long as the link between nationhood and agriculture is a healthy one, the field owner provides for those who lack, and the pursuit of wealth can never descend to survival of the fittest.

**Holiness: Sanctifying the Physical World**

On the Shabbat before a new month, we pray for a physically and spiritually successful life: “life in which there are love of Torah … fear of Heaven … fear of sin.” This is the life of the Land of Israel: a life of holiness,[[7]](#footnote-7) which entails not escape from the physical world, but sanctification of it, living in and beautifying the physical world while remaining committed and connected to the ideals of the Jewish people. It is a life of working in the field while one’s assets and attitude remain oriented toward heaven: a life full of *mitzvot*.

The agricultural *mitzvot* of the Land of Israel allows us to maintain this perspective. A farmer who sacrifices *bikkurim,* first fruits (*Devarim* 26), is required to recite a declaration tracing the historical background of his crops. He recalls God’s promise to the Patriarchs that their descendants would inherit the Land of Israel, remembers the exodus from Egypt, and recognizes God as the One who has given the Jews their land and their crops.

Providing *terumot* and *ma’asrot* from one’s produce to feed the *kohen*, the *Levi*,and the poor allows one always to provide for others with his financial gains.

The charitable gifts of *leket* and *pe’ah* are not handouts to the poor (see [*shiur* 12](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/12chavero.htm)), but the reservation of a part of one’s field for the poor, as if they are its true owners.

Yet the ultimate act of charity and ultimate recognition of the limits on one’s ownership come with the sabbatical (*shemitta*) year. Every seventh year, man must waive ownership of his fields, declaring all that grows to be ownerless and allowing all to partake of his now-ownerless fruit.

An Israeli farmer who had spent years cultivating expensive, exotic fruit trees once described to me the amount of inner strength necessary to watch teenagers come during the sabbatical year and take fruits from his trees without even realizing what had gone into planting them. Those who observe the mitzva of the sabbatical year are with good reason described by our Sages with the verse, “You mighty in strength who fulfill His word, hearkening to the voice of His word” (*Tehillim* 103:20).

This strength of character brings with it an appreciation of God’s involvement with the land, and of who is the true owner of the field. Providing for others from one’s own field helps one develop a giving personality. The feeling of lacking true ownership is then taken to yet another level when all land returns to its initial owner in the jubilee year (*yovel*).

The sabbatical year, significantly, is a time when an agriculturist can dedicate himself to the study of Torah. If, as Rav Soloveitchik noted, Shabbat is an essential part of the Jewish economic ethic (see [previous *shiur*](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/17chavero.htm)), then so is the sabbatical year. During this year, man almost reaches the point of being sustained by manna: “Then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and [the land] shall bring forth produce for the three years” (*Vayikra* 25:21).

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop goes one step further, describing the growth of crops during the sabbatical year as equivalent to plants’ growth in the Garden of Eden. Both, he notes, come forth without need to work the land.

The dedication of the sabbatical year to the agriculturist’s spiritual rejuvenation and refocusing is apparent on Sukkot of the following year, on which the mitzva of *hakhel* is performed. During this ceremony, the people gather at the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and listen as the king reads the book of *Devarim* in an event that partially recreates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Due to the difficulty of maintaining a healthy perspective, spiritual renewal cannot be limited to every seventh year. Therefore, explains the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (mitzva 360), the yearly tithe of kosher domestic animals is brought to Jerusalem, where it is eaten by the owner after the blood and fat have been offered on the altar:

This precept is causally rooted in that God, blessed is He, chose the people of Israel and desired, for the sake of making them righteous, that they be those who occupy themselves with His Torah and know His name. So in His wisdom He brought them close with this mitzva, that they might learn and accept moral teaching. For God knows that most people are drawn after the inferior, lowly physical element, “being also flesh” (*Bereishit* 6:3), and do not devote their spirit to toiling in the Torah and being constantly occupied with it. Therefore, with His understanding, He arranged matters so as to give them a location where all would know the words of His Torah under all circumstances …

… every man would take up the tithe of all his flocks to … Jerusalem, where the Sanhedrin [supreme scholarly court] was … and would likewise take up the tithe of our crops in four years of the seven-year cycle[[9]](#footnote-9) … and eat his fruit there: either the owner of the stock would go there himself to study Torah, or he would send one of his sons there, so that he would study there and be sustained by that produce.

As a result, in every single Israelite’s house there would be a wise man versed in the Torah, who with his wisdom would teach his entire family, and thus “the land shall be full of knowledge of the Lord” (*Yeshayahu* 11:9) … and with a knowledgeable individual in every household … always educating [the entire family] … they would merit to attain what is written, “Then I shall set my Tabernacle among you … and I shall be your God, and you shall be My people. (*Vayikra* 26:11–12)

As the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* shows, benefitting from the physical bounty of the Land of Israel is associated with the Torah and spirituality, which spread from Jerusalem into every home in the Land. The more successful one’s business endeavors, the more one will have to bring to Jerusalem to reconnect with the spiritual core of the nation.

**Outside the Land**

In the Land of Israel, everything from the terrain to the agricultural *mitzvot* is designed so as to assist a person who wants to build a redeemed economy. Although many agricultural *mitzvot* do not apply outside the Land, the same economic principles must apply even to those involved in business and acquisition outside the Land: the economic model of the Land of Israel serves as the ethical ideal even for those whose bread is not brought forth by rain from heaven. Even where agricultural *mitzvot* do not apply, their message should be expressed in business endeavors in every way possible.

In order to maintain a redeemed economy, we must ensure that we remain conscious of God, and develop a society that cares for the weak and needy. We must ensure that our Shabbat is a time of spiritual renewal, and focus on the fact that it is God who delivers His bounty to those engaged in physical work. Reciting blessings that recognize God as the source of our food, subordinating our wealth to a higher purpose, and finding opportunities for spiritual renewal help us to maintain the Jewish economic ethic, wherever we reside.

The sabbatical year symbolizes this concept. Although the agricultural aspects of the year apply only in the Land of Israel, release of loans (*shemittat kesafim*) applies throughout the world. At the conclusion of the year, all unpaid loans are released, and while it is proper that one who owes money repay it, he cannot be required to do so. In essence, this mitzva creates a bankruptcy option for those who are insolvent. The Torah nevertheless goes so far as to require that one continue to lend money to the needy even as the sabbatical year approaches, and not fear that loans will not be returned.

Because the Jewish ethic of a redeemed economy applies everywhere, the entire world needs a sabbatical year. Release of loans not only is a mitzva, but teaches us the proper attitude towards lending, charity, and interaction with employees and clients.

In the next lesson we will discuss the Jewish concept of *tzedaka*, which is above and beyond mere charity. Afterward, we will return to Chapter 19 of *Vayikra* to discuss the various economic *mitzvot* discussed there as a means of sanctifying our lives, wherever we live.

1. See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-yovel*, Chapter 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Bei’ur Halakha* 156, s.v. *sofa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the comments by Chatam Sofer cited in last week’s *shiur* regarding the place of agriculture within the mitzva of settling the Land. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Ramban on *Vayikra* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Gemara proceeds to associate each of the remaining orders of the Mishna with a different element of the verse, but these are beyond the scope this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On mutual responsibility (*areivut*), see year 2, *Shiur* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See year 1, *Shiurim* [21](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/21chavero.htm)–[22](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/22chavero.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Devarim* 31:10ff. and Rambam, *Hilkhot Chagiga*, Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I.e. years 1, 2, 4, and 5. In years 3 and 6, a tithe is given to the poor. In the sabbatical year there are no tithes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)