**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha*:**

**Dr. Tziporah Lifshitz**

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

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לע"נ

 יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**Parashat Ekev:**

**The Praise of Eretz Israel**

**The *Sifrei* on *Ekev*: A Historical Perspective**

Most of the content of *Parashat Ekev* revolves around the spiritual meaning of entering the Promised Land and the obligations that stem from living within its borders. The Midrash of the Tannaim on *Parashat Ekev* opens with four sections that deal directly with the praise (*shevach*) of Eretz Israel. By the same token, the verses and themes that are expounded in most of the other twelve sections relate to similar issues of rain, exile and redemption, among others.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When we compare the content of the *Sifrei* to the content of *Midrash Tanchuma* on *Devarim* (chronologically, the next midrashic work on the Book of *Devarim*), we find that the *derashot* appearing in it on *Parashat Ekev* have no relationship to and make no mention whatsoever of Eretz Israel. Instead, all of the *derashot* deal with the Torah and its study by individual Jews. The *Tanchuma* literature is Midrashic literature from Eretz Israel, like the *Sifrei.* Despite the five hundred years that separate them, this remarkable distinction is far from obvious. It may be suggested that this gap reflects a different historical reality, and a different consciousness regarding Eretz Israel, which in the intervening centuries had fallen from its previous heights.

We will summarize the contents of the first four sections of the *Sifrei* on *Parashat Ekev* (37-40), which deal with the praise of Eretz Israel. Section 37 of the *Sifrei* deals with the blessing manifest in Eretz Israel, unlike Egypt, which expresses itself in the dimensions of matter and spirit. Section 38 of the Sifreideals with the blessing found in Eretz Israel in relation to the people of Israel, which is dependent upon the Jewish people’s being in their land. Section 39 of the *Sifrei* deals with the fertility of the land and the diversity of its yield, and constitutes an expansion of Section 37. Section 40 relates to the special mode of Divine providence in Eretz Israel.

Several fundamental concepts emerge from this unit as a whole:[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. The sanctity of the land derives solely from God's special attitude toward it: closeness, selection, demands on its inhabitants, direct providence, and more. The land itself has no inherent sanctity.
2. All of the unique characteristics of the land find expression only when the people of Israel dwell therein.
3. God's special relationship with the land finds expression in its water and in the quality of its produce.
4. Eretz Israel is not cut off from the rest of the world, and God cares about other countries as well. Eretz Israel serves as a conduit for Divine abundance all over the globe. The other nations sense this and therefore seek to gain a foothold in Eretz Israel.

Each of these perceptions is a topic worthy of extended discussion, but this is not the proper forum for such excurses.

“**A land coveted, an inheritance prized by hosts of nations”**

In the framework of this *shiur,* we will focus on the last *derasha* in Section 37:

It is stated: "And I gave you a land coveted (*eretz chemda*), an inheritance prized (*nachalat tzevi*)by hosts of nations (*tzivot goyim)"* (*Yirmeyahu* 3:19).

[This teaches us that it is] a land populated with mansions (*chavillaot*)[[3]](#footnote-3)for kings and rulers.

For any king or ruler who had not acquired [mansions] in Eretz Israel said: I have done nothing.

Rabbi Yehuda says: Were the thirty-one former kings all in Eretz Israel?

Rather, like they do in Rome today, that any king or ruler who has not acquired [mansions] in Rome says: I have done nothing.

So too every king or ruler who had not acquired palaces and mansions in Eretz Israel said: I have done nothing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

"The inheritance prized (*tzevi*) (by hosts of nations)" (ibid.)

Just as a gazelle (*tzevi*) is quicker on foot than any beast or animal,

So, the fruits of Eretz Israel are quicker to ripen than those of all the other lands.

Another explanation: Just as a gazelle, when you flay it, its hide cannot contain its flesh,

So Eretz Israel cannot contain [all of] its fruits when Israel observes the Torah.

And just as a gazelle is lighter to eat than any beast or animal,

so the fruits of Eretz Israel are lighter to eat than those of all the other lands.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If they are light, I might think they are not rich.

Therefore, it is written: "a land flowing with milk and honey" (*Devarim* 11:9),

Rich like milk and sweet like honey.

And thus is it written: "Let me sing now of my beloved, a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard upon a rich knoll (*keren ben shemen*)" (*Yeshayahu* 5:1).

Just as there is nothing higher in an ox than its horns (*karnav*), so, Eretz Israel is higher than all of the other lands.

But perhaps, just as an ox has nothing more useless than its horns, so, Eretz Israel is more flawed than all of the other lands!

Therefore, it is written: "upon a rich (*ben shemen*) knoll" — Eretz Israel is rich (*shamein*).

This teaches you that whatever is higher than others is more praiseworthy than others.

Eretz Israel, because it is higher than all [lands], is more praiseworthy than all [lands],

As it is stated: "Let us go up and we will possess it" (*Bamidbar* 13:30);

"And they went up and scouted out the land," (ibid. v. 21); "And they went up in the south" (ibid. v. 22); "And they went up from Egypt" (*Bereishit* 45:25).

The Temple, which is higher than all, is more praiseworthy than all,

As it is stated: "then you shall rise and go up to the place" (*Devarim* 17:8);

And it is stated: "And many peoples will go and say: Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Ya’akov" (*Yeshayahu* 2:3);

And it is stated: " For there shall be a day, that the watchmen shall call [upon Mount Efrayim: arise you, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God]!" (*Yirmeyahu* 31:5).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The first *derasha* relates to the words, "And I gave you a land coveted… by hosts of nations," which indicates that all the nations wished to acquire a foothold (something along the lines of an embassy) in Eretz Israel, as an expression of their political strength.

For Rabbi Yehuda, Yirmeyahu is not relating a far-off vision; the sage connects it to the past of the nation and his own present, both among the thirty-one kings of Canaan at the time of the Jewish people's entry into their land in the days of Yehoshua (assuming that they were not kings within the borders of Canaan per se, but foreign rulers who wanted a diplomatic presence in the Promised Land) and in the Roman Empire of his own time.

In the continuation, the words "inheritance prized (*nachalat* *tzevi*)," are expounded as relating to the land's produce, the quick ripening and superior quality of its fruit. In these *derashot*, the word *tzevi* which appears in the verse is expounded in connection with the qualities of the animal that goes by that name, the gazelle (in the feminine plural, *tzevaot* or *tzivot*). The formula "just as a gazelle" is repeated three times. Therefore, *nachalat tzevi* becomes “an inheritance that has the qualities of a gazelle.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The third part of the *Sifrei's derasha* deals with the quality (the "fat") of the produce, which is derived from two other verses: "a land flowing with milk and honey" (*Devarim* 11:9); and "Let me sing now of my beloved, a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard upon a rich knoll" (*Yeshayahu* 5:1).

In this part, the *derasha* moves from extolling the ground and the produce to extolling the elevated nature of Eretz Israel, while emphasizing the word *keren* in the third verse cited therein: "My beloved had a vineyard upon a rich knoll (*keren*)."

Just as there is nothing higher in an ox than its horns, so, Eretz Israel is higher than all of the other lands.

The root *kuf-reish-nun* in *Tanakh* appears in the context of formative events and lofty spiritual ascents: the binding of Yitzchak, the rays of light emanating from Moshe's face, the war of Jericho, the kingdom of the House of David and of the Messiah.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the continuation, the *Sifrei* expounds the phrase "a rich knoll" which appears in the verse:

But perhaps, just as an ox has nothing more useless than its horns, so, Eretz Israel is more flawed than all of the other lands![[9]](#footnote-9)

Therefore, it is written: "upon a rich (*ben shemen*) knoll" — Eretz Israel is rich (*shamein*).

This teaches you that whatever is higher than others is more praiseworthy (*meshubach*)than others.

In this *derasha*, the term "*meshubach*" relates to material abundance.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, the *Sifrei* identifies Eretz Israel as uniting within it spirit and matter.

The last part of the *derasha,* in which the focus shifts from the land to the Temple, points to the Temple as an even more exalted level of this union.

The *derasha* discussed here begins with a description of the desire of the rulers of the nations to acquire a foothold in Eretz Israel, moves on to the issue of the fertility of the land, and concludes with the matter of the spiritual virtue of Eretz Israel. The interweaving of the physical features of the land with its spirituality in the structure of the *derasha* is consistent with the trend we saw above, to reflect the greatness of the period when the people of Israel merit to dwell within the king's estate, eating of its fruit and being satiated by its goodness.

**The good of land and the deeds of the people**

The three verses presented over the course of the *derasha* as proof of the goodness and fatness of the land and its produce relate to the conditioning of the bounty of Eretz Israel on the actions of the people of Israel. The first of the expounded verses is taken from the Book of *Yirmeyahu* (3*:*19*):*

But I said: How did I put you among the sons, and give you a land coveted, an inheritance prized by hosts of nations. And I said: You shall call Me, My father; and shall not turn away from following Me.

This is addressed to the people of the Kingdom of Judea who wish to return to Eretz Israel at the end of the exile. Let us consider it in its full context:

And it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall say no more: The ark of the covenant of the Lord; neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they make mention of it; neither shall they miss it; neither shall it be made any more. 

At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem; neither shall they walk any more after the stubbornness of their evil heart. In those days the house of Judea shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given for an inheritance to your fathers.

But I said: How did I put you among the sons, and give you a land coveted, an inheritance prized by hosts of nations. And I said: You shall call Me, My father; and shall not turn away from following Me. Surely as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, says the Lord. 

Hark! upon the high hills is heard the suppliant weeping of the children of Israel; for that they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, you backsliding children, I will heal your backslidings.

Here we are, we are come to You; for You are the Lord our God. Truly vain have proved the hills, the uproar on the mountains; truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel. But the shameful thing has devoured the labor of our fathers from our youth; their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. Let us lie down in our shame, and let our confusion cover us; for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day; and we have not hearkened to the voice of the Lord our God. (*Yirmeyahu* 3:16-25)

The prophet asks the people in the name of God how can they be allowed to return home to Eretz Israel, if there is no guarantee that they will not repeat the same mistakes which sent them into exile. Based on the context, the description of the virtues of the land — "a land coveted, an inheritance prized by hosts of nations" — emphasizes the contrast between it and the situation in which there is a possibility of sin.

The second verse cited in the *derasha* regarding the praise of the land — "a land flowing with milk and honey" — also appears after the conditioning of continued settlement in Eretz Israel on observance of the Torah:

And know you this day; for I speak not with your children that have not known, and that have not seen the chastisement of the Lord your God, His greatness, His mighty hand, and His outstretched arm…

But your eyes have seen all the great work of the Lord which He did. Therefore shall you keep all the commandment which I command you this day, that you may be strong, and go in and possess the land, which you go over to possess it; and that you may prolong your days upon the land, which the Lord swore to your fathers to give to them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey. (*Devarim* 11:2, 7-9)

The third verse cited in the *derasha*: "Let me sing now of my beloved, a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard upon a rich knoll," is the verse that opens the parable of the vineyard in the book of *Yeshayahu*:

Let me sing now of my beloved, a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard upon a rich knoll; and he dug it, and cleared it of stones, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also hewed out a vat therein; and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth sour ones.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judea, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Why, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth sour ones?

And now come, I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; I will break down the fence thereof, and it shall be trodden down; and I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned nor hoed, but there shall come up briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judea the plant of His delight; and He looked for justice, but behold violence; for righteousness, but behold a cry. (*Yeshayahu* 5:1-7)

These three verses refer to different historical times. Yirmeyahu addresses a question regarding the future, from the end of the time of the exile; the Book of *Devarim* warns in advance of a situation that may arise even before it begins; and Yeshayahu is in the middle, in the Kingdom of Judea during the First Temple Era. The abundance of Eretz Israel does not stand on its own, but is engraved in Divine law, in the conditions written in the Torah, predicated on continued observance of God’s word. This condition is unlimited; it relates not to a particular generation, but to all generations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

After these three verses, three more verses appear over the course of the *derasha* which relate to the praise of the land. The context of the fourth and fifth verses, from which we learn that "Eretz Israel is higher than all of the other lands," is nothing other than the Sin of the Spies!

So they went up, and scouted out the land…

And they went up into the South…

We should go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. (*Bamidbar* 13:21, 22, 30)

The goodness of the fruit of the land proves to be a stumbling block for the Jewish people, causing them to lose the ability to enter the land in that generation. If so, the five verses cited thus far in the *derasha* as evidence of the land’s praiseworthiness contain within them a certain complexity, a note of caution required in order to be privileged to dwell in the land and enjoy its bounty.

The sixth verse, "And they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to Ya’akov their father" (*Bereishit* 45:25), tells of the return of Yosef's brothers to their father in the land of Canaan after Yosef reveals his identity to them. The Torah refers to the good of the land of Egypt three times:

Hasten you, and go up to my father, and say to him: Thus says your son Yosef: God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, tarry not. And you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you, and your children, and your children's children, and your flocks, and your herds, and all that you have; and there will I sustain you; for there are yet five years of famine; lest you come to poverty, you, and your household, and all that you have…

And Pharaoh said to Yosef: Say to your brothers: This do you: load your beasts, and go, get you to the land of Canaan; and take your father and your households, and come to me; and I will give you **the good of the land of Egypt,** and you shall eat the fat of the land…

Also regard not your stuff; for the **good of all the land of Egypt** is yours…

And to his father he sent likewise ten donkeys laden **with the good of Egypt,** and ten she-donkeys laden with grain and bread and victual for his father by the way.

So he sent his brothers away, and they departed; and he said to them: See that you quarrel not by the way.

And they went up from Egypt, and came into the land of Canaan to Ya'akov their father. (*Bereishit* 45:9-25)

Here, too, the verse from which we learn about the praise of Eretz Israel (its height) is found in a negative context, which emphasizes the wretchedness of the land that is languishing in famine, as opposed to Egypt. The notion of "going up" (*aliya*) which appears in this context despites the land being void of good alludes to its spiritual virtue, which is not impaired even in years of famine.

This leads us to the conclusion that the situation in which Eretz Israel gives its produce in abundance is not a natural or simple one, but rather a feature of redemption, when there is symmetry between the actions of the nation and the abundance found in the land. Before it belongs to the people of Israel, or when the people do not keep the Torah, the land's yield is impaired. In addition, the principle presented in the third part of the *derasha*, that Eretz Israel is a supreme combination of matter and spirit (even if in a way that is not realized at all times throughout history), arises from the choice of verses, some of which express the abundance of its physical good, and some its spiritual virtue.

An examination of the verses that conclude the *derasha*, which are brought as proof that "the Temple, which is higher than all, is more praiseworthy than all," reveals that they too conform to the pattern set by the verses brought regarding the praise of Eretz Israel. The first two verses are connected to going up to the Temple for the purpose of receiving the word of God:

If there arise a matter too hard for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, even matters of controversy within your gates; then shall you arise, and go up to the place which the Lord your God shall choose. (*Devarim* 17:8)

And many peoples shall go and say: Come you, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Ya’akov; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (*Yeshayahu* 2:3)

By contrast, the third verse, from *Yirmeyahu,* describes going up to the mountain of the Lord where the people will achieve material gain:

For there shall be a day, that the watchmen shall call upon Mount Efrayim: arise you, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.

For thus says the Lord: sing with gladness for Ya’akov, and shout at the head of the nations; announce you, praise you, and say: O Lord, save Your people, the remnant of Israel.

Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the uttermost parts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travails with child together; a great company shall they return here. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them; I will cause them to walk by rivers of waters, in a straight way wherein they shall not stumble; for I am become a father to Israel, and Efrayim is My first-born.

Hear the word of the Lord, O you nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say: He that scattered Israel does gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd does his flock. For the Lord has ransomed Ya’akov, and He redeems him from the hand of him that is stronger than he.

And they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow to the goodness of the Lord, to the grain, and to the wine, and to the oil, and to the young of the flock and of the herd; and their soul shall be as a watered garden, and they shall not pine any more at all.

Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old together; for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow. And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 31:5-13)

In conclusion, let us consider the placement and interweaving of the verses over the course of the *derasha* as a work of art which expresses the different layers of meaning included therein, which become evident only after a thorough examination of the words of the Sages.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Section 41 in the *Sifrei,* which deals with the relationship between Torah study and keeping the *mitzvot,* is something of an exception, as it is not connected to Eretz Israel.

   It should be noted that the matter of the Sin of the Golden Calf, which is treated extensively in the *parasha*, is not expounded at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A significant phenomenon that emerges from the study of these sections is that many of these *derashot* are brought either in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai or anonymously. The *Sifrei* here contains almost no *derashot* ascribed to other Tannaim. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the meaning of the word "villa" to this day, coming from the Latin *villa,* a country house, farm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rabbi Yehuda's statement appears also in *Sifrei Devarim*, ed. Finkelstein, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Finkelstein, in his edition, 72, note 10, notes that this *derasha* is not part of the original text of the *Sifrei*, but added in the classical era; see there. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the parallel text in BT *Ketubot* 112a, this sole *derasha* is brought in the name of Rav Chisda. See the expansion of this *derasha* by the Amora from Eretz Israel, Rabbi Chanina, BT *Gittin* 57a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The word "*tzevi*" appears also in other places in the Bible in connection with Eretz Israel, and it is expounded in various ways across the literature of *Chazal*. See *Yechezkel* 26:20; *Midrash Tannaim, Mekhilta* 14; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, Chap. 34; BT *Rosh Hashana* 13a; BT *Megilla* 6a; BT *Ketubot* 111a; BT *Gittin* 56a; *Tanchuma, Mishpatim* 17; *Shemot Rabba* 32:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Bereishit* 23:13; *Shemot* 34:30, 35; *Yehoshua* 6:5; I *Shemuel* 2:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is the proper way to read the phrase, as indicating that the horns of the ox have no utility, though they are the physically highest part of that animal. This meaning clearly emerges from a comparison to the previous statement: "Just as there is nothing higher in an ox than its horns." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The term *meshubach* (praiseworthy) in Tannaitic literature relates to the religious-ethical plane. See, for example, Mishna *Nida* 2:1: "Every hand that makes frequent examination is, in the case of women, praiseworthy." Nevertheless, the derivation of the "praise" of Eretz Israel in the *derasha* from the words "*keren ben shemen*," which is expounded as relating to the fatness of the land, relates to its fertility in the earthly, and not in the heavenly, sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to the rule that "anonymous statements in the *Sifrei* may be attributed to Rabbi Shimon" (BT *Sanhedrin* 86a), this statement may be connected to the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Sifrei Va'etchanan* 32:

    Precious are afflictions. Three good gifts given to Israel are prized by the nations of the world, and they were given to them only by way of afflictions: Torah, Eretz Israel and the World to Come. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)