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Loving the Holy Land

A Project of The Shluchim Office

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Emil W. Herman ר׳ מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז״ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Matot

Loving the Holy Land

Good Shabbos!

Well, we're in the middle of the summer now, and one of the fairly popular summer destinations in recent years for young Jewish men and women has been the Birthright program which, as you may know, brings young people to Israel for an all-expenses-paid inspirational trip to introduce this next generation to their birthright.

But one of the complaints you'll regularly hear from applicants and their parents is: There's no room!

It frequently happens that Birthright trips are full. And in general, you hear that each year, tourism to Israel has broken yet another record: All the hotels are occupied, and August is only supposed to bring even more tourists, what with the love and concern for Israel continuing to grow.

All this contradicts those who say there's a distance and a disconnection between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel.

People tend to think that Diaspora Jewry began towards the end of the First Temple Era, at which time the King of Ashur exiled the 10 tribes from its land. But the reality is that the Diaspora began a long time before that. Which brings us to this week's Torah portion: Matos.

In the parshah of Matos, we read about the children of Gad and Reuven, two of the twelve Tribes, who had huge flocks of livestock. The tribes of Gad and Reuven saw that the east bank of the Jordan River was land best suited for animals. So they came to Moshe Rabbeinu and said to him, "If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as an inheritance; do not cross us over the Jordan."

But Moshe didn't exactly love this idea, and he immediately rebuked them: "Your brothers will go to war and you'll sit here?!"

'The Spies have already frightened the Nation into not going to the Holy Land and because of that, we've been in the desert for 40 years, we have Tisha B'Av and so on—and now you want to do the same thing!'

So along came the leaders of these two Tribes and said to Moshe, "Don't worry. On the contrary—we'll go together with everyone to war, and not just alone." As a matter of fact, they added, "We will then arm ourselves quickly [and go] before the children of Israel"—which Rashi explains to mean, "At the heads of the draftees, since they were mighty warriors."

So Moshe then agreed. The very moment that Moshe heard that they were prepared to go to war together with everyone, he immediately agreed to give them the east bank of the Jordan—and not only that, but he also added half of the Tribe of Menasheh.

But the whole thing doesn't seem to make any sense. Wasn't Avraham Avinu promised by G-d a long time before that, that "To your descendants I will give this land"? Isn't it the dream of every Jew to get to the Promised Land? Didn't Moshe tell them endless times that G-d was bringing them to "a land flowing with milk and honey"? Isn't the whole Torah filled with statements of, "When you arrive in the land," then you will do such-and-such a mitzvah? And aren't all the holidays, the pilgrimages, dependent on going up to the Holy Land?

Yet here, the moment they say that they'll join the army, then everything is fine! Then it doesn't matter to Moshe that they're not going to be living in the Holy Land, regardless of the mitzvah to settle the Holy Land and all the other mitzvos that are dependent on the Holy Land.

So we see from here that from the dawn of history, Moshe Rabbeinu agreed, and certainly with G-d's consent, that for whatever reason, Jews should live outside the Holy Land. It's only that Moshe wanted that these Jews going to live in the Diaspora to have a deep connection with the Holy Land—and so therefore, he wanted them to serve in the army, and not for just three years but for 14 full years.

The reason for that was that when they would fight for the Holy Land, they would have an emotional connection to the place, regardless of whether they lived there regularly or not. They would always feel that this land belonged to them. They would feel that they belonged there.

And so therefore, Moshe told them, if you display your patriotic connection to the Holy Land, you may return to live outside the Holy Land.

And thus, Moshe saw nothing essentially wrong with them choosing to live outside of the Holy Land—as a matter of fact, it seems that throughout Jewish history, the Jewish Nation needed Jews who lived in the Diaspora who had an emotional and genuine bond to the Holy Land, and who would strengthen and support the Jews living in the Holy Land.

Now, we've all heard of the JNF, the Jewish National Fund—you know, the charity boxes that we all saw when we were kids in Hebrew School that collected money for planting trees in Israel.

But this custom of Jews in the Diaspora sending money to the Jews in the Holy Land always existed.

For example, the Alter Rebbe made giving money to the Holy Land Jewish community one of the foundations of his movement. He required every Chasid to contribute to his "Tzedakah for Eretz Yisroel" fund, and he had special messengers who would go from village to village in Russia to collect this money from his Chasidim. They were called Shadarim.

When a Shadar would come to a Chasid's home, he would open the family pushkah, the charity box, on the table in front of everyone and count all the money. The Shadar would then record the total, as well as the name and the mother's name of every household member for a blessing. Everyone would then drink "L'chaim!" and wish each other that next year they'd be able to donate even more.

And even the poorest Chabad Chasid would trim from his own livelihood so that he could donate to "Tzedakah for Eretz Yisrael."

As a matter of fact, the Alter Rebbe was so involved in this that one of the main slanders that got him arrested by the Czarist regime was that he was sending money to the Ottoman Empire, which at that time ruled the Holy Land—and which, at the time, was hostile to the Russian Empire.

Thus, the Alter Rebbe's enemies snitched on him to the Czarist authorities that he was supporting enemies of the state, when he was really doing nothing more than sending money to the poor people of the Holy Land.

And to this day, it's very important to the Jews of the Holy Land that there be a strong Diaspora that supports them—because, as is known, the American government supports Israel because of the American Jewish community.

But our mission, my friends, is to guarantee that we pass this emotional bond that we received from the previous generation on to our children, so that they, too, have an emotional connection to the Holy Land—so that they, too, feel that this is their home.

And so we teach them to give charity to Israel. And on top of that, we send them to visit Israel for whatever time possible—so that they'll feel that they belong there and feel that it is theirs.

But in addition to all that, we find the following verse at the end of the parshah: "And Moshe gave to the sons of Gad, the sons of Reuven and to half the Tribe of Menashe the kingdoms of Sichon and Og."

Now how does the Tribe of Menasheh suddenly pop into the picture? They didn't ask for anything!

The commentators explain that the Tribe of Menashe really didn't want to live on the other side of the Jordan River. On the contrary—they wanted to live within the Holy Land. It was only that Moshe Rabbeinu, of his own initiative, asked them to go live on the east bank.

Why? Because the Tribe of Menashe was known as a group of people who loved the Holy Land—because they came from the Tribe of Yosef.

As we read in last week's Torah portion, Parshas Pinchas, the daughters of Tzelaphchad, who came to demand a piece of the Land, were descendants of the Tribe of Yosef, whom Rashi says possessed a great love of the Holy Land.

And so Moshe chose people who loved the Holy Land and who specifically wanted to live in the Holy Land—and specifically sent them as messengers to live with the Tribes of Gad and Reuven so as to protect and safeguard their bond with the Holy Land, and to be their spiritual mentors.

Because if you want to have a connection with the Holy Land, it's not enough to drop a few coins into your JNF pushka. It's not even enough to visit the Holy Land. For a Jew to have a connection with the Holy Land that doesn't fade after a generation or two, he needs to strengthen his connection to Judaism.

And we see this in reality: The more a Jew cares about Judaism, the more a Jew cares about the Land of Israel. It is specifically those Jews who regularly come to synagogue, join Torah-study classes and associate with the Jewish community who visit Israel the most and who send their kids to Israel the most.

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