

Thinking Torah

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Parashat Re'eh

Equality at the Temple.

Our Parsha this week focuses on two themes. The first theme is the centralised worship of God. The Torah goes to great length to ban multiple sites of worship, and the service of other Gods. The Torah provides an alternative to the Pagan temples and altars "on mountains and hills and under every fertile tree." That alternative is "the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there." (12:5) The vision that the Torah has is a single exclusive place of worship and only one sacrificial altar. We are informed that it is to be situated in a place - yet undesignated – but to be chosen by God. With the hindsight of history, we know this place to have been the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. [See II Samuel Ch.24:15-24 for the episode in which this site was identified.]

The second theme of our Parsha is a focus upon social justice and societal cohesion. This objective is given expression by means of an entire range of social laws. We have laws of Charity, the benevolent treatment and freeing of a slave, the remission of debts in the Sabbatical Year, and a selection of ritual tithes (see Ch.15).

There are passages in which the two themes - the Temple as the sole place of sacrifice and worship, and the concern for the status of the poorer classes in society - come together. One example would be the three Pilgrim Festivals, which are described towards the end of our Parsha (Ch.16) Here, we read:

"You shall rejoice in your festival with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow in your communities. You shall hold festival for the Lord your God seven days in the place that the Lord will choose..." (16:14-15)

The Torah paints here an image of national unity, with the Temple at the epicentre. On festivals, there is a possibility that those on the fringes of society and those who have no independent means of living might be excluded from the celebrations; for financial reasons, for social reasons. The Torah deliberately stresses that at the Temple all people celebrate together. What the Torah is promoting here is a certain equality, an attempt at unity despite economic and societal differences. The place where this can happen is at "the place that the Lord will choose." Before God, all are equal.

But how exactly does this work? Why would the downtrodden person feel included in the festive Jerusalem environment? What is it that the Temple manages to create that might generate this mass rejoicing of the entire nation together?

MAASER SHENI

I believe that we can find some sort of answer in a most unexpected law. I am referring to the law of Ma'aser Sheni -the Second Tithe - which can also be found in our Parsha. Let us read the verses together and we will then engage in a deeper analysis.

"You shall set aside every year a tenth part of all your grain produce that your field yields. You shall consume the tithes of your new grain and wine and oil and the firstlings of your herds and flocks in the presence of the Lord your God, in the place where He will choose to establish His name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God forever. Should the distance be too great for you, should you be unable to transport them ... you may convert them into money. Wrap up the money and take it with you to the place that the Lord your God has chosen and spend the money on anything you want - cattle, sheep, wine, or other intoxicant or anything you may desire. And you shall feast there, in the presence of the Lord your God, and rejoice with your household." (14:22-26)

What does this text tell us? It instructs the Jewish farmer to set aside a tenth of his agricultural produce. This tenth must be brought to "the place which God chooses" i.e. the Temple, where the food will be eaten. For those who live so distant that the food will spoil on the journey, they may sell the food, taking the monetary value to spend on food and drink in the chosen city.

What is the point of all this? Where is it leading? What difference does it make if one eats produce at home or in Jerusalem? The food is not holier! Why do it? Or as Rav Menachem Leibtag points out on the verse - "You shall consume the tithes ... so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God forever." ; "Can you explain how 'eating out' in Yerushalayim would teach someone how to fear God?"

Let us add some further questions. A tenth of a year's harvest is an enormous amount of food. Can a single family eat all this food? What is the reason to transport that volume of food to the capital city?

Another point might be worth mentioning. The Torah's system of tithes sounds a little like taxation. I would not be surprised if the Jewish farmers of Temple times resented them just like many people resent taxes today.

Is that what they were? Just taxes? But then, this tax is consumed by the owner! It does not go to the Treasury or the government. We will attempt to delve into this simple law and to illustrate the way in which law might have made a marked impact upon the social and religious substance of the nation.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Maimonides gives the following rationale for this law:

"God commanded that The Second Tithe be spent only on food products, and consumption was restricted to Jerusalem. This ensures a culture of generosity and kindness (in the city). The money must be spent on food, and the sums build up throughout the year. Eventually the money will be used to finance some sort of gathering in order to strengthen love and bonds of brotherhood between people." (Guide to the Perplexed 3:39)

"The benefits of the festivals ... the second tithe money were used for expenses ... as well as the first born animals ... there will be an enormous amount of food ... and a person will naturally donate to the needy. The verse has already stressed the notion of charity at festival times when it states: "You shall rejoice in your festival with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow in your communities..." (16:14)

Maimonides informs us of the effect this law has in the social arena. With so much food to consume in Jerusalem, what was a family to do? They would save the money of the second tithe which had collected during the course of the year and would spend it in Jerusalem on their festival expenses. However even the most luxurious restaurants in Jerusalem will not use up the vast sums (10% of everything) which had accumulated. Hence, people would simply make handouts to the poor. The markets of Jerusalem were full of the best food and everybody was only too delighted to provide generously for the poor. After all the money had to be spent, and only in Jerusalem.

Likewise, a person who had a wedding, a barmitzva, a party for whatever reason might decide to have it in Jerusalem. Why? Because the entire cost of the caterer can be paid for by Ma'aser Sheni money! So Jerusalem became a place of "gathering" and family celebration.

So let us summarise. Maaser Sheni on a basic level acts to attract Jews to Jerusalem for the Pilgrim Festivals and to enjoy the festival fully - expenses paid! But over and above this, it encourages everybody in Jerusalem to share their food, to provide for any and everyone else,

even (and especially) if they are of a lower social status. And further still, Jerusalem becomes a place of family gatherings and celebrations.

Now maybe we understand how Jerusalem became such a welcoming place for "outsiders". On the festivals, it was simply a place of giving, everybody happy to give freely without a second thought. It was a place where all could feel comfortable.

SPIRITUAL REASONS.

The passage in our Parsha talks about the second tithe as being directed at a given goal: "so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God forever." How does this law ensure this spiritual goal?

Here are two comments by two mediaeval commentators:

"SO THAT YOU MAY LEARN TO REVERE THE LORD: When you witness that place of God's immanent presence (shekhina), the priests going about the Temple service, the Levites at their posts, and Israel gathering (to pray and study)." (Rashbam)

"SO THAT YOU MAY LEARN TO REVERE THE LORD: Because in that chosen place of the Temple there will also be the Supreme Court of law who research and legislate (lit. teach)" (Sephorno)

Interestingly, both commentators see the cause of this newfound reverence for God in the wider experience of Jerusalem rather than the practice of Maaser Sheni specifically. Where they differ is in the precise definition of the spiritual experience in Jerusalem.

Rashbam chooses to see the Temple as a source of spiritual inspiration. The magnificent structure itself, its impressive service and the very feeling of God's close presence. The overall emotional-spiritual experience of the Temple ensured its role as a catalyst for greater closeness with God and deeper personal spirituality.

The Sephorno however, sees the entire spiritual experience as related to a more intellectual experience. He talks about visiting Jerusalem to experience the Supreme Court, the Beit Din HaGadol. There one would hear the finest scholars in the land analysing legal intricacies and issuing legal - Halakhic - rulings, which would bind all of Israel by their authority. The intellectual process, the equivalent of today's Yeshiva experience, is the fundamental factor in the spiritual inspiration of the city. It is a city of Torah learning and the epicentre of the Halakhic process. That is why Maaser Sheni which leads one to Jerusalem has the effect of

The Sefer Hachinuch takes this particular point a stage

further:

"God knows that most people are attracted to material things for they are all mortal; they cannot apply themselves to the demanding process of Torah study. Thus God devised a situation whereby there would be a place in which everyone would be aware of God and knowledgeable of His law. Now there is no doubt that a person resides where his money lies. Therefore when a person would bring his tithe ... to the place of Torah observance and study - Jerusalem - where the Sanhedrin (Supreme Court) sat, scholars of immense knowledge and shrewdness.... he will, at the very least spend some time in study of Torah, or alternatively he would send a son to study Torah and would maintain him there with the money of the second tithe. Through this will come a situation whereby every household in Israel will have at least one representative who was learned in the words of Torah and able to teach the entire family...." (Mitzva of Ma'aer Behema)

The Sefer Hachinuch proceeds to explain the effect of communal members who have a passion for, and knowledge of Torah, and the effect that they can have on a community.

But let us summarise the view of the Sefer Hachinuch. He proposes that the Second Tithe as a tool for spreading the word of Torah and popularising Torah study. The large sums of money that were designated for food use in Jerusalem would be ideal for supporting a Torah scholar in Jerusalem, preferably the farmer himself, or a son of his. Let us not forget that if the Sanhedrin was in Jerusalem, then the 70 most prominent sages were also residents of the city. In that case, Jerusalem was filled with Yeshivot, and the tithe money could support a student easily within those environments. Then, this learned person would be able to influence his home community too.

So the Second Tithe functions as an incentive and a facilitator of serious high-level Torah Study. It enables every family to have their own, homegrown scholar.

SUMMARY

We now realise that a simple law like a tithe of this nature can have effects way beyond our immediate expectation. First we have noted the enormous social impact of the tithe, allowing food to be freely distributed in the city, and a lowering of the societal walls that we have built around ourselves. The second dimension to this tithe - Maaser Sheni - is the religious dimension. Whether in the emotional-spiritual realm, or in the intellectual-studious dimensions, the tithe facilitates an entire range of possibilities of quite a unique nature.

From the perspective of Jerusalem - "the place which God chooses" - we realise how this simple law transforms Jerusalem into a city of joy and brotherhood, of kindness and caring, of markets overflowing with every good thing. It is also a city with an intellectual hub, a spiritual core and a place of Torah study and spiritual betterment.

Maybe on this basis, the words of the Haftara take on additional significance. Here the Navi Yishayahu is talking to Jerusalem about its future:

"And all thy children shall be taught of HaShem; and great shall be the peace of thy children. In righteousness shalt thou be established; be thou far from oppression, for thou shalt not fear, and from ruin, for it shall not come near thee."
(Yishayahu 54:12-13)

May Hashem indeed comfort us by making these words of prophecy into our living reality.

Shabbat Shalom.

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