

# The Torah of Eretz Yisrael

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**B**lessed is our God, who created us for His glory, and separated us from the wayward, and gave us the Torah of truth” (*Uva LeTziyon* prayer). The separation between Israel and the nations, which the sages count as one of the vast separations “between holy and mundane, between light and dark” (*Havdala* service), is expressed in every single aspect of the activities of life, both that of the individual and the community. This includes the connection of the nation to its unique land, in which “the eyes of the Lord your God are constantly present, from the year’s beginning until year’s end” (Deut. 11:12).

“He set the boundaries of peoples, to the number of the Children of Israel” (Deut. 32:8). This, according to the *Sifrei*, refers to national borders, so that no foreign entity would encroach upon the Land of Israel. On the one hand, as Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon puts it (*Emunot VeDeot*, third essay), “Our nation is no nation except through its *Torot*”; yet on the other hand, the essentials of these *Torot*, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, are inextricably bound to this desirable land: “And He gave them the lands of the nations ... that they might keep His statutes and observe His laws” (Ps. 105:44-45).

The sages have said that the Torah applies essentially when the Jewish people reside in their own land. Even those mitzvot that require physical action, such as tefillin and mezuzah, apply outside of the Land of Israel only as “reminders,” as explained by the *Sifrei* (*Parashat Ekev* 43:17): “So that they will not be new to you when you return.” The connection between the Torah and the Land of Israel is felt most profoundly with those commandments that are specific to the land, since these apply nowhere else. These mitzvot are designed to form the character of the populace as an agricultural nation, living its life in the bosom of nature, plowing, sowing, and reaping. The people, however, are not influenced by being earth-bound; on the contrary, the people influence this earthly existence. The talmudic term for ignoramus, *am haaretz*, literally means “people of the land,” as Maimonides (*Commentary to the Mishna*, introduction to Zera’im) explains: these are people devoid of wisdom, dedicated only to cultivating the land. This is not the destiny of the Jewish people; rather, as the Talmud puts it (Rosh HaShana 35a), they are *am shebasadot*, the people in the fields, connected to Torah and prayer. The physical acts they perform are also tools for spirituality; even their “regular” food is eaten as if it were a holy portion from God’s table.

This does not apply only to those who work themselves to death, as it were, in the tents of Torah; they are not the sole heirs of Torah and mitzvot. As Moses states: “You are standing this day *all of you* before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, and your stranger who is in the midst of your camp” (Deut. 29:9–10). Moreover, those mitzvot tied to a life of activity – plowing, reaping, and the like – cannot be fulfilled at all except by those who occupy themselves with such activities. Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and to guard it” (Gen. 2:15); “to work it” simply means cultivation, while “to guard it” basically denotes protection. It is only on this basis that we can add another layer: “to work it” by performing the positive commandments, “and to guard it” by observing the prohibitions, as explained by the Zohar (vol. I, 27). This is the secret of the greatness of the Torah of truth: it encompasses all forms of life and is not confined to a cadre of uniquely gifted individuals. Indeed, the nation as a whole

becomes special: a treasure among the peoples, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6).



“And the gold of that land is good’ (Gen. 2:12) – for there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel” (Gen. Rabba 16). The superiority of the Torah of the Land of Israel is not expressed in the subjects studied, nor in the method of study; indeed, the curriculum is the same, whether it is Torah studied inside or outside of Israel. Thus, the distinction between the Torah of the Land of Israel and the Torah of *Hutz Laaretz* (“Outside the Land”) must be a difference in conceptualization and scope. The Zohar (Zohar Ḥadash, Ruth 210) states: “Now this was the custom in former times in Israel upon redemption and upon exchange’ (Ruth 4:7) – ‘upon redemption,’ this is the Jerusalem Talmud; ‘upon exchange,’ this is the Babylonian Talmud.” The Babylonian Talmud is defined as “exchange” (*temura*) because it was the nation’s replacement for losing its normal life. Torah outside of Israel was a substitute for customary features of national life. It was the ground beneath their feet when the literal ground was pulled out from under them, and it erected a wall of fire around the nation when its physical fortresses fell to the enemy. However, an “exchange” is only a temporary solution, an emergency measure, and therefore it cannot be regarded as good. This term “good” applies only to the Torah of the Land of Israel, which is defined as “redemption.”

The Torah of the Land of Israel does not invalidate all the features of national life that characterize every other people; rather, it demands them: a state, an army, industry and labor, intellectual activities, agriculture. However, the Torah of the Land of Israel redeems these features of national life, giving them another meaning, and thus these elements themselves, which otherwise might subjugate people to physicality and materialism, are the tools for spiritual elevation. Isaiah (42:5) states: “Who gives soul to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it,” and the Talmud (Ketubot 111a) understands this as teaching that being in the Land of Israel guarantees one a portion in the World to Come. In the place of a war of the spirit against the body comes the resuscitation of the body: a soul is placed within it, and a spirit is given to it, a spirit of life.

Thus, the body is raised to rebirth, and the ways of the world (*halikhot*) turn into laws (*halakhot*) that ratify existence. It is a fulfillment of the verse: “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:6).



The Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 55b–56a) famously ascribes the destruction of Jerusalem to the incident of Bar Kamtza, [who is embarrassed at a feast in the presence of the sages and then puts a blemish in the animal that Caesar sends to the Temple in Jerusalem for an offering. The priests are about to offer the animal regardless, in order to avoid a diplomatic catastrophe, but Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas dissuades them. Rabbi Yoḥanan then concludes: “Through the humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt, and we ourselves exiled from our land.”] However, the version of this story written in the Land of Israel (Lam. Rabba 4:3) differs. There Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas is blamed for a different type of inaction, namely, failure to halt the escalation of humiliation at the feast itself, when the host tells Bar Kamtza to leave:

Said [Bar Kamtza to the host]: “Since I am here, let me stay, and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink.” He said, “I won’t.” “Then let me give you half the cost of the party.” “No,” said the other. “Then let me pay for the whole party.” He still said, “Get out.” Now, Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas was present, and he had the opportunity to protest but declined to do so. [The host] took [Bar Kamtza] by the hand and put him out. Said [Bar Kamtza], “Since the elders were sitting there peacefully, I will pay them back....” Said Rabbi Yose: “Through the humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas our Temple has been burnt.”

There is no question that Rabbi Zekharia’s humility is basically a positive thing. It comes from his constant concern for self-perfection and dissatisfaction with what has been achieved. His is a view turned ever inward, continuous self-criticism that does not allow any room for directing others or being concerned with them. This worldview does not voice protest

when it is necessary or deal with setting things right. Perhaps it emerges from a certain disregard for a public that constantly thinks of the vanities of this world, for the ordinary people who are immersed in ethereal life and not eternal life: What, ask the scholars, do these trivialities have to do with us? Greatness is not to be expected of these people, so should we dedicate thought to them? Is this not a waste of our time, a distraction from Torah study? Rabbi Zekharia sits there, as do other rabbis, undoubtedly engaged in dispute over a matter of Torah. Their discussion is enjoyable and edifying, and they do not suspect or surmise that they are laying the groundwork for the destruction of the Temple.

Perhaps this is what Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai meant when he said: “Grant me Yavne and its sages.” Yavne was not chosen at random. As the Talmud reports: “A favorite saying of the rabbis of Yavne was: ‘I am God’s creature and my fellow is God’s creature. My work is in the town and his work is in the country.... Will you say that I do much and he does little? We have learned: One may accomplish much or one may accomplish little; what matters is that one direct his heart to heaven’” (Berakhot 17a, see Rashi ad loc.). Among the sages of Yavne, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai founded an approach that was in direct opposition to that of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkulas. According to this approach, the whole nation is a single entity, and there is no justification in seeking the perfection of the individual while rejecting the mission of maintaining a certain level of spirituality for the wider community. In the corporate framework of the nation, no one can be relinquished. Nor there is anyone who is entitled. “One may accomplish much or one may accomplish little; what matters is that one direct his heart to heaven.” This means that there is no justification for isolation; instead, Torah scholars must forge close relationships with the people. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai recognized that only in this way could the nation be rebuilt, and there they kept the ember of the nation in its land burning bright, with Yavne and its sages.



Among the agricultural settlements of the Land of Israel, the Religious Zionist settlements of the “*Torah VaAvoda*” movement shine like sparkling diamonds. They constitute a unified body that keeps the Torah

and mitzvot, and are crowned with the glory of enjoying the fruits of their own labors. This is where the conditions for the realization of all the mitzvot in their entirety are being met; this is where the endeavor to revive the ideal of the Jewish farmer is made flesh, that of *am shebasadot*, “the people in the fields.”

This revival of a form of life that had been snatched away from us certainly gives rise to many questions, as well as mistakes and missteps. This is the way of renewal. As the sages say: “A man does not fully understand the words of the Torah until he has stumbled in them” (Gittin 43a). We cannot be afraid of errors, just as we must not restrain criticism. What is important is that the critiques be faithful, not disingenuous or rejoicing in finding faults in others. Rather, criticism must be motivated by love, by pain, by a desire to fix things and a readiness to assist in repairing what is broken.

And before the criticism and the rebuke, there must be guidance. More than ever, the nation requires sages in the Land of Israel who can make halakha sweet, sages of Yavne who know that success requires collaboration with the community and who are ready to march arm-in-arm with the public in order to reliably support them, to guide and direct them to tranquil waters. Without doubt, this requires us to delve into the halakha in order to apply it to every area of life, formulating *halakhot* of society and *halakhot* of state, *halakhot* of the army, and *halakhot* of agriculture. We must clarify these *halakhot* and analyze the problems of the modern era to determine how they may be solved in the light of halakha.