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Geulas Yisrael Are You My Mother?

Very few mitzvot are as dramatic as *shilu'ach haken*- dispatching the mother bird prior to removing its eggs or its little chicks. Few mitzvot seem as logical as this directive aimed at suppressing human cruelty. Excessive aggression toward animals can quickly spiral into violence toward human beings. There is no denying the inherent violence of separating a mother bird from her children. Though taking eggs is absolutely necessary to support human nutrition, pausing the process and removing the mother, tempers the brutality and preserves a degree of human compassion when it is most vulnerable.

This iconic, common-sense mitzvah has a deeper layer of meaning and symbolism. The Zohar recasts this mitzvah as a metaphor for the Jewish people and their relationship with “their mother”- the Land of Israel. This portrait of baby birds reposing peacefully in their joyful nest under the watchful eye of their mother, serves as a metaphor for the Jewish people. During the golden era of Jewish prosperity, our national condition resembled this scene: we enjoyed sovereignty and serenity in our Homeland of Israel. Due to our betrayals

we were violently separated from our mother- the Land of Israel. Our mother was anguished by this separation, moaned about her lost children, and continues to pray to Hashem for their safe return. The process of *shilu'ach haken* re-enacts the sad tragedy of Jewish Exile. Our mother Israel, suffers the Exile of her children.

Many nations refer to their Homeland as the Fatherland. For example, the Germans refer to Germany as the Vaterland (father-Land) – a term which fostered nationalistic pride. As the Zohar implies, our Homeland of Israel is depicted as our mother and not our father. Jews have only one non-biological Father and it is Hashem. Our Land can't possibly be termed father. The Land of Israel is our mother, and this influences the tone and texture of our relationship with our Land.

Mothers provide basic life and basic growth to their children. Once reared, children advance toward impressive or remarkable accomplishments, but it is the mother who establishes the baseline of health and of identity. In our religious lives, we all aspire toward religious excellence dreaming of surpassing religious accomplishments. However, the Land of Israel- similar to a mother- provides a platform of “basic” religious identity. The Midrash writes that whoever lives in Israel, speaks Hebrew, and recites shema is ticketed toward the

next world. We all dream of religious identity which far exceeds mere residence in Israel and Hebrew facility. However, the baseline of our religious lifestyle consists of living in our Land, speaking our language and accepting our One God. If the foundation is solid, the tower will rise. Israel, as our mothers do- provides that solid platform.

There is a second maternal feature to the Land of Israel. Both a father and a mother educate their children, inculcate values and nurture their child's future. Additionally, a mother provides something more innate and more inchoate- warmth and confidence. A nursing baby doesn't probe future decisions and isn't contemplating life and its broader values. It clings to its mother for warmth, succor, and tender love. A mother's love provides confidence and clarity. The world around them may be filled with struggle and uncertainty but, in its mother's arms, an infant senses protection and comfort. The Land of Israel provides similar confidence and serenity. Mitzvah observance and Torah study can be obtained outside the borders of our Homeland. Famously, the Ramban asserted that mitzvah performance in Exile is merely practice. Mitzvot don't possess inherent halachic meaning outside the Land. And are only practiced as a rehearsal in preparation of our eventual return and the revival of actual obligations. This striking position of the Ramban

is overwhelmingly rejected and mitzvot do possess absolute and objective value independent of geography.

Though mitzvot can be performed outside the Land, life in Israel provides the quiet confidence and calm that only home can provide. The past year taught us how secure and serene home feels when the world around us is chaotic.

Finally, the Zohar's story about being separated from our mother, provides a comforting tone to the harshness of Exile. If the Land of Israel is our mother and we are her chicks, our exile was painful for our Motherland just as it was for us. We were snatched but our mother was also sent away. Not only were the Jews exiled but the Land was also devastated. Gallut doesn't only affect the Jews but also wrecks the Jewish Homeland. For centuries, the Land was cursed and its fertility was stifled. Great empires which had colonized the entire planet were unable to till the Land, draw its vitality, nor colonize its hill-tops. The Land itself remained plagued and impassable.

We have finally returned to our Homeland and it has sprung to life to welcome her children home. The desert has bloomed and a dormant Land has awoken from its scorched slumber to signal her children home. Our mother is once again happy. *Eim habanim semeichah!!* ■



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