



Agriculture and Infrastructure

The halakhot of “arla” mandate a prohibition against eating the first three years of fruit produce of a tree. The Torah prefacing these laws by describing the planting process: “When you enter the Land and plant fruit trees” - גַּם תֵּצְא בָּנֶה וְגַטְעָתָם כֹּל עַץ מִכְּלֵי. The prohibition of eating fruits, presumes that trees had already been planted, yet the Torah articulates the planting of trees in language reminiscent of actual mitzvot. Evidently, planting trees in Israel is a sacred experience.

Our relationship with the Land of Israel is primarily religious and historical. It is a “heritage Land”, delivered by Hashem to our ancestors as part of a national covenant. Furthermore, it is the Land in which we rendezvous with the concentrated presence of Hashem. In addition to these abstract features of the Land, through agriculture we also interface with our homeLand in an earthly manner. Israel is described as our mother – אֶם הַבְּנִים שָׁמָחָה – and agriculture actively bonds us to our mother in a more instinctual fashion. Through agriculture the Land and her seasons seep into our subconscious. Over the

past 150 years, agriculture was an essential element of our return to Israel.

Agriculture and Secular Zionism

Secular Zionist pioneers were not drawn back to Israel as a fulfillment of prophetic dreams or as a messianic awakening. Looking to infuse their Zionism with values, they developed an agricultural “ideology”. AD Gordon, who emigrated to Palestine in 1904 and who articulated a religion of labor, wrote that “the Jewish people has been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within city walls these two thousand years...We lack the habit of labor-not labor performed out of external compulsion, but labor to which one is attached in a natural and organic way. This kind of labor binds a people to its soil and to its national culture.” Commitment to tilling the Land and draining its swamps was a national vision inspiring secular Jews to return home and endure great hardship and sacrifice. Additionally, many early secular Zionists viewed farming and agriculture as a great “equalizer”, erasing the socially corrosive class divisions created by capitalism. Agriculture provided a cultural bond where prophecy and ritual could not.

Redemptive Agriculture

Even for religious Jews, agriculture was a redemptive catalyst. The Vilna Gaon viewed the cultivation of our Land as a redemptive stimulus. Chapter 102 in Tehillim describes the return to Zion and the

כי רצוי עבדיך אבניה ואת עפרה יחננו. Traditionally, this “craving of stones” symbolized Jewish longing for redemption. Many Talmudic sages would caress the actual dirt and stones of Israel to demonstrate their love. To the Vilna Gaon, craving stones and dirt was a metaphor for the agricultural development of dirt and stones. Developing the stones and dirt of Israel wasn’t merely a “expression” of love, but would actually promote redemption.

Early religious pioneers were painfully aware that our two-thousand year hiatus from Israel left us unfamiliar with its topography and its local agriculture. Rav Tzvi Kalisher, an ardent religious Zionist leader (after whom the kibbutz of Tirat Tzvi is named) endorsed the formation of a “beit midrash” to study the “chochmat ha’aretz” and train students in agricultural tactics.

The early kibbutzim and moshavot met with great difficulties and many of the early settlers were forced to return to Europe. Yet many Rabonim, both in Europe and in Israel, encouraged their disciples to persist in their struggle to tame this inhospitable Land. As Rav Yitzchak Elchonon Spektor (a leading 19th century Rabbinic sage after whom the Semicha branch of Yeshiva University is named) assured his students “the special spirit of the Land will assist us gradually in this agricultural endeavor”. Agriculture was seen as a spiritual endeavor which would merit special providence. Evidently, he was correct. It just took longer than expected.

The Modern Disconnect from Agriculture

The modern era has severed most of



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us from agricultural activity. Agricultural industrialization and large-scale importation of agricultural produce have sidelined most of us from direct interaction with our Land. Even the formative experience of shemithah has been hollowed out. For most of us it is reduced to a question of which kashrut policy to adopt. We don't live Israel through agriculture.

Yet, despite these changes, there are two ways to "simulate" the effect of agriculture upon our experience of the Land of Israel:

Familiarity with the Land

As Ya'akov returns to Israel after an absence of twenty two years, The Torah portrays Esav's descendants as "yoshve ha'aretz" or dwellers of the Land. This label is painfully ironic: Esav has raised his clan in Israel to be "dwellers of Israel", while Ya'akov was shepherding in the plains of Lebanon. Ya'akov and his clan are now foreigners. As the Talmud recounts, Esav's children were so familiar with our Land, that they could smell and taste the actual dirt in determining agricultural strategy.

Sadly, we too, have been absent from our Land- and for far longer than twenty-two years. Now that we have returned, it is time to get reacquainted with our Land and

its divine beauty. My own children who b'H were raised in Israel, are far more knowledgeable about our Land than I will ever be. In place of agriculture and planting trees, travel and tiyulim bond us to our motherLand. Knowledge of our Land cannot remain purely spiritual or abstract. The Land isn't just a concept.

B u i l d i n g Infrastructure

Though the Torah instructs planting actual trees, it refers to the more general process of developing the Land. Early Zionist pioneers were tasked with erecting the basic infrastructure of this country: draining swamps, building transportation infrastructure, raising an army and establishing democratic traditions. Our generation has the privilege to chaperon Israel into the modern world of technology and to stabilize both her economy and our standard of living. The next generation will face its own challenges. Most of us no longer plant trees but we are developing Israel's socio-economic infrastructure.

This is the infrastructure which will greet Moshiach. We didn't just wait patiently for Moshiach but constructed infrastructure which will eventually welcome him. I hope he will be proud of what we have built. I think he will. It is impressive. ■

