

The Blessed Land

Rav Avraham Ytzchak haKohen Kook Ztkl

**"...a land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey [i.e. syrup of dates];..."
(Deut. 8:8)**

"Rav Hasdah and Rav Hamnunah were sitting at a meal; dates and pomegranates were brought before them. Rav Hamnunah commenced with a brakhah (benediction) upon the dates. [Rav Hasdah] said to him, is not the accepted opinion that of Rav Yosef - and some say of R. Yitzhak - that whichever takes precedence in this verse [Deut. 8:8] takes precedence in being blessed? [Rav Hamnunah] said to him, the word `honey' [i.e. dates] is second in number after the word `land', while the word `pomegranates' is fifth. [Rav Hasdah] said to him, would that we had limbs of iron that we might follow you." (Brakhoth 41b)

As the brakhoth (benedictions) awaken hearts to those righteous perceptions (Rambam, Hilkhoth Brakhoth 1:3) which are parent to righteous deeds and excellent virtues, so too, are the fine points and particulars of each law built up in ways which lead on to noble and excellent virtues and the principles of Torah in beliefs and perceptions (emunoth u'deoth). And inasmuch as the love of Eretz Israel is the foundation of the Torah, bringing the community of the people of G-d [Klal Israel], and the world in its entirety, to its perfection of wholeness, therefore the precedence accorded to the object of each brakhah is linked to its proximity to "eretz" (Land) in the Torah. Thus are we taught that whoever is in closest proximity to the Land, and has the most love for the Land, and who puts forth the greatest endeavor in Settling the Land (Yishuv Eretz Israel), receives precedence in being blessed and is closer to attaining the perfection of wholeness.

And as to those who love the Land, they may be classed according to their merits and their powers of discernment. For there are those who love the

Land for its noble qualities. They thirst to "take pleasure in her stones, And love her dust." (Ps. 102:15) in order to fulfill the mitzvot (commandments) which are dependent upon the Land. They cleave to the Land in pursuance of that lofty aim which is to be found by the community of Israel and the world in its entirety when it is sought on a spiritual level. But there are also those who love the Land and strive for its Settlement in order to achieve the aim of establishing a resting-place for the community of Israel [in their Land]. This too is a sound and glorious endeavor; nonetheless it is not on the same high level as that aspired to by those who recognize the lofty aim which is the basis of the love of the Land.

Therefore the proximity of the objects of the brakhoth to "eretz" is alluded to in this verse in two orders of classification. The first group, of five 'kinds', suggests that highest, most superior form of yearning for the Land as exemplified by the Five Books of the Torah which are the basis of the perfection of wholeness of Israel from which is drawn the perfection of wholeness of humanity. And each member of this group takes precedent in the brakhoth according to its place in the verse and its proximity to "eretz". The second group, ["olive-trees and honey"], is exemplified by those who recognize the natural wholeness of the community of Israel in its Land . . .

Thus we learn here how great is the merit of one who yearns to settle the Land even for materialistic purposes, for the sake of the community. For what is done for the sake of the community will always transmute the material into the spiritual, and the high and lofty aim will be attained by means of the linking of G-d's People with G-d's Land. Therefore whoever is deeply absorbed in the Land, even on a lowly level, should be strengthened and encouraged by us and placed foremost in being blessed. He must be given precedence over one who is tardy in coming and remains at a distance, even though at heart the one from afar is on a higher spiritual level. For the Settlement of the Land and the love of the Land expressed in deeds is a sublime affair. In this regard, the Sages wrote of Omri (Sanhedrin 102b) that he won a kingdom because he added one city to Eretz Israel, even though his intentions were certainly materialistic. (Yalkut Shimoni, Part II, 207)

We must learn that it is necessary for us to strengthen the physical powers of the national community, and thus will come about the strengthening of the spiritual forces. Therefore [Rav Hamnunah] said to them, this is second in number after the word `land'. That is, even though it is second in number to `land' in the second, lower level, spiritual grouping, nonetheless it takes precedent over that which is fifth in number to `land' in the first, higher level, spiritual grouping, because of the impression that the love of the Land ought to make upon us. So that although the soul of one may be on a lowly level compared to that of the other, nonetheless his material enterprises impel towards a lofty aim. Thus out of physical strength will come spiritual strength. Therefore they said to [Rav Hamnunah], in word and deed, would that we had limbs of iron that we might follow you. Would that we had the physical strength and iron power - that we were strong muscled - that we might receive from you a spiritual wholeness great as your own virtues - that we might love the material strength that is in G-d's People that will surely bring about spiritual strength.

And as to national matters concerning the community of Israel, here also, would that we might have the means to strengthen the physical and material side of the community - limbs of iron - iron cars, iron bars - with forceful vigor and a body strong as iron to gird our loins with courage and exalt our glory in the spirit of valor. That we might follow you, and we will walk your path winning to glory in the way of the Torah, with love and tranquility, neither "scaling the wall nor crying havoc against the nations of the world" (Ketuboth 111a). Each one must multiply their inner strength, even if it is materialistic in essence, for thus will we bring about the spiritual reality, which is the ultimate goal - "...Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the L-rd of hosts." (Zech. 4:6) And the Psalmist said, "Glorify the L-rd, O Jerusalem;/Praise thy G-d, O Zion./For He hath made strong the bars of thy gates;/ He hath blessed thy children within thee./He maketh thy borders peace;/He giveth thee in plenty the fat of wheat." (Ps. 147:12-14) To which the necessary conclusion and completeness, in accordance with the keudushah (holiness) of Israel, will be that, "He declareth His word unto Jacob,/His statutes and His ordinances unto Israel." (Ps. 147:19)

**---HaRav A. Y. Kook, Ein Ai'yah [Brakhoth 41b]
(translated by Rhea Magnes)**

COMMENTARY: The status of those Founders and Settlers in Eretz Israel who were not shomrei Torah u'mitzvoth (followers of the Laws and commandments of the Torah) is a central theme in scholarly discussions of Zionism. HaRav Kook draws upon one of the finer details of the laws concerning benedictions (Hilkhoth Brakhoth) to define this unique and complex relationship. The halakhah (Jewish Law) states that if a variety of fruits, which are each to receive the same benediction, is placed before the one who makes the benediction, and one species in the variety is of the "Seven Kinds" of produce with which Eretz Israel is blessed (Deut. 8:8), the benediction is made over that species first. It is then not necessary to repeat the same benediction over the remaining varieties of fruits. (Shulkhan Arukh, Orekh Haim 211:1) The halakhah goes on to state - according to Rav Yosef - that if there are two or more species of the "Seven Kinds" on the table, then the benediction is made over whichever one is named first in the passage in the Torah (Deut. 8:8).

It is to this halakhah that the story in the Gemara (Brakhoth 41b) refers. An Amora (Talmudic Sage) gave precedence to a species of fruit which is named later in the text than the other species of the "Seven Kinds" which were before him. He explained his actions by saying that the species whose name is located in the Biblical text closest to the word "eretz" (land) is to be blessed first, even though it appears later in the text. Thus are we taught that there is a special and unique virtue in being "close" to Eretz Israel. This idea is explained and developed at length by HaRav Kook.

Thus, according to the explication of HaRav Kook, even that which is done to contribute to the physical sustenance of the People of Israel in their Land, will lead in the end to their spiritual sustenance as well. The allusion to Israel's physical sustenance is exemplified by the two species which are named in the second order of the Biblical passage: "...olive-trees and honey". It may be noted that this allusion can be carried through from the fruits themselves to their products, oil which is derived from the olive and the syrup which is derived from the dates. This is applicable to the idea which is developed by HaRav Kook in which he explains that out of that material virtue of contributing to the physical sustenance of the People of Israel in the Land will be derived a spiritual end. ---Y.M.