

Being a Jew in exile and in Israel (*Acharei Mot*)

Parshat *Acharei Mot* instructs the Jewish nation, ‘you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor shall you do as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you’ (*Vayikra* 18:3).

Based on this verse, Rabbi Berachya, in a teaching quoted in Midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 23:7, invokes the words of *Shir HaShirim* 2:2 of *keshoshana bein hachochim*, ‘like a lily among the thorns’, to explain that it is as if God said to Moshe:

“Go and say to the Jewish people that when they were in Egypt they were like a lily among the thorns (*keshoshana bein hachochim*), and now, as they prepare to enter the land of Canaan, they should also be like a lily among the thorns (*keshoshana bein hachochim*) and they shouldn’t do as they did in Egypt or as they do in Canaan.”

Clearly, this teaching is very meaningful – especially given the fact that we are between Pesach and Yom Ha’atzmaut. Still, an important question as posed by Rabbi Chaim Elazary (1902-1984) in his *Netivei Chaim* commentary on *Vayikra* 18:3, is why was there a need for the Torah to reference Egypt and Canaan? As he writes:

‘Surely, if the Jewish people were like a lily among the thorns while they were in exile where they acted with righteousness even while surrounded by those that were wicked, they would most certainly continue doing so when they arrived in Israel. Still, it seems that it was necessary for the Jewish people to be given a specific command about [not following the ways of the Canaanites] when they entered the land of Israel - even though they had steadfastly maintained their identity as a lily among the thorns while exiled in Egypt.’

To this, Rabbi Elazary responds by explaining that,

‘We have been taught that wherever there is an increase in opportunities for holiness, there is also an increase in opportunities for spiritual impurity as the Gemara (Sukkah 52a) teaches us: ‘Whoever is greater than his fellow, his evil inclination is also greater than his fellow’. The simple reason for this is that when the evil inclination (yetzer hara) fights against the good inclination (yetzer hatov) it acquires the necessary weapons to fight against its foe. Accordingly, if its foe is greater, then so too the weapons of the yetzer hara will increase.’

What this means is that rather than there being a *kal vachomer* (a fortiori) of, ‘if the Jewish nation were like a lily among the thorns in Egypt, then certainly they will be so in the land of Israel’, the reality is that, ‘if the Jewish nation had to strive to be a lily among the thorns in Egypt, then certainly they will have to strive to be so in the land of Israel’. This is because, as stated clearly in *Vayikra* 18:25-30 and as emphasized by the Ramban in his commentary to *Vayikra* 18:25, when living in the land of Israel more is spiritually expected of the Jewish people. At the same time, when living in the land of Israel, the threat of spiritual failure is also greater.

This then prompts Rabbi Elazary to add that,

'In this command the Jewish people are being given a warning: Do not think that now that you are in your homeland that you can live like all other nations! The fact is that when you were in exile, you understood that if you were to behave like your neighbours that this would thereby cause you to assimilate. This is why you endeavoured to maintain your identity and essence as a nation. The problem is that when you come the land of Israel, you may then think that you can dwell like all other nations and that there is nothing to be afraid of in terms of assimilation. As a result, you will grant yourselves permission to adopt their ways and practices. In response to such a concern the Torah specifically warns us that even when we are in our own land, we must strengthen our loyalty to our holy and pure heritage as expressed in our Torah.'

As a Jew who previously lived in the diaspora, I know what it means to be like a lily among the thorns in exile. And as a Jew who now proudly lives in Israel, every day provides me with further opportunities to discover and nurture what it means to be a lily among the thorns here in Israel.

Just as Israel differs from all other countries, so too, the tools for spiritual success in Israel are different to those required outside of Israel. Still, the overall lesson we learn from *Vayikra* 18:3 is that, both while living in exile and especially while living in Israel, we must not be spiritually careless or complacent. Instead, we must be clear and strong about what it means to be a Jew, and live in a way that is expressive of *keshoshana bein hachochim*.