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What's the Point?

By Rabbi Joshua (pointedly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In parshas Vaeschanan, Moshe completes his account of the sins of the generation of the wilderness, and tells the new generation, " And you who cling to the Lord your God are all alive today"(Devarim 4 : 4). He then proceeds to tell them that they should observe all the mitzvos in the land which they are about to enter. Interestingly, the immediate outcome of their fealty to the laws of the Torah, as described by Moshe, is not that they will thereby be able to continue living in the land. That result is mentioned further on. The first thing Moshe mentions is the effect their observance will have on the nations who are in their midst. He tells the nation, " You shall safeguard and perform them, for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely a wise and understanding people is this great nation' " (Devarim 4 : 6). One may rightfully ask, is this really the first thing the nation was worried about - how the peoples living among them would react to their performance of the mitzvos? Moreover, why, as Rabbeinu Bachya and other commentators ask, is it specifically the statutes - the chukim - that lead these people to admire the nation so much? Chukim are commandments whose purpose is not readily discernable, and eludes most people. The rabbis tell us that the nations of the world actually taunt the Jews over these laws, claiming that they make no sense. Why, then is it then the nation's observance of them that will now move these people to proclaim the virtues of the Jews?

I believe that an answer to our questions can be found in the next verses, which explain why the peoples will be impressed by our observance of mitzvos. Moshe says, " For which is a great nation that has a God Who is close to it, as is the Lord, our God, whenever we call to Him? And which is a great nation that has righteous statutes and ordinances, such as this entire Torah that I place before you this day" (Devarim 4 : 7 - 8). Rabbeinu Bachya explains that what Moshe is saying is that once the nations see that we observe the ordinances, the mishpatim, which can be explained rationally, they realize that the chukim also must make sense, because otherwise such an understanding people would not observe them. However this explanation does not account for Moshe's mentioning the closeness of God as an observable feature which also impresses the peoples. I therefore prefer the approach of Rav Yitzchok of Volozhin, in his Peh Kadosh, and Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch, in his Peninei Da'as. They both write that the nations are impressed by the tenacity with which the Jews perform God's statutes, despite the seeming lack of purpose behind them. I believe that this approach gets to the core of what we are supposed to accomplish through living as a nation in Eretz Yisroel.

Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohein Kook, as cited by Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriah in his Moadei Rayah, notes that the Jewish nation was called upon at Mt. Sinai, as a prelude to receiving the Torah, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Shemos, 19 : 6). This charge, he explains, includes two elements - to practice holiness in the context of a kingdom. In order to do this, it is necessary to live as a nation on one's own land, with a sovereign government and all the other usual trappings of a nation. The task of the Jewish nation, continues Rav Kook, is to serve as an example to all peoples that one can be connected to God in all aspects of life, and that God -consciousness is not something confined to recluses or religious functionaries living in a cloister. Seen in this context, we can understand that it is precisely the nation's observance of the chukim which bring into relief the divine aspect of what they are doing. The closeness to God that the peoples observe in the life of the Jewish nation cannot be attributed by them to the simple factor of following natural law, as dictated by human logic, because much of what they do does not seem to conform to human logic. They therefore conclude that all of the nation's observances reflect a divine origin, and it is through connecting to these laws that the nation evokes a divine response when they pray.

In the introduction to his work Eitz Hadar, Rav Kook writes that the seven Noachide laws that all people are required to observe are basically natural law, and the details of these precepts are decided

upon based on human logic. Jews are also required to observe these laws, but for them the details are based upon Torah law. Thus, for example, the Torah prohibition of murder includes the prohibition of shaming someone publicly, while the Noachide prohibition does not. There is one opinion in the Talmud that kilayim, the mixing of different species, is included among the Noachide laws. Rav Kook says that for a non - Jew, the laws of botany would determine the identification of what is considered a separate species, while for a Jew this would be decided by Torah law.

There is a halacha that in order for a member of one of the seven Canaanite nations to live in Eretz Yisroel, they must become a ger toshav - a 'resident stranger' - which entails, according to the Rambam, the acceptance of the Noachide laws upon themselves. This opinion is difficult, however, because they are already obligated to observe these laws, just as all other people are. What, then, do they add by accepting the Noachide laws upon themselves, that warrants the right to live in the Holy Land? Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rov, explains that when the non - Jew accepts these mitzvos upon himself, he must accept them as they are explained by Torah law. Following Rav Kook's explanation, the idea behind this is that keeping the Noachide laws as they are defined through human logic is simply a matter of keeping natural law, so that society will run smoothly. By becoming a ger toshav, the non - Jew injects a divine element into his observance, bringing God into his life on a regular basis. Inspiring the peoples of the world to bring God into their daily lives is the task of the Jewish nation living in Eretz Yisroel, and it is therefore the first thing that Moshe mentions when he tells them to observe the mitzvos there. By becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, something which can be fully realized only in Eretz Yisroel, the Jewish nation inspires all other peoples to lead a life that is imbued with God-consciousness.

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