KI TETSE: To Wait or Not to Wait for the Mashiach?

THE EMPTY TENT

This week's Haftarah, Roni Aqarah (Yeshayahu 54), presents an extraordinary image of redemption, the Geulah. The prophet speaks to Yerushalayim, which during the exile that followed the destruction of the Bet Hamiqdash had been left desolate, like a mother who suddenly finds herself alone in her tent—her home—without her children. But now, Yeshayahu tells Yerushalayim, everything is about to change! Your children are coming back, and there will be so many of them that you will need to make some renovations to the house: "Harchibi meqom aholekh"—"Enlarge the space of your tent." In other words: pull out the stakes, move them much farther apart, expand your home, and extend its boundaries, because they are already coming…

The prophet gives her that instruction—but no one returns. The poor woman is still without her children; the city remains completely empty and desolate, and now utterly disappointed. But Yeshayahu tells her: al tachsokhi—"Do not make your tent smaller." Do not lose hope that one day your children will return. Yeshayahu understands that after a loss, the temptation is to make yourself smaller: to shrink the tent, not to get your hopes up, not to take too many risks, not to nurture false expectations. In the name of Bore Olam, the prophet asks her to prepare a larger home and wait. Her children will return. In multitudes. But that "soon" would have to wait a very long time before becoming reality.

For centuries, we read this prophecy as a utopia, a dream beyond dreams. Jews scattered throughout the world prayed to return to Tziyon.

But eventually our tefilot were answered: once again, we have our State of Israel—the expanded tent that Yeshayahu prophesied.

Many waves of Aliyah were triggered by terrible circumstances: pogroms, persecution, antisemitism, wars. Millions of Jews arrived in Israel because they could no longer remain where they were. It was not a choice: someone or something was chasing them and pushing them—forcing them!—toward Israel.

RETURNING BY CHOICE

But there is another kind of Aliyah, with a unique merit of its own: Aliyah by choice. When a Yehudi does not flee to Israel, but deliberately moves toward Israel. When he or she voluntarily leaves behind a good and stable life because he wants Medinat Israel to become his home and the home of his children.

This is the kind of Aliyah—Aliyah motivated by conviction rather than convenience—that we experienced in my community a couple of weeks ago. A group of seven families, together with their children, made Aliyah to Israel! I know these families extremely well: they are my congregants, my students, my friends. All are successful professionals or businessmen living very comfortably in Great Neck in beautiful, comfortable homes. Their families are established here; they have excellent schools, stable jobs, and an extraordinary community life.

As good Sephardic Jews, the value and importance of family and extended family are paramount. The pain of physically separating from siblings and parents—and taking their grandchildren away from them—has been the most difficult, painful, and heartbreaking part of this entire process. But when the conviction is so strong, one feels that these enormous sacrifices are being made with the hope that, BE”H, the path is being prepared for the rest of the family to

eventually come to Israel as well. And when that happens, their integration will be easier because they will already have family established there.

Paying the very high price of sacrificing comfort and familiarity, and facing the challenges of uprooting themselves, these young families from our community decided to become part of Yeshayahu's prophecy and return to Israel's expanded tent. They chose Raanana, a beautiful city with excellent schools for their children and first-rate healthcare. There they will begin building their future.

I believe this awakening began, ironically, after October 7, when the war began—a war that still has not ended. We witnessed a religious awakening among less religious Jews, and a renewed interest in Israel among Jews who were already religious. I never thought this would happen. Great Neck is one of the places with the highest percentages of Jewish residents anywhere in the United States—a place where, when you walk through the neighborhood, it seems that 90% of the homes have a mezuzah. It is a place where absolutely nothing is missing for a full Jewish life… (except for "Israel").

THREE POWERFUL IDEAS THAT STAYED WITH ME

When these young families said goodbye, some of the husbands shared a Debar Torah at Seudah Shelishit and, directly or indirectly, explained what had led them to make this decision.

I will repeat some of these ideas in my own words.

MITSVOT MADE IN ISRAEL

There are 613 mitsvot in the Torah. According to the calculation of the Chafets Chayim, 271 of them can be observed today outside Israel, and an additional 26 can be fulfilled in Erets Israel—a total of 297. Many of the remaining mitsvot cannot be fulfilled today because they depend on the Bet Hamiqdash, the qorbanot, the service of the kohanim, or other

conditions that no longer exist.

Those additional 26 mitsvot are not “difficult” to fulfill in Great Neck. They simply cannot be fulfilled there. A man with a small garden in Raanana can fulfill Torah mitsvot that no Jew in New York can fulfill, no matter how wealthy, observant, or learned he may be.

But there is something more—and even more important. Rashi, quoting the Sifre, explains that even in exile we must continue observing the mitsvot so that they will not be “new” to us when we return to our land. In other words, the mitsvot keep us connected to the road home:

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“Vesamtem et debarai”—Even after you are exiled, continue to distinguish yourselves through the mitsvot: put on tefillin, place mezuzot, so that they will not seem new to you when you return.

Ramban takes this idea much further:

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“For the essential fulfillment of all the mitsvot is for those who dwell in the Land of HaShem.” (Ramban, Vayiqra 18:25)

Outside Israel, we remain fully obligated to observe the mitsvot—tefillin, mezuzah, Shabbat—but their natural home, the place where they reach their fullest meaning, is Erets Israel. A Yehudi in exile is like a flower growing in a greenhouse. The forest—the natural environment of that flower—is the Land of Israel.

I want to go to Israel because it is the natural place where

all the mitsvot can be fulfilled as the Almighty intended them to be fulfilled.

PRAYING OR MOVING?

Three times a day, we ask HaShem to gather us back and pray that "our eyes may behold Your return to Zion."

But praying without doing anything is like asking HaShem for parnasah—sustenance—in Barekhenu while making no effort to work. We pray for HaShem to crown our efforts with success, not to replace them. When we say Refaenu—"Heal us"—we do not pray instead of going to the doctor. We pray while also doing everything in our power—our hishtadlut—to become healthy. If we simply pray and refuse to go to the doctor, we are responsible for what happens to us!

What, then, is the difference between praying for sustenance and health and praying for the Geulah?

Every day we ask HaShem in *Teqa beshofar gadol lecherutenu*: "Gather us from the four corners of the earth." HaShem has already heard our prayers and granted our request! The gates are open, and we can return to Israel.

To continue praying for something that has already been granted to me, while doing nothing about it, is not prayer.

It is procrastination.

When Moshe stands praying to HaShem while the people of Israel are trapped between the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian army closing in from behind, HaShem tells him: "Ma titsaq elai? Dabber el Bene Israel veyissa'u!" —"Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Children of Israel to move forward!" Rashi explains: this was not the time to prolong prayer. It was time to move.

There is a time to pray, and there is a time to act. At that moment, HaShem was telling Moshe: Stop praying. Move forward.

Step into the sea. You do your part—and leave the rest to Me.

I want to live in Israel because HaShem has already answered our prayers. Now it is my turn to do my part—and move.

WAITING OR NOT WAITING FOR THE MASHIACH?

The great merit of living in Israel, like the merit of any other mitsvah, lies in bechirah chofshit: freedom of choice. And the more difficult the choice, the greater its merit. If someone forced me—or paid me—to go to minyan every morning, it would not be the same as choosing to go myself. And if going to minyan requires me to sacrifice some comfort because I sleep a little less, or costs me some income because I work a little less, then the merit is even greater. The greater the sacrifice involved in choosing to perform a mitsvah, the greater the merit of fulfilling it. As Ben He He teaches in Pirqe Abot (5:23): lefum tsaara agra—"According to the effort is the reward."

I want to go to Israel by my own choice. Out of conviction. Even if it costs me. I do not want to leave because one day it may become dangerous to remain in Great Neck. I do not want to flee from where I live because I can no longer afford health insurance while healthcare there is free. Because then it would not be my choice—it would be my convenience.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (1075—1141), in his famous book The Kuzari, presents a very harsh and embarrassing warning to Jews who were able, but unwilling, to return to Israel. The King of the Khazars asks the Rabbi: What happened during the Second Temple period, when the Jews prayed to God to return them to Israel, and then, when this became possible in the days of Cyrus (or Achashverosh, Y.B.), they chose to remain in exile—while, ironically, continuing to pray for God to return them to Tziyon?

The Kuzari's response to this attitude was very severe:

“This sin—the failure to return to the Land of Israel when we had the opportunity—is what prevented the Divine plan from reaching its fulfillment during the Second Temple period. The prophet Zekhariah anticipated that all the Jews would return: ‘Sing and rejoice, daughter of Tziyon’ [for God is once again in His land, Zekhariah 2:14], and that when the majority of the Jewish people returned to Israel, the SHEKHINAH, the Divine Presence, and prophecy would return to Israel! The Yehudim were expected to return voluntarily to their land. But incredibly, this did not happen, and only some Jews returned [the poorest among them]. The great majority remained in Babylon [Persia], in a voluntary exile, because they were unwilling to separate themselves from their worldly affairs, their mansions, and their businesses.”

This cannot happen a second time.

I want to arrive in Israel before the Mashiach comes. I want to go to Israel through my own merit, by choice, and out of love for Bore Olam.

THE ONLY DEPARTURE WE SHOULD CELEBRATE

For those of us who remain here, the departure of these wonderful families and their children—52 people altogether—leaves us with mixed emotions. We will miss them, and even though our community numbers 1,200 families, their absence will be felt! But at the same time, we feel tremendous pride and joy knowing that they are now inside Yeshayahu’s tent.

It is the only kind of farewell that should be celebrated.

Because they are opening the way for those who may one day want to join them—by choice, or even by force.

To these seven families, and to all those returning to the land of our forefathers, we pray that HaShem accompany them through this enormous step; that their adjustment be easy;

that they find in Israel a true home; and that their children and grandchildren grow up deeply connected to Am Israel and Erets Israel.

“Harchibi meqom aholekh.” Make more room in your tent, Israel: your children are coming home.