

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Lech Lecha

Acquiring the Land of Israel

וה' אמר אל אברהם... שא נא עיניך ורא... כי את כל הארץ אשר אתה ראה לך אתננה ולזרעך עד עולם.

Hashem said to Avram... raise now your eyes and look... for all the land that you see, to you I will give it, and to your descendants forever. (13:14-15)

קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה.

Arise, walk through the land, through its length and breadth, for to you I will give it. (ibid. pasuk 17)

Viewing and Walking

The above pesukim relate that Hashem told Avram to do two things: to look upon that land and to walk its length and breadth. What is the goal of these two things?

According to the Gemara in Maseches Bava Basra,¹ by walking the length and breadth of Eretz Yisrael Avraham effected an acquisition of the land. This act constitutes a form of acquisition known as chazakah – demonstrating a proprietorial relationship with the land. And what of the first instruction, to “look upon the land”? What was its role? Presumably this was purely a matter of having Avraham preview the land that he would then acquire by walking through it. However, it is interesting to note a discrepancy between these two pesukim:

When Hashem tells Avraham to look upon the land, He states that He will give the land to Avraham “to you and to your descendants forever.”

When He subsequently tells Avraham to walk through the land, he states only that “to you I will give it.”

Why does the “preview” of the land describe a more permanent gift than its actual acquisition? The Meshech Chochmah explains that in fact, by viewing the land, Avraham was doing more than merely previewing.

1 100a.

When Vision Effects Acquisition

The halachah states that although acquisition normally requires some form of act, there are times when something can be acquired just by looking at it. The Gemara² informs us that one can acquire an ownerless object (hefker) through looking at it. Accordingly, it is possible that by viewing the land, Avraham actually came thereby to acquire it! However, this would only be the case if Eretz Yisrael was considered ownerless at that time. Was that the case? Furthermore, if indeed Eretz Yisrael was considered ownerless, and could be acquired by simply looking at it, what was the purpose of additionally instructing Avraham to walk its length and breadth?

Two Levels of Relationship with the Land

The Meshech Chochmah explains that our relationship with the land exists on two levels. Of course it is ours in the physical sense, to dwell there as a nation with all that that entails. However, beyond that, as we know, Eretz Yisrael has unique, elevated spiritual properties, which are available to those who dwell there.

To put this into a conceptual framework: Halachah distinguishes between kinyan haguf – ownership of the thing itself, and kinyan peiros – ownership of the rights to use it. When it comes to Eretz Yisrael, primary and essential ownership (kinyan haguf) rests with one who is able to connect with the spiritual qualities of the land, while physical possession is in the category of usage rights (kinyan peiros). The question for us to consider is: which of these aspects had been taken ownership of prior to Avraham's arrival in the land?

In physical / temporal terms: the people of Canaan populated the land before Avraham arrived. In this respect they enjoyed an element of ownership of the land, one which would need to be transferred to Avraham.

In spiritual terms: no one had hitherto accessed the higher qualities of Eretz Yisrael. In this respect the land was hefker!

Therefore, since Hashem wanted to grant Avraham full ownership over the land, He instructed him to do two things.

Firstly He told Avraham to look at the land, thereby acquiring the spiritual connection to and ownership of Eretz Yisrael. Since this aspect of the land was ownerless, Avraham could acquire it through looking at it.³

Additionally, Hashem wished to grant Avraham ownership of the physical aspect of the land. Since the Canaanites were currently living there, it was not considered ownerless in this respect, and hence this required an actual act of acquisition – to walk the length and breadth of the land.

Moreover, since the spiritual aspect of the land can never be owned by anyone other than the Jewish people, the first pasuk which describes spiritual acquisition states that the land would be given to Avraham and his descendants, forever.

However, since the Jewish people would not always enjoy temporal control of the land,

2 Bava Metzia 118a.

3 Rav Yehuda Cooperman, in his peirush to the Meshech Chochmah, explains that this approach will help us understand why, having already told Avraham to “look at the land” in pasuk 14, Hashem repeats “For the land *that you see*, to you I will give it etc.” By mentioning Avraham seeing the land in the second pasuk, Hashem was indicating that it was through this seeing that he would acquire the land.

the second pasuk, which describes the acquisition of that element, states that it will be given “to you”, but does mention Avraham’s descendants, for there was no guarantee the Jewish people would necessarily enjoy uninterrupted control of the land in from that point onwards.

“Raise up your eyes and see.”

Based on this idea, the Meshech Chochmah provides a deeper level of understanding Hashem’s opening words to Avraham in the beginning of pasuk 14, “raise up your eyes.” On a straightforward level, these words refer to Avraham physically raising his head so as to allow him to look around in all directions. However, Meshech Chochmah explains that these words are actually describing an elevated way of seeing. In physical terms, Avraham did not immediately see the effects of his acquisition of the land: the Canaanites who then populated the land did not recognize him as its owner. Additionally, as we know, when the time came that he needed a plot to bury Sarah, he was forced to pay an exorbitant amount for it.⁴ Nevertheless, in a more elevated sense, reflected in the words “raise up your eyes,” Avraham fully acquired the land – immediately and permanently – by fulfilling Hashem’s instructions in that pasuk, “and look upon the land.”

Active Ownership

A final fascinating point which emerges from the Meshech Chochmah here is that Avraham’s spiritual acquisition of the land enabled him to access and actualize its elevated qualities. This means that the unique properties known to us regarding Eretz Yisrael, such as Hashem’s direct supervision and interaction with it, the special mitzvah and merit of living there etc. were all initiated and “activated” as a result of Avraham coming into ownership of it! This means that not only do the Jewish people attain their highest levels of sanctity when they are in Eretz Yisrael, the land itself attains its sanctity as a result of its connection with the Jewish people, as initiated by Avraham Avinu in our parsha.

This idea is already referred to by the Meshech Chochmah earlier in our parsha.⁵ Commenting on the pasuk⁶ which states that “Avram took his wife Sarah... and they set out to go to the land of Canaan,” the Zohar explains that this means he encouraged her to accompany him by describing how beneficial the trip would be for them, for he could not have forced her to go against her will. We may ask, why did he need to encourage her? Does the halachah not state that either spouse can coerce the other to move to Eretz Yisrael in order to fulfill the mitzvah of living there?⁷ The Meshech Chochmah answers that this is true once living in Eretz Yisrael has become a mitzvah. However, it was not until Avraham had arrived in the land and acquired it that living there became a mitzvah! Hence, at the time he undertook his initial journey, the only means through which he was able to “take” Sarah with him was through encouragement.

4 See Sanhedrin 111a.

5 12:5 s.v. vayikach

6 Ibid.

7 See Kesuvos 110b.