



5782 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Parashat Emor / פרשת אָמור

Celebrating the “First of Zion”

When discussing the holiday of Sukkot, the Torah states that “you should take on the first day [of Sukkot] the [etrog, lulav, haddasim and aravot].” The Midrash¹ hones in on the phrase “the first day” and explains that through the mitzvah of the four species the Jewish people will merit many “firsts.”

R. Berechia says: In the merit of taking the four species on the first day, I will appear to you first... and will build for you “the first” which refers to the Beit HaMikdash... and will bring for you “the first” – the King Mashiach - as the verse states “The First of Zion (*Rishon LeZion*) are here! I will send a herald to Yerushalayim.”²

This Midrash identifies the “First of Zion” as Mashiach himself. Interestingly, though, this identity seems to be in tension with other elements of the verse. The fact that the verse speaks of a herald would seem to indicate that the verse is not referring to the triumphant arrival of King Mashiach, but an earlier stage during which the news must still be announced and publicized.

In fact, the medieval commentators were sensitive to this point and do not identify the “First of Zion” as the final King Mashiach. For example, Redak explains that the verse refers to “the first one to leave exile and come to Zion will become the herald of redemption.” Accordingly, it seems to be a debate between the Midrash and Redak if the verse refers to the final arrival of King Mashiach to rule in Yerushalayim or the first person to leave exile and live in Zion.

Despite the differences in their interpretations, the fact that the phrase “First of Zion” is ambiguous enough to bear both interpretations is itself important. Perhaps the ambiguity is intended to teach us that we should not create an essential barrier between the first returnees to Zion (Redak) and the final King Mashiach (the Midrash). They should be linked and seen as part of the same continuum. Even when there is but a trickle of people returning to Zion we should have the

¹ Vayikra Rabbah, Emor 30:16.

² Yeshayahu 41:27.



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perspective that these people are part of the process of redemption that will eventually lead to Mashiach. Even the “first one to leave exile and come to Zion” is a major step towards the arrival of King Mashiach.

This possible interpretation teaches an important lesson. Intuitively, we might only want to become excited over King Mashiach himself which is the culmination of our prayers and dreams. Events such as a trickle of Jews to Zion, or the establishment of a largely secular Jewish state may seem far from the ideal reality described by our prophets. However, it is our obligation to connect the dots. The return to Zion is a process. We must celebrate the “first one to leave exile and come to Zion” even as realizing that we still do not have the climax of redemption. And understanding where we are in this process should encourage us to work with God to further Zion on the path of redemption closer and closer to the coming of Mashiach.