

The Choicest Portion

As the first *mitzvah* of *kiddush hachodesh* is communicated to *Moshe* and *Aharon*, the verse puts deliberate emphasis on the location of this “conversation”. “*Hashem* said to *Moshe* and to *Aharon* in the land of Egypt saying (*Shemot* 12:1)” *Chazal* are perturbed by the emphasis on *Eretz Mitzrayim*. In the *Midrash Tanchuma* (*parsha* 5), they explain that *Hashem* would not rest His presence in the cities of Egypt; the idolatry obsessed Egyptians made their cities impure and antithetical to spiritual union with *Hashem*. Instead, *Moshe* would exit the settled cities for the countryside in order to communicate with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. Similarly, *Hashem* chose to deliver the first *mitzvah* of the Torah in a place clear from idol worship, in the land of Egypt and not in the cities of Egypt.

The *midrash* goes on to explain that prior to the Jewish people’s entry into *Eretz Yisrael*, other lands were viable for prophecy and communication with *Hashem*. But once *Eretz Yisrael* was chosen, all other lands became inadequate and invalid for this holy purpose, נפסלו כל הארצות. Similarly, prior to Jerusalem being chosen as the principle resting place of God’s Divine Presence, prophecy was easily accessible anywhere in the Holy Land. But after Jerusalem’s unique status was established, ובסתלק הדבור מארץ ישראל, the prime access to *nevuah* was consolidated to *Yerushalayim*. (It is important to note the careful distinction in language employed by the *Midrash*. *Chutz La’aretz* is described as פסול, invalid for a Divine rendezvous, while *Eretz Yisrael* is still כשר, but less viable. It is for this reason that many *neviim* experienced their first prophecy while visiting the *Beit HaMikdash*.) Finally, the *midrash* concludes with *Hashem*’s final choice of the *Beit HaMikdash*. This last *bechira* made the *Har HaBayit* into the principle place of the *Shechina*.

A careful reading of this *midrash* reveals a powerful portrayal of *Eretz Yisrael*’s superior status over all other lands. *Moshe Rabbeinu* could not communicate with *Hashem* in the idol-infested cities of the Egyptians. Instead, he was forced to travel outside the cities to pray and “learn” the first commandments of *Hashem*. The qualitative jump from the impure cities of Egypt to its countryside is parallel to the qualitative jump from *Chutz La’aretz* to the Land of Israel. After the *bechira* of *Eretz Yisrael*, all other lands became the equivalent of the impure cities of Egypt. The rabbinic decree of *tumat chutz la’aretz* (*Shabbat* 15a) reflects this metaphysical reality. *Chazal* declared all lands outside of *Eretz Yisrael* as impure, reflecting the spiritual inferiority of other lands in comparison to the chosen Land of Israel.

But even after the unique and superior status of *Eretz Yisrael* was established, another *bechira* occurred within her boundaries. Jerusalem was chosen for a qualitative spiritual jump similar to what *Eretz Yisrael* had experienced over the other lands of the world. *Yerushalayim* became the choicest portion, the chosen city within the chosen land.

A closer look at the text of *Shemot* reveals another layer. Every *perek* that proceeds *Shemot* 12 begins with *Hashem* speaking to *Moshe*, but *never* does the Torah emphasize where the conversation took place. It is only at the onset of *mitzvah* instruction that the Torah emphasizes the need for God’s communication to be separate from the cities of Egypt. Torah instruction particularly requires surroundings of purity in order to achieve true Divine connection.

With every *bechira* and consolidation of the *Shechina*, the premier location for Torah study became more and more focused as well. It isn’t a coincidence that the *Har HaBayit* was also the

seat of the supreme Torah authority. As the ultimate destination for all Torah instruction and clarification, the *Sanhedrin HaGadol* specifically belongs within the choicest portion of *Eretz Yisrael*.