



From Heaven to Earth and Back

One enigmatic passage serves as the only biblical source cited directly in the Prayer for the State of Israel:

If your dispersed ones shall be at the ends of the heavens, from there the L-rd your G-d will gather you and from there He will take you. And the L-rd your G-d will bring you to the Land that your forefathers inherited and you shall inherit it... (*Devarim* 30:4-5)

Here Moses describes how the Jewish people will be redeemed, but why would G-d gather individuals from the holiest of all places – the heavens – to bring them to the Land?

Rav Saadia Gaon interprets this as a metaphor. The Torah paints a picture of a people who, albeit in exile, will live holy and devout lives, who will 'return unto G-d, listen to everything He commands' and serve Him wholeheartedly (30:2). Throughout our history, Jewish people strove to fulfill this imperative. They formed insular communities of piety, where study houses were full and adherence to Jewish law was systemic. These were times of education and spiritual self-growth, and the resulting scholarly achievements were extraordinary.

But, much like one's time at university, study is a lofty ideal in and of itself, but also a means rather than an end alone. We acquire knowledge in order to apply it. In the World to Come, or heaven, Torah study may be exclusively viewed as an end, but here it is more, helping us to sanctify the mundane, to live a life of holiness, and

in doing so, to elevate the world into a sanctified, heavenly place.

It is fine, in our private lives, to retreat from societal influences and to create a holy space in which we can focus on our own personal spiritual journey. However, all too often people get stuck in this inward focus, losing sight of the ultimate goal – our responsibility to bring the world with us on our path of spiritual growth.

Perhaps, therefore, by saying that G-d will gather the people from 'the ends of the heavens,' the Torah is implying that G-d will draw the people back from their solely spiritual pursuits, and bring them 'to the Land,' back to reality. By specifically mentioning the Land, the Torah teaches that G-d will indeed bring the people to deal with the nitty-gritty practicalities of planting seeds and working the physical land. And what better time to remember this than Yom HaAtzmaut amidst the Coronavirus.

For the first time in 2,000 years, we have been afforded the opportunity to build a Jewish homeland. Israel is ultimately meant to be built into a beacon for the world, as an inspiration nation. In order to actualize this, each one of us needs to recognize our responsibility of applying our Torah knowledge to the real world. Each one of us has a role to play in building this great nation, a thread to weave in the creation of our national and even international tapestry.

This message applies even beyond the building of a national homeland. The Talmud (*Niddah* 30b) teaches

that before a person is born, we are taught the entire Torah while still in the womb. And at the end of our lives, we pass on to another idyllic spiritual existence – heaven. While our lives are bookended by these two blissful realms of elevated holiness, a few verses after this passage we are reminded that the Torah is 'not in the heavens' (30:12). It is not meant to be confined to the study house but must be constantly implemented, to shape every facet of our day-to-day lives.

There are those who build a spiritual 'cocoon' around themselves. They attempt to connect to the untainted pre-life (womb) and post-life (World to Come) spiritual heights. Between the womb and the tomb, the Torah commands us to find the courage to rise to the challenges of this world. The miracle of the State of Israel, the return of our people to its ancestral home despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, is the ultimate example of this. Though we may be susceptible to failure along the way, it is incumbent upon us to embrace the real world with these values, in other words, as it says a few verses later to 'choose life so that you may live!' (30:19)

Rabbi Benji Levy is CEO of Mosaic United, a partnership between the State of Israel and the global Jewish community dedicated to mapping the broad spectrum of Jewish experiential opportunities.