One Aspect of Kedushat HaAretz

The Sifrei Zuta, in its first gloss to Sefer Bamidbar (5:2), discusses the mitzvah to send the teme’ilim outside the Mishkan and the areas surrounding it, by level of sanctity. The mishnayot in Masechet Keilim (1:6-10) similarly list these 10 levels in ascending order of kedusha, starting with Eretz Yisrael and concluding with the Kodesh HaKodashim.

Rav Soloveitchik was fond of discussing the first level of kedusha listed in the Mishnah – that of Eretz Yisrael: “Eretz Yisrael is holier than all other lands. And what constitutes its holiness? That we bring from it the fruits of Eretz Yisrael in the form of teruma, ma’aser, shmita, yovel, leket, and the [first fruits offered as] bikkurim. The latter maintain that bikkurim is one of the mitzvot dependent upon the Land (teruma, ma’aser, shmita, yovel, leket, shichecha, pei’ah, challah) – these three obscure dinim are the ones specifically chosen to express the uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael. Furthermore, although one of the Mishnah’s examples of Eretz Yisrael’s kedusha is that the fruits of bikkurim may only come from the produce of Eretz Yisrael, certain versions of the text of the Sifrei Zuta neglect to mention this third example. What accounts for this apparent discrepancy, whether to list the din of bikkurim amongst the dinim that demonstrate Eretz Yisrael’s distinctiveness?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the Sifrei Zuta and Mishnah are not merely outlining the special kedusha of Eretz Yisrael per se. Of course, there exists a concept of kedushat Eretz Yisrael, which gives rise to the long list of mitzvot. In this context, however, Chazal express the notion that there are 10 levels of kedushat Beit HaMikdash. The core of kedushat Beit HaMikdash, its most intense degree, is found in the Kodesh HaKodashim. The kedusha then spills over to the other areas in descending levels, until it fills the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael itself, which possesses the tenth level of kedushat haMikdash. Chazal seek to prove that Eretz Yisrael, apart from its own kedushat haAretz, is endowed with a lower level of kedushat haMikdash. This cannot be demonstrated from the group of mitzvot encompassing the bikkurim, for they are dependent solely upon kedushat haAretz.

It seems strange that of all the dinim that make Eretz Yisrael unique – the teruma, ma’aser, shmita, yovel, leket, shichecha, pei’ah, challah – these three obscure dinim are the ones specifically chosen to express the uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael. Furthermore, although one of the Mishnah’s examples of Eretz Yisrael’s kedusha is that the fruits of bikkurim may only come from the produce of Eretz Yisrael, certain versions of the text of the Sifrei Zuta neglect to mention this third example. What accounts for this apparent discrepancy, whether to list the din of bikkurim amongst the dinim that demonstrate Eretz Yisrael’s distinctiveness?

Another din that reflects the kedushat haMikdash aspect of Eretz Yisrael is that ma’aser beheima (animal tithes) and bechor beheima tehora (firstborn kosher animals) are not offered as korbanot if they come from outside Eretz Yisrael (according to Rabbi Akiva, Bechorot 53a, Temurah 21b). Similarly, the Mechilta (Petichta, Parashat Bo; see Kli Chemdah, Parashat Chukat, siman 4) holds that the allowance, during certain periods in history, to offer a korban on a bama (mizbeach outside of the Beit HaMikdash) was likewise only applicable in Eretz Yisrael.

The Mishnah added a third din to demonstrate that Eretz Yisrael contains an element of kedushat haMikdash – that only the fruits of Eretz Yisrael are obligated in bikkurim. The Mishnah must hold that bikkurim is not one of the mitzvot dependent upon the Land, but rather part of the avodah of the Beit HaMikdash, and the fruits must therefore grow on land that possesses kedushat Beit HaMikdash. This is the point of dispute between the Mishnah and some versions of the Sifrei Zuta, which do not include the din of bikkurim along with the omer and shtei halechem. The latter maintain that bikkurim is one of the mitzvot dependent upon the Land. Therefore, while it is true that the fruits of bikkurim may only come from produce grown in Eretz Yisrael, this din does not prove anything regarding the kedushat haMikdash aspect of Eretz Yisrael. This aspect of the kedusha of Eretz Yisrael can only be proven through the dinim regarding the omer and the shtei halechem.

1 See Nefesh HaRav, pp. 77–78; Eretz HaTzvi, p. 97.

Adapted from “Rav Schachter on the Parsha.”

Rabbi Hershel Schachter is Rosh Yeshiva and Rosh Kollel at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University.