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*With
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ב"ה

Parshas Re'eh

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Holy Binoculars

Farming has been an extremely dominant part of the Jews' everyday life for thousands of years. The majority of Jews, for a large part of history, had an agricultural job of some sort in order to sustain themselves. Hence, the Torah designed a very intricate set of agricultural laws, which ensured that the individuals who could not sustain themselves were not left hungry. These very elaborate sets of laws were put in place, including *terumah* (tithe given to the kohanim), *ma'aser rishon* (tithe given to the levi'im), *ma'aser ani* (tithe given to the poor), *leket* (fallen crop that is to be left for the poor), *shikcha* (forgotten crop that is to be left for the poor), *pei'ah* (a corner of one's field that is to be left for the poor), and *shmittah* and *yovel* (in which land is left unworked every seventh and fiftieth year, and its produce that grows naturally at that time is left for all to take). The purpose of all of these laws is clear; to maintain a society in which all are fed, regardless of one's economic class.

The odd one out is *ma'aser sheni*, which is seemingly unrelated to the purpose of helping the poor. On years one, two, four, five, and seven of the seven-year *shmittah* cycle, we are instructed to take ten percent of our entire crop and bring it to Yerushalayim for us to consume within the city walls. We are to fill up our wagons and saddle our donkeys and bring our crops to Yerushalayim, and we cannot return home until we consume every last drop. If one's crop amounts to a quantity that exceeds his ability to carry it hundreds of miles to Yerushalayim, he is commanded to sell the crop, and use the proceeds to buy food and drink within the city limits of Yerushalayim.

What Are We Doing?

The question is obvious; what is the purpose of this? What exactly are we trying to accomplish by dragging hundreds of pounds of produce in tow, finding a bench somewhere, eating it, and promptly returning home? What exactly

is the Torah trying to accomplish by this? It doesn't seem to have any apparent spiritual aspect to it, and certainly doesn't seem to be benefiting society in any way. There is no special blessing we say or song we chant as we carry out this process. So why does the Torah command us to do it?

The explanation that the Torah offers doesn't seem to solve our problem. The Torah (Devarim 14, 23) explains that the reason we bring ma'aser sheni is l'maan tilmad liyira es Hashem – we are to bring our food and eat it in Yerushalayim in order to learn to fear Hashem. How exactly does schlepping three crates of eggplants to Yerushalayim and eating them on a street corner cultivate yiras shamayim?

Holiness On A Tuesday

The Chinuch (mitzvah 360) offers a powerful explanation. He explains that the Torah is commanding us all to take time out of our busy lives and spend a day or two in the holy city of Yerushalayim. The point is for us to be inspired and bring that inspiration back to our homeland far away, injecting our daily lives with holiness.

But it still seems baffling. Every member of the Jewish people traveled to the Bais Hamikdash thrice yearly on Pesach, Shavuos and Succos; so, what does this add? Haven't we been there already? Doesn't coming a fourth time run the risk of dulling the inspiration we received when we came the previous three times?

The answer is that the Torah wants us to come and see Yerushalayim when life is regular. When there isn't a grandiose Pesach or Succos permeating the air, and there isn't the heightened buzz of Shavuos all around. When there aren't throngs of people and choirs and sacrifices. The Torah wants us to go and see the streets of Yerushalayim on a Tuesday afternoon when there's nothing going on. The Torah wants us to observe that holy shopkeeper in the shuk and how scrupulous he is with the way he talks. The Torah wants us to watch the baker and see how he uses every spare moment he has to sing the songs of Hashem's Torah. Hashem wants us to catch a glimpse of the Torah giants that walk the streets of the city shrouded in holiness, even when nobody's observing.

The Torah wants us to come to Yerushalayim specifically when it is not a holiday, so we can see what is expected of us on a normal day; meaning, to see what the Torah defines as normal. To see what holy people do and don't do on a daily basis. Not what they do while in the Bais Hamikdash on Shmini Atzeres or in shul on Shavuos night. This time the focus is on what they do on a Wednesday morning while eating breakfast.

The Torah wants us to bottle up those sights and sounds of the streets of Yerushalayim and bring them back to wherever we call home, so we can inculcate them in our lives. To use our refreshed definition of “normal” and apply it to ourselves. We return with broadened vistas in what we are capable of achieving spiritually, a heightened sensitivity of what we allow in our homes, and perhaps more importantly, what we don’t.

The Holy Stone Wall

While this is a transformational idea, the problem is that this solution runs into a wall both literally and figuratively. The Gemara (Zevachim 119b) states that in order to eat ma’aser sheni, one needs to be within the walls of the city containing either the Bais Hamikdash or the Mishkan (Tabernacle). There was, however, an exception to the rule. There was one place where the Mishkan had once stood, where one was able to fulfill his obligation of ma’aser sheni, as long as he was able to see the city even when standing far beyond its walls. That city was the city of Shiloh. But first, a brief history.

After the Jews entered the land of Eretz Yisrael, they erected the Mishkan in Gilgal, a city near the city of Yericho. It stood there for fourteen years while the land was conquered and divided. The Mishkan was then moved to Shiloh, where it remained for 369 years. During a war with the Plishtim, the Aron was captured. Upon hearing this tragic news, the Kohen Gadol of the time, Eli, fell backward from his chair and died. It was at that time that the Mishkan in Shiloh was destroyed. Afterwards, the Mishkan was rebuilt in the city of Nov, where it stayed until King Shaul killed all the Kohanim living there, upon which it was moved to the city of Givon. It stood in Nov and Givon for 57 years, collectively. It was then that Shlomo Hamelech finally built the first Bais Hamikdash in Yerushalayim.

In all of the Mishkan’s many locations, the law regarding ma’aser sheni remained the same; one must bring a tenth of his produce to within the walls of the city where the Mishkan was currently situated, and eat it there.

The exception was Shiloh. As long as you could see Shiloh, you were able to eat ma’aser sheni. Perched on top of a hill twenty miles away was good enough. No need to be any closer.

The question is, why? If the entire point of the law was for us to absorb the everyday sanctity and piousness of the city, how are we accomplishing that while eating our peppers on top of a mountain, relying on binoculars just to make out the Shiloh skyline? How are we to absorb the holiness the city exudes from so far away?

The answer can be found in the reason the Gemara gives as to why the Mishkan was in Shiloh in the first place. It was there in the zechus of Yosef Hatzaddik. The Gemara says that because of the herculean strength Yosef displayed while withstanding the immodesty and immorality of Egypt, he merited having the Mishkan rest in his portion of land for a whopping 369 years. So holy was this Yosef-inspired city, that those who merely saw it from afar were viewed as being halachically transplanted inside of it. Just laying one's eyes on it from afar had the same effect as being present in its streets. Why was this so?

Yosef: A Spiritual Catapult

The Ben Ish Chai (Ben Yehoyada on that Gemara) explains that Yosef, with his steadfast commitment to holiness, set the bar for the rest of Jewish history, showing us the spiritual heights, we are all able to attain even while entrenched in the mud of everyday life. Yosef introduced to the Jewish people a new normal. He introduced us to our ability to remain pure despite being engulfed in impurity. So intact was his holiness, so rock-solid was his grasp of sanctity, that the Medrash (Vayikra 33, 5) labels Yosef as the seminal protector of the Jewish people's sacredness until this day.

Hence, continues the Ben Ish Chai, merely seeing the city of Shiloh, merely glancing at the Yosef-inspired Mishkan, even from afar, was so inspirational that there was no need to come closer. When we looked at the Mishkan in Shiloh, we were reminded of how Yosef injected an oasis of purity in the midst of a sea of contamination, and we became inspired to do the same. So awesome was Yosef's holiness that merely seeing his Mishkan from miles away, close to 500 years after his death, electrified us and enabled us to find sparks of holiness in our souls, sparks that we were previously unaware were there.

When we took one look at that Mishkan, we were met with Yosef's fireball of holiness. We remembered the young seventeen-year-old boy all alone in a foreign land. We remembered the youth who looked down as he walked through the dark streets of Rameses. We saw the lad who, no matter his circumstances, kept on smiling. We remembered Yosef who, despite unfathomable pressure to commit adulterous acts, let his soul shine bright. We remembered the teenager who, with unimaginable strength, ran away from sin like we would from the plague. We remembered it all and injected it into our homes. We were reminded of how holy our souls can be and of how much spiritual strength is stored in its vast recesses.

Advanced Mathematics and the Surprising Power Within

George Danzig was a graduate student in advanced mathematics in the University of California, Berkeley. He was a smart student and loved math but didn't think he was anything out of the ordinary. One day, he came a few minutes late to his math class. He surreptitiously sat down in his seat and quickly copied the two homework problems written on the blackboard before catching up to what the professor was teaching.

Later that evening, he sat down with a glass of tea to work on the two homework problems. Although he found them quite difficult, he was determined to finish them, hoping not to make an even worse impression after coming late to class earlier that day. After spending several hours on them, he was finally able to solve the problems, and satisfied, he went to sleep. The next day, when he handed the paper to his math teacher, the teacher looked up at him with surprise.

"What is this?" he asked George.

"It's the homework from yesterday," George replied.

"I didn't give any homework yesterday," the professor said with increased energy in his voice.

"So, what were those two problems on the blackboard?" George asked, as the rest of the class looked on.

The teacher, with his heart pumping furiously, grabbed the paper from George's hand and read it from top to bottom. After staring at the paper in utter disbelief, scanning it over and over and over again, the professor jumped out of his seat and excitedly screamed:

"George, those were two unsolvable math problems presented by ancient math scholars hundreds of years ago that haven't ever been solved in the history of math! And you just solved them!!

"George, you have just solved a problem that the smartest men in history were baffled by! I can't believe it!"

George Danzig spent the first 22 years of his life completely unaware that he had in him the ability to solve math problems that have stumped every mathematician in world history. The difference between him and the rest of them was that he didn't hear the professor tell the class that these problems were unsolvable. He didn't hear the professor say it was too hard. All he saw were two problems that needed to be solved, and he found the wisdom buried deep within his brain to solve them.

Each and every one of us have unimaginable spiritual strengths buried deep within our souls. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we think that our souls only come alive on days like Simchas Torah and Yom Kippur, while the rest

of the year gets relegated to spiritual mediocrity. We need to remember Yosef and the strength he showed us that we all have. The ability to take the streets of Yerushalayim and the sights of Shiloh and implant it wherever we find ourselves. We need to take a day off from our busy lives and just sit and observe holy people going about their life. We need to be reminded that our souls are far stronger than what the peanut gallery says they are.

Parshas Re'eh is always around Elul time. Elul is a time when we reenergize ourselves, a time when we rethink ourselves, a time when we reexamine our capabilities. It's a time when we ask ourselves Judaism's most important question: why be spiritually good, when we can be spiritually great?