people without a land is a lost people, a homeless nation without refuge or sanctuary. But of what significance is this wandering? Does it increase our spiritual obligations or render us incapable of meaningful service of G-d?

As a description of what will happen to the nation if they do not observe the mitzvos, the Torah tells us “you will perish quickly off the good land which the Lord gives to you” (Devarim 11:17). In other words, and as the Sifrei and Rashi state explicitly, a punishment for non-observance of the mitzvos is exile for our land. The next few verses then tell us, “And you shall put these words of Mine on your hearts and on your souls and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand and they shall be totafos between your eyes… and you shall write them on the doorposts of your house…” (Devarim 11:18,20). The connection between these verses is unclear. What does exile have to do with tefillin and mezuzahs?

Rashi1, based on the Sifrei, explains: “Even after you have been exiled, distinguish yourselves by [observing] the commandments: put on tefillin, make mezuzos, so that they will not be new to you when you return.” The clear implication is that the proper place for these mitzvos is Israel and that, really, there is no reason to observe mitzvos in exile. The only reason given is so that we not fall out of practice for when we return to the Holy Land.

The proper place for these mitzvos is Israel and that, really, there is no reason to observe mitzvos in exile. The only reason given is so that we not fall out of practice for when we return to the Holy Land.

This is certainly a very difficult idea. As the Ramban2 points out, certain mitzvos are bodily obligations (chovos haguf) and do not vary based on one’s location. Why should there be a difference whether one is in Israel or in Canada. Either way, the bodily obligations still apply.

Furthermore, there are different reasons for the many commandments. Some refine the human character, others train a person to obedience of the Divine, and others are necessary for the smooth running of a civil society. Why should such mitzvos apply any less in exile than in Israel?

The Sifrei on Devarim 18:29 relates the following story:

R’ Yehudah ben Beseirah, R’ Masyah ben Charash, R’ Chananah ben Achi R’ Yehoshua, and R’ Yonasan were going to [a place] outside of Israel. When they reach Platom, they raised their eyes, shed tears, tore their garments, and recited this verse: “And you shall possess it and dwell in it and you shall observe all the laws and the ordinances…” (Devarim 11:31-31). They said, “[We see from here] that settling the land of Israel is equivalent to observing all of the commandments.”

Once again, we see the importance of the land of Israel in respect to the observance of mitzvos. However, in the above story, the exact opposite point might be inferred than from the prior passage. The most recent passage might imply that mitzvah observance is specifically for those in exile. Those living in Israel, however, fulfill the commandment of settling the land that is equivalent to all of the mitzvos. From the prior passage we see the exact opposite: only in the land of Israel is the observance of mitzvos significant.

We can determine that the idea settling the land of Israel is more important than other mitzvos this is certainly not literally true. This type of exaggerated statement is typical

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1 Devarim 11:18
2 ad loc.
of rabbinic literature and can be found in regard to tzitzis, avodah zarah, Shabbos, and tzedakah.3 The upshot of such a statement is that settling the land of Israel is extremely important, but there is no implication that it overrides or renders unnecessary the observance of other mitzvos. Indeed, according to the Ramban, mitzvos in Israel are more important than outside of Israel, but sins in Israel are also more significant than equivalent acts in exile. The holiness of the land makes abrogation of G-d’s law an even more serious infraction.4

However, we are still left with the puzzling statement that mitzvos outside of the land of Israel are inherently meaningless. Can that be true? The Kesav Sofer points out that the statement of the Sifrei is only regarding very specific mitzvos — those mentioned in subsequent verses, i.e. tefillin and mezuzah. The Gemara5 states that the verse “And all the people of the earth shall see that the name of God is called upon you” (Devarim 28:10) is referring to tefillin. One of the functions of tefillin, and possibly mezuzah as well, is as a sign that G-d protects and watches over His nation. When that nation is in exile, the tefillin and mezuzah might serve not as a kiddush Hashem, a sign of G-d’s greatness, but as a chillul Hashem. We, the wearers of tefillin, G-d’s chosen people, are second-class citizens, wanderers without a home. The real purpose of tefillin is certainly not accomplished in exile. Only in a strong Israel, where G-d’s glory is manifest, is the mitzvah of tefillin properly fulfilled. In all other times, we observe it as preparation for the time — we pray very soon — when G-d’s glory will once again be entirely manifest and those who look upon us will see the G-d watches over His people.

A recurring theme in last week’s and this week’s parshiyos is the obligation to love G-d. How? How can one be ordered to feel an emotion? How much control and volition do we have over whether or not we love something or Someone?

The same question may be asked of the tenth dibrah. How can we be commanded not to covet something? Can someone simply shut off desire as through with a faucet?

The mitzvah of ahavah in this week’s parashah is one of many that obligate us to engage in mussar. The central concern of mussar is the perfection of the self through the perfection of one’s middos. Mussar begins very aware of the gap between mind and heart, between that which we know we ought to do and the priorities that actually shape our decisions. It also gives us tools to bridge that gap. So, while someone may not be able to prevent a current bout of desire, or simply conjure up ahavas Hashem, love of the Almighty, one can change oneself into a person who will respond more appropriately in the future.

The Kesav Sofer points out that obligate us to engage in mussar.

1 Devarim 10:16
2 Ad loc
3 Rashi, Bamidbar 15:41; Bava Basra 9a
4 See VaYoel Moshe 2:37
5 Berachos 6a

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The Torah instructs us to bridge this gap when it says, “You shall circumcise the orlah of your heart, and no longer stiffen your neck.”1 The term “orlah” is that used for the skin removed during a bris milah. Rashi2 explains that we are to remove “the blocking of our heart

1 Devarim 10:16
2 Ad loc
The point of the blessing is to set up a hergeil, a habit of expressing thankfulness. If it is not there yet, in time the true thankfulness will follow.

Parashah. “And you shall place these words of mine al levavchem – on your hearts.”3 Why “on”, would it not be more appropriate for Moshe to tell the Jews to place them “in our hearts”? The Sefas Emes quotes his grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim, as follows: The Torah writes, “And you will know today, and you will answer to your heart that Hashem is G-d in the heaven above and on the earth below; there is none else.”4 Once we know today, why do we need to answer our hearts? Because there are things known in the mind that are not yet accepted by the heart. Therefore: “vehasheivosa – you will answer”, from “shuv”, to return. It must be repeated again and again until the words penetrate. This is “al levavchem.” Place it on your heart, pile it higher and higher, eventually it will penetrate.

This is a lesson that can be learned from the mitzvah of bentching. As it says in this week’s parashah, “And you shall eat, you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your G-d for the good land which He has given you.” While the Torah obligation is to bendtch only after a full meal, when one is satisfied, we bendtch even after eating the volume of an olive of bread – the smallest amount that halachah considers “eating” – even without satisfaction. Nor do we need to actually feel thankful for the land in order to be obligated in the blessing. Rather, the point of the blessing is to set up a hergeil, a habit of expressing thankfulness. If it is not there yet, in time the true thankfulness will follow.

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Second, the conclusions that describe the mitzvos that relate ahavas Hashem differ in sequence. “Ve’ahavta” places “v’eshinantam levanekha”, teaching your children, ahead of “ukeshartam le’os”, the mitzvah of wearing tefillin. “Vehayah im shamo’a” places tefillin first.

Third, it also does not quite describe the same mitzvah of teaching one’s children. “Veshinanton levanekha vedibarta bam – and you shall ingrain them into your children and you shall speak of
them.” The mitzvah in Ve’ahavta is to teach one’s children, with a focus on the effect on the teacher. Teach them so that you shall speak of them. In the second paragraph, “Velimadtem osam es beneichem ledabeir bam – and you shall teach them to your children to speak of them.” Teaching one’s children so that they say them. The focus is on the children carrying the words into the next generation.

Last, the quantity of people that each speaks of differs. The verbs and nouns of “Ve’ahavta” are written in the singular – “ve’ahavta... levavcha... nafchecha... me’odecha... Anochi metzavcha...” “Vehayah”’ is addressed to a group of people – "im shamo’ah tishme-u... metzaveh eschem... levavchem... nafshechem... metar artzechem...”

We can suggest that this last distinction underlies the others. The first paragraph of Shema is a message for the individual and the second, to the nation. From the personal perspective, the essence of teaching is that it forces mastery and focus on the subject. This impact is more a part of the self than wearing tefillin on the body. Therefore it appears before tefillin in the sequence of describing the radiation of the love of one’s heart outward. The teaching described in “Vehayah im shamo’a” is from a national perspective, the need to carry the mesorah on to another generation “ledabeir” that they too embrace these words. This description of transmission, with the focus on others, comes after the tefillin worn on one’s own body.

To the individual, “sechar mitzvos behai alma leika – reward for mitzvos is absent from this world”. There is little correlation between a person’s righteousness and his wealth. The individual therefore relates to his possessions solely as opportunities to serve G-d, and their absence solely as a challenge to which Hashem is asking him to respond to. It is interesting to note that the verse that describes the obligation to bendch after meals (also found in this week’s parashah) is written in the singular: “ve’achalta, vesavata, uveirachta... – and you will eat, and you will be satisfied, and you will bless Hashem your G-d for the good land which He gave you.” The conjugation is in the singular and the blessing comes after enjoying what Hashem gave us. There too, the relationship is one of using what one has, not in earning it.

While it is proper to focus on the religious value of one’s own money, it is incorrect to be similarly “frum” when it comes to someone else’s.

While it is proper to focus on the religious value of one’s own money, it is incorrect to similarly “frum” when it comes to someone else’s. When looking at the community’s money, this commitment of “bechol me’odecha” is not as simple. The attention is less on how to respond to having the wealth, and more on what can we do to ensure that the community has what it needs. Not a response after the fact, but a request before it. On the national level, the warnings of the tochachah, the rise and fall of our fortunes as prophesied in Ha’azinu, apply. For the nation, property is an indicator; national wealth that is abused is guaranteed to be eventually withdrawn.