**The TANACH STUDY CENTER**   
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PARSHAT MASEI

The Borders of the Land of Israel

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What are the precise borders of the Land of Israel?

From the story of Bnei Gad & Reuven in Parshat Matot (chapter 32) it seems as though the borders of Israel are rather 'expandable', while in Parshat Masei (chapter 33) they appear to be quite fixed. In the following shiur, we examine the biblical roots of this complicated topic.

Two cliche's, both based on psukim in Tanach, are commonly used to describe the expanse of the borders of the Land of Israel:

(A) 'from the Nile to the Euphrates'

(B) 'from Dan to Beer Sheva'

The discrepancy between these two borders is immense! According to (A), Eretz Yisrael encompasses almost the entire Middle East, while according to (B), Israel is a tiny country not much bigger than the state of Rhode Island.

So which cliche is more 'correct'?

THE BORDERS IN PARSHAT MASEI

We begin our study with chapter 34 in Parshat Masei, for it contains what appears to be a very precise description of the borders of the Land of Israel:

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: Command Bnei Yisrael and tell them, when you enter Eretz Canaan, this is the land which shall become your inheritance - ERETZ CANAAN ACCORDING TO ITS BORDERS. Your southern border, from Midbar Tzin... " (see 34:1-13).

Over the centuries, many attempts have been made to identify each location mentioned in this chapter. In regard to the eastern and western borders, i.e. the Mediterranean Sea (34:6) and the Jordan River (34:11-12), everyone is in agreement. However, in regard to the northern and southern borders, a variety of opinions exist:

The 'minimalist' opinions identify the northern border in the area of today's Southern Lebanon, i.e. along the Litani River - until it meets the Metulla area (what used to be called the 'good fence'). Likewise, the southern border is identified along the Beer Sheva-Gaza line in the northern Negev.

On the other hand, the 'maximalist' opinions identify the northern border somewhere up in Turkey and Northern Syria, while the southern border is found somewhere deep into the Sinai desert.

THE EASTERN FRONTIER

With this in mind, let's return to the story of the two and half tribes in Parshat Matot. Even though the EASTERN border in Parshat Masei is clearly the Jordan River, from the 'deal' that Moshe Rabeinu makes with "bnei Gad u'bnei Reuven" (see 31:1-54) it appears that it is possible to EXPAND this border to include what is known today as Transjordan.

In that story, Moshe Rabeinu agrees that should the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and Menashe fulfill their vow to help everyone else conquer their land, then - the area of Transjordan will become their official inheritance in Eretz Yisrael! [See also Yehoshua chapters 13->14, and chapter 22.]

So why are the borders of Eretz Yisrael so ambiguous? Are they vast or small? Are they fixed or expandable? Are certain parts of the 'Holy Land' holier than others?

To answer this question, and to understand why this topic is so complicated, we must return to Sefer Breishit and carefully examine the psukim that describe the land that God promised to the Avot.

THE LAND PROMISED TO AVRAHAM AVINU

Recall from Parshat Lech Lecha, that when God first chose Avraham Avinu He promised him a special land as well [See Breishit 12:7, 13:14-17, 15:18, 17:7-8. See also 22:17-18, 26:2-5, 28:3-4, 28:13-14, 35:11-12, 46:1-4, 48:4 & 21 (that should keep you busy).]

In His first three promises to Avraham, God describes the land in very general terms, without any precise borders. For example:

1) In Ur Chasdim:

"Go forth from your native land & from your father's house to the LAND WHICH I WILL SHOW YOU." (12:1)

2) At Shchem:

"I will assign THIS LAND to your offspring" (12:7)

3) At Bet-El:

"Raise your eyes and look out from where you are... for I give all the LAND WHICH YOU SEE" (13:15)

However, later on in Parshat Lech Lecha, when Avraham Avinu enters into two covenants ["britot"] with God concerning the future homeland of his progeny, we find a more precise definition of the land. The only problem is, as we will see, each covenant describes a different set of borders!

1) At BRIT BEIN HA'BTARIM: / "HA'ARETZ"

"On that day God made a covenant with Avraham, saying: to your offspring I assign THIS LAND, from the RIVER OF EGYPT [the Nile] to THE RIVER, the river EUPHRATES, the Kenites, Knizites ...(the ten nations)" (Breishit 15:18-20)

The land defined by these borders is immense! It extends in the northeast from the Euphrates River that flows from northern Syria to the Persian Gulf, and in the southwest from the sources of the Nile River in Ethiopia down to the port city of Alexandria! [Undoubtedly, this covenant is the source for the popular phrase "from the Nile to the Euphrates".]

2) At BRIT MILAH: / "ERETZ CANAAN"

"I assign the land in which you sojourn to you and your offspring to come, all the LAND OF CANAAN,..." (17:8)

In this covenant, the 'promised land' is much smaller. Even though this is the first time in Chumash where we find the expression ERETZ CANAAN, the borders of Canaan have already been described in Parshat Noach:

"And the border of the Canaani was from Sidon (the Litani valley in Lebanon) down the coastal plain to Grar and Gaza, [and likewise from Sidon (down the Syrian African Rift)] to Sdom, Amora... (the Dead Sea area)" (Br.10:19).

[Note that this is the only border which is detailed in the genealogies of Breishit chapter 10, most probably because it is needed as background information to later understand Parshat Lech Lecha!]

This biblical definition of Eretz correlates (more or less) with the general locale in which the Avot lived - "eretz m'gurecha" (see 17:7-8). The Avot lived and sojourned in the area bounded by BEER SHEVA and Grar to the south (see 21:22-33, 28:10, 46:1), and the area of Shchem and Dotan (37:12-17) to the north. In his battle against the Four Kings, Avraham chased his enemy as far north as DAN (14:14)!

[Undoubtedly, this border reflects the popular phrase: "from Dan to Beer Sheva". This phrase is used several times later in Tanach to define the people living in the Land of Israel. For example: "And all of Israel, from Dan to Beer Sheva, knew that Shmuel was a trustworthy..."(I Shmuel 3:20, see also Shoftim 20:1 and Melachim I 5:4-5).

In summary, the source for the conflicting borders of Eretz Yisrael appears to be its two different definitions in BRIT BEIN HA'BTARIM and BRIT MILAH. Now, we must explain the connection between each "brit" and its respective definition of the land.

TWO BORDERS / TWO TYPES OF KEDUSHA

To understand the significance of these conflicting borders, we must relate to the nature of each covenant.

The deeper meaning of God's establishment of TWO covenants with the Avot, (Bein Ha'Btarim - b'shem HAVAYA and Milah - b'shem ELOKIM), was discussed in our shiurim on Sefer Breishit. For the purpose of this week's shiur, we will briefly review our conclusions:

BRIT BEIN HA'BTARIM

After Avraham's military defeat of the Four Kings (and hence his first CONQUEST of the Land), God promises Avraham Avinu that his offspring as well will indeed one day CONQUER ("yerusha") the Land. However, that final conquest would take place only after several generations of bondage in a foreign land, after which they will gain their independence and their oppressor shall be punished. [See Breishit 15:1-8,13-18.]

In Brit Bein Ha'btarim, the land where they will become that sovereign NATION is described as expanding from the 'Nile to the Euphrates' (15:18), [the land then occupied by the ten nations see 15:18-20].

This covenant with Avraham Avinu reflects the HISTORICAL/ NATIONAL aspect of Am Yisrael's relationship with God, for it emphasizes that Avraham's children will become a sovereign nation at the conclusion of a long historical process (better known as Yetziat Mitzrayim). Note, that in this covenant, the Promised Land is consistently referred to as "ha'ARETZ"; its conquest is referred to as "YERUSHA", and Hashem's Name is "shem Havayah".

BRIT MILAH (Breishit chapter 17)

In preparation for this covenant, God first changes Avram's name to Avraham in anticipation of the birth of a child from Sarah [nee Sarai]. Then God promises Avraham that He will enter into a special relationship with his offspring - "lihyot lachem l'Elokim" - to be 'a close God with them'. [See Breishit 17:3-9.]

This covenant reflects the RELIGIOUS/ PERSONAL aspect of Am Yisrael's relationship with God, for it emphasizes a special intimacy with the Divine. In this covenant, the Promised Land is referred to as "ERETZ CANAAN". [Note that Bnei Yisrael's inheritance of this land (from father to son) is referred to as "achuza" in contrast to the use of the word "yerusha" in Brit Bein Ha'Btarim.

Hence, we can conclude that there are two aspects in regard to the "kedusha" (sanctity) of Eretz Yisrael:

(A) The NATIONAL aspect

The "kedushat Ha'ARETZ" of Brit Bein Ha'Btarim relates to the CONQUEST of the land ("yerushat ha'aretz") and the establishment of a national entity - a sovereign state. This "kedusha" is realized once Bnei Yisrael attain sovereignty, as is the case once Yehoshua conquers the land. For example, the obligation to give tithe from the land (i.e. "trumot u'maasrot") only begins once the land is conquered.

[See Rambam, Hilchot Trumot, first chapter!]

(B) The PERSONAL aspect -

The "kedushat Eretz Canaan" of Brit Milah already existed in the time of the Avot and remains eternal. This kedusha reflects God's special Providence over this land (see Vayikra chapter 18), even when other nations are living in it. This intrinsic "kedusha" is forever present no matter who is sovereign over the Land, be it Persians, Romans, Crusaders, Turks, British etc. [Let's hope that there will not be a need to add any others to this list in our own generation.]

The following table summarizes our analysis thus far:

THE VAST BORDERS THE LIMITED BORDERS

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PHRASE: the Nile to the Euphrates from Dan to Beer Sheva

COVENANT: Brit Bein HaBtarim Brit Milah

NAME: ha'Aretz Eretz Canaan

ASPECT: National Personal

ACQUIRED BY: "yerusha"=sovereignty "achuza"

YERUSHA & ACHUZA

To clarify this distinction, let's take a closer look at two key words that describe our acquisition of Eretz Yisrael in each covenant:

(A) In Brit Bein HaBtarim - "yerusha" (Br.15:3,4,7,8);

(B) In Brit Milah - "achuzah" (Br.17:8).

In Chumash, the word "ye-ru-SHA" implies conquest, which leads to sovereignty, i.e. military control over an area of land. [Not to be confused with its popular usage, "ye-RU-sheh", usually referring to an inheritance that one receives from a parent.]

This sovereign power can then apportion that land, or sell it, to its inhabitants. Once acquired in this manner, the purchaser of this land can then sell or give his portion to anyone he may choose. Usually, if the owner dies, the land is automatically inherited by his next of kin. In Chumash, this type of ownership is known as "achuza" (and/or "nachala").

For example, when Sarah dies Avraham must acquire an "achuzat kever" - a family burial plot (see Breishit 23:4). He must first PURCHASE the plot from the Hittites, for at that time they are the sovereign power.

Accordingly:

(A) Brit Bein HaBtarim, the national aspect, uses the word "yerusha" for it foresees Am Yisrael's CONQUEST of the Land.

(B) Brit Milah uses the word "achuza" for it emphasizes one's PERSONAL CONNECTION to the land.

AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Based on our understanding of these two covenants, their conflicting borders can be reconciled.

Avraham Avinu was chosen to be a nation that would become a blessing for ALL nations (see Br. 12:1-3). In that promise, the special land set aside for that nation is called "ha'Aretz". In Brit Bein HaBtarim, "ha'Aretz" is defined as the land between the Nile and Euphrates. These two rivers should not be understood as borders; rather as centers! Let's explain why.

Never in the history of mankind have these rivers marked the border between two countries. Instead, these rivers were the reason why the two CENTERS of ancient civilization formed, i.e. Mesopotamia ("N'har Prat") and Egypt ("N'har Mitzrayim"). [See 15:18-21.]

Therefore, as Brit Bein HaBtarim reflects the NATIONAL aspect of our relationship with God, its borders of "ha'Aretz" reflect our nation's destiny to become a blessing to ALL mankind. We are to become a nation "declaring God's Name" at the crossroads of the two great centers of civilization. The location of the land between these two rivers reflects this aspect of our nation purpose.

THE 'KERNEL'

The more precise geographic borders of this special land are defined in Brit Milah as Eretz Canaan - 'the land in which our forefathers sojourned'. Because this land is destined to become the homeland for God's special nation, it possesses intrinsic "kedusha". It is this sanctity which makes the land sensitive to the moral behavior of any of its inhabitants (see Vayikra 18:1-2,24-28).

Hence, the most basic borders of Eretz Yisrael are those of "Eretz Canaan", i.e. 'from Dan to Beer Sheva', as promised in Brit Milah. These borders constitute a natural geographic area; Eretz Canaan is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the West, the Negev desert on the South, the Syrio-African Rift (Jordan River) to the East, and the Lebanon Mountain Range to the North [the Litani River valley].

Once this 'kernel' area is conquered, in potential its borders can be (but do not have to be) extended. The potential limits of this expansion are set by Brit Bein HaBtarim, from "N'har Mitzraim" to "N'har Prat". This phrase could be understood as a LIMIT rather than a border, as each river represents a center of ancient civilization. After conquering Eretz Canaan, Am Yisrael can, if necessary, expand its borders by continuous settlement outward, up until (but not including) the two ancient centers of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia.

EXPANDING KEDUSHA

This interpretation explains why Transjordan does not acquire "kedushat ha'aretz" until "Eretz Canaan" is conquered. Bnei Gad & Reuven must first help conquer the 'kernel' area of "Eretz Canaan". Afterwards, this kedusha can then be 'extended' to Transjordan. [Note the use of "lifnei Hashem" in Bamidbar chapter 32, especially in 32:29-30.]

When Bnei Gad & Reuven follow the terms of their agreement with Moshe, not only do they help Bnei Yisrael conquer Eretz Canaan, they also facilitate Transjordan becoming an integral part of Eretz Yisrael ("ha'aretz").

THE RAMBAM's DEFINITION OF ERETZ YISRAEL

In his Yad HaChazaka, the Rambam must provide a 'halachick" definition of Eretz Yisrael, for many mitzvot apply only in that Land. He does so in the first chapter of Hilchot Trumot & Ma'asrot [in Sefer Z'raim]

As "trumot & maasrot" are laws that apply only in "Eretz Yisrael", the Rambam must provide a precise definition of its borders. Although one would expect a geographical definition, to our surprise we find instead a 'political' one!

"Eretz Yisrael - which is mentioned anywhere (in Yad Hachazaka) - includes those lands that are CONQUERED by a King of Israel or by a 'navi' with the backing of the majority of Am Yisrael ..." (see I:1-2).

Note how Rambam defines the borders of Eretz Yisrael as the area under Israeli 'conquest' [="yerusha"]. Whatever area within the Land is under Am Yisrael's sovereignty is considered 'halachikly' as "eretz yisrael".

Based on the above shiur, we can understand the reason for this strange definition.

Certainly, Jewish sovereignty doesn't make any geographic area 'holy'. As Rambam himself explains in the third halacha, it is only if this conquest takes place within an area of 'the land that was promised to Avraham Avinu - i.e. the borders of Eretz Canaan as promised to Avraham at Brit Milah, and defined in Parshat Masei. However, this area reaches it fullest level of "kedusha" only once Am Yisrael conquers it.

Then, once this 'kernel' area is conquered, Am Yisrael can expand its borders up until Bavel [="nhar Prat"] and Mitzrayim [="nhar Mitzrayim"]. However, as Rambam explains in the third halacha, this expansion can take place only after the 'kernel' area of Eretz Canaan is first conquered.

Finally, in the fifth halacha, Rambam uses this to explain why the kedusha of the Land [="kibush rishon"] was annulled when the first Bet ha'Mikdash was destroyed. Because the "kedusha" of the land (in relation to trumot u'maasrot") is a function of its conquest ("yerusha" or "m'shum kibush"), therefore as soon as Bnei Yisrael lost their sovereignty, the "kedusha" of the land was lost as well ["batlah kedushatah"]. Similarly, during the second Temple period, because the land was not conquered, rather it remained under the sovereignty of other nations (e.g. Persia, Greece and Rome), the "kedusha" never returned. Instead, Ezra instituted a rabbinic "kedusha" to obligate the produce of the land with "trumot umaasrot", because the original kedusha did not return.

I recommend that you review this Rambam inside (see also the final halacha of Perek Aleph), and note how these laws relate directly to the primary points of our shiur.

'LAND FOR PROGRESS'

We have shown that our relationship to the Land of Israel, just as our relationship with God, exists at both the national and individual level. God chose this special land IN ORDER that we fulfill our destiny.

While "kedushat Eretz Yisrael" at the individual level may be considered a Divine GIFT, its kedusha at the national level is most definitely a Divine CHALLENGE. To achieve its fullest borders and to be worthy of them, we must rise to that challenge.

shabbat shalom,

menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. MITZVAT KIBUSH ERETZ CANAAN

Our interpretation enhances our understanding of the Torah's presentation of the mitzva to conquer Eretz Yisrael in Parshat Masei (Bamidbar 33:50-56). First, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to CONQUER the land = "yerusha":

(A) "V'HORASHTEM et kol yoshvei ha'aretz mipneichem...

V'HORASHTEM et ha'aretz v'yshavtem bah, ki la'chem na'tati et ha'aretz la'RESHET otah.

Only once the land is conquered can it then be apportioned to each family, according to the tribal households:

(B) "v'HITNACHALTEM et ha'aretz b'goral l'MISHPCHOTEICHEM... l'matot Avoteichem TITNECHALU..."

The conquest is referred to as "ye-ru-sha'", while the distribution of the land afterward is referred to as "nachala":

"Yerusha" is achieved by the joint effort of military effort by all twelve tribes [Yehoshua chapters 1->12]. Afterwards, "nachalah" is achieved when each tribe settles and establishes communities in its portion [Yehoshua chapters 13->19].

Note that the word "nachala" could be considered synonymous with "achuza"; "achuza is usually used when purchasing a piece of land, as when Avraham buys a burial plot and field from Efron (see Br. 23:9,16-20), while "nachala" is usually used in reference to a family inheritance.]