



Parshat Masei: Lessons for Regional Planning

By Dr Jon Greenberg Ph.D

In this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Moses: "Command the Children of Israel that they shall give to the Levites, from the heritage of their possession, cities for dwelling; and open space all around the cities shall you give to the Levites. The cities shall be theirs for dwelling, and their open space shall be for their animals, for their possessions, and for all the amenities of life."¹

The subsequent verses specify the dimensions of this area that was to surround the Levite cities, as a belt 1,000 cubits wide, and then as 2,000 cubits wide (2,000 cubits is equivalent to between 3,000 and 4,000 feet or 914 to 1219 meters).² Rashi explains the apparent contradiction and further describes the uses of this area: "He assigned two thousand [cubits] for them around the city, of which the inner thousand was for open area and the outer [thousand] for fields and vineyards."³ Sforno adds that this open space also enabled city residents to have "beehives, dovescotes, and other such items".⁴

The Torah uses the Hebrew term '*migrash*' to describe this "green belt." What is a '*migrash*'? Onkelos translates it as '*revach*,' or space.⁵ But why does the Torah require an open space around cities?

The answer is surprisingly practical. The Talmud explains that the inner belt serves to beautify the city; residents may plant trees there, but may not use the area for construction or agriculture. Rather, it is to remain open park land. The city itself is "zoned" for construction, and the outer belt for agriculture. The Talmud forbids converting land in any of these three zones to uses reserved for the others.⁶

With this practical explanation in mind, we should not be surprised that the majority of the rabbis involved in the Talmud's discussion of the *migrash* concluded that this law applies to all Jewish towns in Israel, and not just to those reserved for the Levites. Maimonides accepts this opinion as settled law.⁷

Do the Jews observe the laws of *migrash* today? To address this question, we need a bit of historical perspective. After the destruction of the second temple, we lost political sovereignty and were exiled from our land. For almost two thousand years, we were not able to realize this *mitzvah* (commandment) because we lacked our own sovereign cities in the land of Israel. We were aliens in other people's lands. When many of our people returned to our land in the past century, Jews began once again to build cities and farms in Israel, and a new society took shape. Vigorous and creative debates about how to observe other *mitzvot* (plural form of *mitzvah*) of the land of Israel under modern conditions deepened our appreciation of *shmitah*, *yovel*, and other neglected agricultural laws. These discussions continue to produce novel modern solutions to ancient problems. However, the *mitzvah* of *migrash* has not yet become part of the conversations of Israeli rabbinic authorities or regional planners.⁸ Returning it to today's Jewish agenda is one of the challenges facing those who are concerned about Torah and the environment.

A major exception is the great nineteenth century German writer Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Rabbi Hirsch takes a broad view of the implications of the *mitzvah* of *migrash* for both social relations and land use.



He views this mitzvah as promoting the development of a society that combines urban sophistication and rural connectedness to the natural environment—"an urban population engaged in agriculture". Rabbi Hirsch also sees the *mitzvah* of *migrash* as a limit to the urban sprawl that would otherwise be inevitable: "Clearly these laws place an obstacle to the growth of large cities at the expense of the surrounding country which otherwise is so very prevalent. Not even the open spaces of the city, or any part of it, may be used as building sites."

The commandment of *migrash* in the Torah inspired the "garden city movement" founded in 1898 by Sir Ebenezer Howard in the United Kingdom. A garden city was intended to be a self-contained community surrounded by a green belt, with carefully planned regions of commerce, living, and recreation. Howard himself established two such garden cities in England, which remain successful today.⁹ His ideas influenced the planning of other cities around the globe, and also influenced the British urbanist Sir Patrick Geddes in the planning of Tel-Aviv, Israel.¹⁰ In the 1950's when Be'er Sheva, the largest city in Israel's Negev region was developed, it was built according to a 'garden city' plan, with small housing units generously spaced apart. However, the regional climate soon proved unsuitable for such urban planning, and neighborhoods gradually became more developed and crowded as the garden city theory was abandoned.¹¹ Eventually, criticisms of the effectiveness of the 'garden city' arose, and many modern architects developed ideas radically different from those of Sir Howard.¹²

Today, the applicability of the garden city philosophy is contested, but the *mitzvah* of *migrash* remains part of our eternal Torah. The *mitzvah* of *migrash* was a wonderful institution for our agrarian ancestors, but how could it be practiced today, when nearly 11 million people live west of the Jordan River, and the Earth's population is approaching 7 billion? In the industrialized Western countries, 98% of the population works away from the land, in manufacturing and service jobs. In 2005, the United Nations reported that the majority of people in the world today live in cities.¹³ As city dwellers, we can certainly grow from internalizing the principle of *migrash*, even without apportioning an actual green belt. *Migrash* moderates some of the negative effects of city life, such as the alienation of a person from nature and from the source of the food they eat. That's why *migrash* comes from the root '*legaresh*,' to divorce or separate, because it separates one urban area from another in an attempt to marry Jews to the natural existence G-d gave them in the land of Israel.

Our disconnection from nature is one of the root causes of environmental degradation, causing people to abuse resources, spread pollutants, and plan poorly for the future of our planet. A civilization can radically damage the natural world when it does not see itself as part of that world. Which city residents actually know the river to which their sewage flows during the common occurrence of storm-related flooding? A society can squander natural resources when it is not aware how it uses them. How many of us know exactly where our electricity is produced and how the plant transports the coal for its production? And when a community does not realize its dependence on certain natural processes (such as the growth of rainforests, the reproduction of fish schools, the flow of clean water aquifers) it is unlikely to prioritize their unhindered continuation.

Judaism does not emphasize abstract, quietistic contemplation of G-d's greatness. Rather, appreciation of G-d develops from the physical performance of *mitzvot* in G-d's world, and leads back to appreciation of G-d

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and the world. Thus, restoring our awareness of nature and our place within it will invigorate our efforts to solve environmental problems, inspired by the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

Suggested Action Points:

- Experience nature at least once a month. The Israelites with their green belts had constant access to natural areas where they could look out and see signs of human civilization. To the extent that we can connect to the natural world God created, we can recover some sense of the grandeur of God's creation.
- Grow some of your own food. Backyard gardens can help us connect to the natural cycles of plant growth and reduce the use of fossil fuels to transport our food from farm to market.
- Support sustainable urban planning in your community by encouraging zoning laws that limit sprawl.
- Promote access to green spaces and parks in and near urban areas.

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¹ Numbers 35:2,3

² Ibid. verses 4 and 5

³ French Torah Scholar and commentator, 11th cent.

⁴ Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, Italian scholar and commentator, 13th-14th cent. Commentary on Numbers 35:4

⁵ Onkelos was a famous convert to Judaism in Talmudic times (c.35-120 CE). He is considered to be the author of the famous translation of the Torah into Aramaic, Targum Onkelos (c.110 CE).

⁶ Babylonian Talmud (200 C.E.--500 C.E.), tractates Baba Batra 24b, and Arachin 33b

⁷ Maimonides is Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Spain and Egypt, 2nd-3rd cent. His ruling is found in Zeraim, Hilchos Shmittah V'Yovel 13:5

⁸ This is due in part to a halachic debate about whether the law of migrash applies to cities in Israel when the majority of Jews do not reside in Israel. The halachic consensus is that other land-related laws such as shemitah (not farming in Israel every seventh year), yovel (cancelation of land contracts every 50 years), and terumah (tithing) apply regardless of the percentage of Jews living in Israel, and so today they are vigorously applied and developed in an Israeli religious context.

⁹ Buder, Stanley, Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern Community, Oxford University Press, USA 1990.

¹⁰ Boardman, Philip, Patrick Geddes: Maker of the Future (1944)

¹¹ Gordus, Yehoshua, and Stern, Eliyahu (Ed.) The Book of Be'er Sheva, Keter, 1979.

¹² <http://www.geocities.com/rr17bb/cityplanning.html>

¹³ United Nations, DESA, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2005 Revision*, available at http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WUP2005/2005WUPHighlights_Exec_Sum.pdf