



Sustenance from the Source

By Michael Rosen

“And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, For these shall the land be divided as an inheritance according to the number of the names” (Numbers 26:52).

The Torah portion of Pinchas discusses apportioning the land of Israel according to preset measurements, called '*nahalot*'. These delineations are to remain forever.¹ These land apportionments are intended to provide the setting for true 'sustenance'; receiving in a way that connects us to the land and its Creator. As part of the great scheme of sustenance, Hashem gave us land measures to keep as a sustainable and balanced inheritance. This respect for maintaining a sustainable relationship to the land by which we are sustained informs our approach even outside of Israel. We need to strengthen our access to sustenance, both physical and spiritual, by feeling our connection to the land, even though we might live in modern cities. We can do this by making human health and wellbeing a goal in the architecture and scale of our cities, and planetary health and wellbeing a guiding force in planning our source of nutrition.

The torah directs us to live in faith and unity with creation; approximately half of the *mitzvot* involve agriculture and land apportionment.² But city living distances people from the agricultural test of faith, and thus they also are deprived of the resulting closer relationship with Hashem. In rabbinic literature, the order of the Mishna related to agriculture is called "*emunah*," a Hebrew word which means faith in Hashem's blessings. Dependence on the land deepens our relationship with Hashem through "*emunah*". When we are aware of Hashem as the Source of all sustenance, what we find today is a false illusion of sustainability in urban and suburban areas. With no *emunah*, land is harvested without an appreciation of the source of sustenance. Industrialized farming results in depleted soil, less nutritious food, and pollution from pesticides. This kind of farming has little regard for the natural balance of life. By working with nature, with Hashem, organic sustainable farming produces a healthy harvest that will sustain the human immune system, as well as the environment.

In addition to compromised nutrition, the overall health of city dwellers is an ancient issue. As early as the 11th century, Rashi explained "Life is more difficult in the city, because so many live there, and they

¹ See Rashi (11th cent. French Scholar and commentator) to Leviticus 25:15. "...When you sell or buy land, know how many years remain until the jubilee year, and according to that number of years and number of yields that the land can produce in those years, the land should be sold to the buyer. Because, after all, the land will return to (the ancestral owner) in the jubilee year..."

² Mind over Matter G-d and Nature Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn Shamir Publications

crowd their houses together, and there is no air, whereas in villages there are gardens and orchards close to the homes, and the air is good. ”³,

Rambam commented about city communities in the 12th century:

The quality of urban air compared to the air in the deserts and forests is like thick and turbulent water compared to pure and light water. And this is because in the cities with their tall buildings and narrow roads, the pollution that comes from their residents, their waste ... makes their entire air malodorous, turbulent, reeking and thick...

... And if you cannot move out of the city, try at least to live in a suburb created to the northeast. Let the house be tall and the court wide enough to permit the northern wind and the sun to come through, because the sun thins out the pollution of the air, and makes it light and pure.”⁴

We know today that imbalances such as no sunlight, lack of sleep, inadequate fresh air and environmental stress- all deficits common to city life- degrade health and immunity levels.⁵ The sages’ recommendations for the city are valid today, for they understood the balance of land and health.

Nutrition and health aside, the Sages of the Talmud also noted that the emotional environment undergoes more damage in large cities than in small towns. In explaining a law of the Mishnah⁶ that a husband may not compel his wife to move from a village to a large city, the Talmud cites the reasoning of R. Yosi ben Hanina⁷, that life is more difficult in the city than the village.

Obviously city living is imperative nowadays, and has been for decades, for many people seeking a livelihood. However, despite some advantages that cities have over the smaller towns and villages that many people have left, individuals are weakened by living in places where identity is not reinforced and supported by a community⁸. Social fragmentation is created in cities where the public and private domains are in conflict. For Jews living in cities, the balance of public and private domain is defined by an *eruv*, a minimal structure symbolizing a fence that surrounds the city. Today there are many cities whose Jewish communities benefit from modern *eruvim* (plural of *eruv*). The *eruv* is effective for enabling the carrying of objects on the Shabbat, by symbolically unifying an entire community to one domain. *Eruv* construction and maintenance requires cooperative work by a community of people and benefits all involved. Thus, the *eruv* engenders a continuous social domain which is supportive of community life, and focused on Hashem. Being included in a city *eruv* combats social isolation and spiritual estrangement.

For city dwellers, the key to maintaining mental and physical health is to reconnect with the natural world, and its Creator. Cities without a connection to nature or agriculture, green space, light, air and horizon create an imbalance which can support neither physical nor spiritual life. Rabbi Nachman

³ Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaky, France, 11th cent. Scholar and commentator, in his commentary to Babylonian Talmud, tractate Kettubot 110b

⁴ “Rambam” is an acronym for Rabbi Moses Maimonides, or Rambam, Fost, Egypt 1135-1204 C.C., “The Preservation of Youth”

⁵ Golany, Gideon, Housing in Arid Lands, Halsted, 1980.

⁶ Mishnah Ketubot 13:10.

⁷ Ketubot 110b. R. Yosi ben Hanina's opinion was codified as law. Maimonides, *M.T., Ishut* 13:17, rules: "And he may not remove her from a city to a village, or from a village to a city, because there are some matters for which living in a city is an advantage, and there are other matters for which living in a village is an advantage. See also *Shul. Ar. Even haEzer* 75:1.

⁸ Mumford, Lewis. The Culture of Cities, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1938.

would go for walks in the woods to speak to Hashem just outside the town. In this manner he was able to escape the damaging, isolating effects of the city, by maintaining a connection with nature and the Source of creation.

By taking these minute, physical steps, we can reconnect to the land and the unity expressed in creation, by learning from our sages and, returning to the Source of all sustenance. “... *by knowing and believing that all creation is not separate from G-d, but in reality an extension of his oneness*” (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)⁹

Action Items:

- 1) Communities today are attempting to reclaim what is missing by reconnecting to the land. Sustainable design is bringing courtyards, green roof gardens, and community garden spaces to cities, bringing fields within city limits. In addition, agricultural and nature preserves right outside city perimeters maintain life-giving nature zones around cities. By supporting sustainable design, organic agriculture, and community gardens we can strengthen the balance of population and land
- 2) By helping to support *eruv* construction in your city, community bonds can be strengthened around a holy purpose.
- 3) Take a walk in a park inside or just outside of your city. Pause if you'd like and take some time to reflect on your dependence on creation, or to pray.

⁹ Mayim Breslov Publication Rabbi Nachman of Breslov lesson Written by Moshe Mykoff