

PUTTING THE GREATER GOOD FIRST

Is one permitted to leave the Holy Land? And—the lesson for us Americans.

Making Aliya

We're all familiar with the term "aliyah," which has two meanings: a) being called up to the Torah, and b) moving to the Land of Israel. Alongside it, there's a less-known term—"yeridah." Yeridah means someone leaving the land, known as a "yored."

But where did this expression come from? In practical terms, it's actually the opposite: the Dead Sea is the lowest point on Earth, and meanwhile, Israel's high peaks can't compare to the heights in places like Nepal, where Israelis flock. So why do we call it "aliyah to Israel" and "yeridah from Israel"? It seems like it should be reversed!

The origin of these terms is found in the Torah. In Parshas Lech Lecha, Avraham leaves the land and "goes down" to Egypt—"Avraham went down to Egypt." Later, it says, "Avraham went up from Egypt" when he returns to the Land of Israel. Similarly, in our portion, we find that G-d says to Yitzchak, "Do not go down to Egypt." We also read, "Yosef was brought down to Egypt," "Yosef's brothers went down [to Egypt]," and, as the Sifrei says, "Eretz Yisrael is higher than all

other lands,” as it’s written, “The L-rd lives, who brought the descendants of the House of Israel up from the north and from all the lands” (Yirmiyahu 23:8).

The Maharal of Prague explains that the reason Eretz Yisrael is called higher than all other lands is not because of physical height, but because of its spiritual and inherent significance.

Living In Israel

So now we have a Holy Land that is geographically low but spiritually high.

But with a land that is so holy and elevated, wouldn’t there be a mitzvah of settling in the Land of Israel? Does that mitzvah apply today?

This question has long been debated among halachic authorities. According to most authorities, there is no such obligation, and some even argue that it may not be considered a mitzvah.

However, all opinions agree that someone already living in Israel should not leave. This raises a question about the many Jews in our time who have left the land—how did they do so, given that leaving is generally prohibited?

This question isn’t new; it goes back to Avraham Avinu himself, who observed the entire Torah before it was even given, yet he left the Land of Israel! It’s a question that has recurred throughout Jewish history. For instance, we know Mordechai from the Purim story originally went up to Israel with Ezra during the Second Aliyah of the returnees from Babylon. He was

a member of the Great Assembly, yet later he returned to Persia, where he ultimately passed away. In later generations, the Rambam (Maimonides) also went up to Israel but then moved to Egypt. This is particularly notable since there's a prohibition against returning to Egypt.

It's said that the Rambam would sign his name with the words "transgressing three prohibitions daily," referencing the Torah's commandment not to "return to see [Egypt] again" (Devarim 17:16) and two other similar warnings. So how did he and other great figures leave Eretz Yisrael?

When You May Leave

There is a halachic principle that permits leaving Israel under three specific circumstances:

1. **To study Torah** - If a person cannot find a teacher of equal caliber in Israel, he is permitted to travel abroad to study with a superior teacher. However, once he finishes his studies, he must return.
2. **To marry** - If someone cannot find a suitable match in Israel, he may leave to seek a spouse but should return after marriage.
3. **For livelihood** - If a person needs to conduct specific business for financial reasons, he is allowed to travel for this purpose.

That said, even in these cases, permission to leave is limited to a temporary stay abroad. If the intent is to settle permanently outside Israel, leaving is prohibited, as the person does not

intend to return.

So, in light of this halachah, how could so many good Jews leave Israel without one of the three permitted reasons?

The Community Comes First

Perhaps we can explain it as follows: There's a halachah in the laws of mourning (Rambam, Hilchos Avel 5:16, and Shulchan Aruch) that a mourner is not permitted to study Torah because Torah brings joy. However, if the community needs him—if he is a significant teacher—they permit him to teach. In this case, his personal joy is set aside in favor of the community's need (see *Hisvaaduyos* 5748, Vol. 2, p. 565).

We can say the same here: the halachah about leaving Israel applies to an individual considering his own needs, where there are specific allowances and limits. But for a public figure on whom many people depend, it's a different situation—the question shifts from his personal desires to the needs of the Jewish people. Mordechai didn't return to Persia for personal gain; he saw that many Jews remained there, as only 42,000 returned with Ezra while over half a million stayed in Babylonia and beyond. Mordechai returned to serve and protect them.

The same holds for the Rambam. When he came to Eretz Yisrael, he found very few Jews there. By contrast, Egypt had a large Jewish community in need of a leader of his stature. In such a case, where the needs of the many outweigh personal obligations or benefits, halachah considers the needs of the community first.

What lesson can we take from this? While we don't live in Israel, even when making major decisions—such as moving or taking on a new role—we should consider the benefit to the Jewish people. Community needs should come before individual gain. For instance, if you're actively involved in your community and thinking of moving to Florida, consider the impact on the community you're leaving. Your role might be significant here, while elsewhere it may not be as needed. Always make sure to take the community into account.