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Parshat Mattot - Mase'i: On Faith

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As the Jewish people are about to settle in *Eretz Ca'naan*, the Torah reminds them they are responsible for building cities for the Levi'im. The Levi'im were the religious leaders, designated to perform *Avodat Hashem*, sacred work. They would not have time to work and could not afford to build their own homes; the responsibility of providing homes for the Levi'im fell on the community.

The Torah goes on:

And you shall give the Levites open spaces around the cities. These cities shall be theirs for dwelling, and their open spaces shall be for their cattle, their property, and for all their needs (Bamidbar 35:2-3).

וּמִגְרָשׁ לְעָרִים סְבִיבֵיתֵיהֶם תִּתְּנוּ לְלוֹוִיִּם: וְהָיוּ הָעָרִים לָהֶם לְשֵׁבֶת וּמִגְרָשֵׁיהֶם יִהְיוּ לְבִקְחָתָם וְלִרְכֻשָׁם וְלִכָּל חֵיָתָם: (בַּמִּדְבָּר לֵה:ב-ג)

Not only must *B'nei Yisrael* build cities for the Levi'im, the Torah mandates that *B'nei Yisrael* must build open spaces around the cities as well (*migrash*). The Torah describes that the *migrash*, these open spaces, must be 1,000 or 2,000 cubits all around - approximately three to four thousand square feet.

But why does the Torah require an open space around cities?

The Gemara (Aruchin 33b) offers an environmental benefit of the *migrash*. The city itself is zoned for building and the outer area is zoned for agriculture. Residents may plant trees in the *migrash*, but may not use the area for construction; it is to remain open park land. Rashi, however, offers a more spiritual and meaningful explanation. The open space had to remain undeveloped for aesthetic reasons-- to beautify one's surroundings, "*lhiyot Inoy haiyr* (to serve to beautify the city)" (Rashi 35:2).

It is a space where one goes to exalt in the beauty of God's creations, of the trees, the flowers and the gardens. The beauty is up-lifting. There's an intrinsic benefit of having an open space, beyond it being good for the environment. It's actually good for the soul.

In fact, our Torah seems to have a preference for open spaces, classifying them as more elevated space than a city. Consider, for example, some of the first cities constructed in Bereishit: Nimrod, Noah's grandson, is responsible for building the cities of Bavel, Erech, Akkad, and Kalnay, all cities that ultimately became corrupt. The Tower of Bavel became a paradigm of corrupt city life. Lot chose to leave Avraham, and the open space and settle in the city of Sodom (Bereishit 13:12). And finally, the Jews in Egypt had to construct a city with their bare hands, with the sweat off their backs.

God commanded the people to build cities for the Levi'im, with all of its comforts and potential vices; but to combat the potential immorality wrapped up in cities, they were commanded to build the *migrash* as well.



Practically, we no longer observe the law of *migrash* today. After the destruction of the Temple, we were exiled from our land and no longer had sovereign control over Eretz Yisrael. In modern day Israel, when we once again gained authority over the land, the Rabbinic leadership gave thought to how to observe other agricultural laws mandated in the Torah, such as *shmitta*, and *yovel*. However, the law of *migrash* was never reintroduced into the bylaws of the country.

And yet, surprisingly, 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, not just to those reserved for the Levi'im. The laws of *migrash* were extended to all of *Clal Yisrael!* Maimonides accepts this opinion as law (*Hilkhot Shemittah V'Yovel*, 13:5)—it is ideal for all cities to be surrounded by gardens, by open spaces.

And so I wonder, is there anything we can derive from the mitzvah of *migrash*, the mitzvah of open spaces, even if today, we cannot literally designate large, open, undeveloped areas surrounding our communities?

Perhaps the mitzvah of *migrash* can be seen as a metaphor for allowing unpopulated, quiet space in our lives. This week, at the Hartman Institute, we are exploring issues of Faith and God. *Emunah* (faith) for some is tangible and resonates with us daily. For others, the journey towards faith (*derech emunah*, as Rav Nachman explains), is a lifelong process. I believe that even if we don't have words to describe faith, we need to create an empty and quiet unpopulated space, like the *migrash*, where the mystery of the divine can reveal itself and take shape. In the hustle and bustle of our lives, the mitzva of the *migrash* inspires us to wander into the unknowable essence of God and contemplate all the beauty (and ugliness) that the world has to offer.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.