



5780 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayeshev / פרשת וישב

Yerushalayim Our Shepherd

Our parsha opens by describing Yosef as a shepherd of sheep. As we are aware, in this regard Yosef was not a trailblazer but simply following in the professional footsteps of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather who were all shepherds before him. What is unique about this profession? Why would our ancestors choose to spend their time shepherding?

The Ba'al Shem Tov¹ comments on our parsha that etymologically, the word for shepherd – *ro'eh* – is associated with the Hebrew word for friendship – *rei'ut*. On a simple level, he explains that just as friends are two people who feel as one, similarly, the shepherd ensures that all of the sheep are located in the same place and not dispersed over a large area.

As a mystic, though, the Ba'al Shem Tov sees this physical description as indicative of a spiritual truth. In essence, a proper “*ro'eh*” is able to unite disparate elements of the spiritual world. Each person has a unique spark of God that is embedded within them at birth. At times, unfortunately, the uniqueness of these sparks causes friction and fighting. As shepherds, the ultimate mission of our forefathers and Yosef was to recognize that these individual sparks are all part of the same large flame – God – and cause them to become united as one.

Perhaps with this background we can glean a deeper understanding of a verse in Yechezkel. After describing the future return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, Yechzkel concludes a prophecy with the following description of the Jewish people and Yerushalayim:²

So says the Lord God: I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel to do for them; I will multiply them-the men-like a flock of sheep. Like the flocks appointed for the holy offerings, like the flocks of Yerushalayim on its festivals, so will these cities now laid waste be filled with flocks of men, and they shall know that I am the Lord.

¹ Ba'al Shem Tov al HaTorah, parshat VaYeishev, siman 1.

² Yechezkel 36:37-38. Translation adapted from Chabad.org.



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God says that He will make the Jewish people as numerous as the flocks of sheep that converge in Yerushalayim around the time of the festivals. On a simple level, Yechezkel is simply describing the tremendous ingathering of the people to Yerushalayim in the end of days.

However, with the background of the Ba'al Shem Tov's Chassidic teaching perhaps we can suggest another layer of meaning. Yerushalyim is specifically associated with a mass of sheep due to its unique capability to unify a dispersed and disparate people. The people returning from exile will be arriving from all four corners of the world and will be accustomed to their own language, culture and way of life. Even after the miracle of the geographic ingathering another formidable task will be how to create a unified nation from these disparate groups.

One key to overcoming this challenge is Yechzkel's allegory of sheep in Yerushalayim. The city has a power to take distinct elements and to "make all of the Jewish people into friends." In a word, Yerushalayim is our shepherd.