

# ***Mitzvah Shvitzva & Living in the Land of Israel:***

## **A Story, an Observation and a Question**

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I have been living in Israel now – albeit on sabbatical with a home still in Atlanta – since August 2018, and the single most common question I get is “so what do I think of Israel so far?” Although I have been to Israel countless times and have children living here, I have steadfastly responded to the question with a question. To make it more interesting, I always start the question with a story. Here it goes.

It was the mid-1980’s at Yeshiva University and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein ל"צ" was speaking at a Friday morning Q&A and a student asked him why he moved to Israel. This was clearly not the first time he had been asked this question and he launched into a concise and erudite discussion of the mitzvah to live in Israel, outlining – I still remember – the four major views as he saw them and ending with the words “clearly a *mitzvah*.” The questioner immediately stood up and said “*mitzvah shvitzva*: who cares! Tell me what you like about living in Israel, so that you would live there even if it was no *mitzvah* at all.” Rabbi Lichtenstein was quite surprised by the question. He stopped in his track and said “Good question: I need to think” and he sat down and thought. It was very silent in the room: you could see his brow furrow and the heat emanating. After more than 5 minutes of deadly silence, Rabbi Lichtenstein spoke. He said thus (give or take):

I deeply enjoy the nobility of poverty found in the culture of Israel. People are “great people” and ideas are “valuable ideas” in Israel, even if they do not make you wealthy. Not so in America where everything is measured by its worth in dollars. Poor people in America are never respected: in Israel, poverty is still ennobling. From the secular *chalutzim* to the *kollel* members, poverty does not make one unimportant or unsuccessful. Maybe it is even a sign of God’s love.

(I have done my best to remember this brief speech from nearly 35 years ago: does anyone have a tape of the event? I have not found one.)

So, I have told this story many times during my nine months of residing in Israel. Then I say “*Mitzvah Shmitzva*” and I ask. “If it were not a *mitzvah* to live here, would you? And why?”

Five categories of responses are given (with some people endorsing more than one).

**The first response is simple.** “No”, I am told, with double incredibility, “it is impossible that this is not a *mitzvah*” and “it is ridiculous to consider that anyone would want to live here if it were not a *mitzvah*.” I have been told both of these points by a considerable number of people. I admire the people who give me this answer mightily: they hate living in Israel and they stay here anyway – with American or Canadian passports in hand – because it is *mitzvah*. They are suffering every

day for the sake of complying with halacha. When I share with them the witticism that it is better to live in Brooklyn and yearn to live in Jerusalem than to live in Jerusalem and yearn to live in Brooklyn, I am rebuffed – one even asked me if this was even an Orthodox saying. The *mitzvah* is to live here and they are doing that mitzvah no matter how much it hurts – and it does hurt them much.

**The second response is the polar opposite and I hear from my Charedi friends and family:** “Of course, there is no real *mitzvah* to live in Israel,” I am told -- rather “I live here because this is the best place to be economically struggling and Orthodox and learn Torah”. The cost of living in many places in Israel is cheap, Torah education abounds, health care is free, simple food is not expensive and ugly housing – which is still in a safe neighborhood surrounded by a loving Orthodox community – easily can be found. And this is even more so true for a large family. My Charedi friends all tell me that if you are happy to live at a low standard of living, moderate poverty is much more livable in Israel than in America since the social service network is broad and yeshiva tuition is very low. Further, they tell me, the burdens of the IDF are easily avoided, making Israel a paradise on this earth for “Torah True Jews” even if there is no firm mitzvah to live here. In sum, *chesed* abounds, poor neighborhoods are safe, Yeshivas are on every corner and [even the milkman is a Torah scholar](#).

**The third answer is more common among my secular friends in Israel**, and it resonates with many of the Zionist Orthodox as well. Israel is the only place left in the world with deep Jewish culture. The calendar is Jewish, the curriculum is Jewish, the Jews are not in the closet, and the community is imbued with a sense of Jewish purpose that makes Israel the largest Eastern European *shtetel* ever. They even speak Hebrew! As one said to me just recently: “Pesach is a national holiday in Israel – in New York you just do not have ‘[alternate side of the street parking](#)’.” The community in Israel has deep Jewish value independent of the *mitzvah* to settle the land, in that Israel is building a cultural norm around Jewish principles and values which, while in theory, could be present in some other Jewish location – like the [Russian Jewish Republic](#) – in fact this is the only place we have where the dominant culture is grounded in our common Jewish law, history and culture. “Israel is the center of the Jewish world now” or as one said to me “imagine: people want to convert to Judaism to fit in to the community.”

**The fourth answer is ever more interesting.** Jewish sovereignty is vital to the Jewish future -- we need a nation and a state and an army to defend ourselves and that is Israel. The lessons of the Holocaust abound and there is no Jewish future without a Jewish army to defend it. The greatness of Israel lay in its sovereignty and its status as a nation like any other. This has nothing to do with the *mitzvah* to settle the land and in theory could be so in Iceland – but it is not. It is here in the Middle East, with all of its complexities and difficulties and wars, that Israel resides. But this has made Israel important and powerful and a true nation-state with a thriving economy, a powerful military and control over Jewish destiny. The era of the sniveling Jew, who seeks equality from the community around him or her, but which Jews can never really achieve in the diaspora as a minority. In Israel, we actually live in a sovereign Jewish state and that can only be accomplished by Jewish power, control and independence.

**The final answer is also voiced to me, albeit sometimes furtively.** The history of the Jewish people is one of wandering and exile even from our homeland. We, as a community, never put too many eggs in any one basket and we know that with the passage of time, every basket has eventually been smashed by those who hate us. Israel now is one of those baskets of eggs that is housing and holding the Jewish people – millions and millions of them, more eggs here than any other basket – and we need to work as hard as we can to strengthen the basket and protect each and every egg. Historically, all baskets have eventually broken: some after a few centuries and some after a millennium or more; that could happen here also. We are here in Israel now and it is our mission and duty to help each egg grow and prosper and strengthen the basket. Every Jew needs to find the place they can prosper in and every Jew needs to invest in a basket, and its eggs.

**So you want to know my view?** The truth is that I am just on sabbatical this year and returning to my academic job next year in Atlanta, so I might just be a diaspora Jew listening in to a conversation I am hardly part of, since I live in America. I know that living in Israel is a *mitzvah* and to me that is enough to explain why I want to live here.

But I am deeply interested in how the Jews living in Israel who could live in America, are thinking about the additional factors. So here is my question: *Mitzvah Shvitzva!* [Tell me](#) why you live in Israel and what you see of value to living in Israel other than the fulfillment of the mitzvah of living in the land of Israel?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> What is interesting is that no one speaking to me in 2018- 2019 finds the answer that Rabbi Lichtenstein gave more than 35 years ago to be still accurate. This highlights many of the economic and social changes in the over the past decades as well as the burgeoning upper and extremely wealthy class in Israel. Can I add that the single most common answer given by Americans who are temporarily in Israel, but intend to reside elsewhere – or Americans who just aspire to live in Israel and who read a draft of this essay – is totally different. This group predominantly avers that:

**Living in Israel is a Joy Every Day:** They tell me that they hope to be part of building wonders no one would have imagined. “Centuries years ago, had you told the Jews of Europe what would exist here today-- religiously, nationally, culturally, economically-- for Jews, they'd have said it was a pipe dream.” And they add “It was only by persevering day by day we got to where we are today, and I believe there are unanticipated wonders yet to come (as *Nevi'im* have told us). On many days, the physical beauty of this land, the cultural comfort of living among fellow Jews, the strong support for Orthodox Judaism, are more than enough.” Even when they acknowledge the stresses, they profess that the future is bright and all will be better.

I cannot help but wonder if they think of Israel as Disneyland rather than a homeland.