

FROM THE EDITOR

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The State of Israel, one of the tiniest nations on the face of the earth (ranked #155 in area¹) with a population of just over 8 million (ranked #98 in the world² – about the size of New York City), now ranks as one of the most innovative countries in the world, climbing the charts at a breath-taking pace and presently outperforming even the United States in areas such as research and development, tech education, and patents.³

So what accounts for this incredible drive towards innovation, towards making things better, easier, and more efficient, improving the world in which we live?

Without a doubt, some of that drive grew from the sheer necessity of trying to bring a land that had been sorely neglected for centuries back to life, a massive on-going effort that continues until today, with even extreme climates, such as the arid desert of the Negev being miraculously turned into lush, farmable land thanks to special designer crops and farming techniques. Such enormous efforts, however, were obviously deeply rooted in and motivated by our profound love and attachment to the precious land given to us by Hashem and wouldn't have taken place (or been as successful) anywhere else.

But a more complete answer, I think, can be found in the Torah's unique outlook on the physical world. While some religions view the world around us as being inherently corrupt and devoid of any redeemable value, something from which one should strive to detach himself as much as possible, with some sects even famously shunning the use of technology, the Torah sees the physical world as something that, if handled properly and with the correct intentions, can not only be used, but even elevated in the service of Hashem and made holy. And, whereas other religions focus entirely on the next world, limiting and even denying physical pleasures in this world except for what is absolutely necessary, in exchange for the promise of spiritual pleasures in the world to come, we are actually told by our Sages⁴ that we will have to account to Hashem for those physical pleasures that we were permitted to partake of in this world but did not!

The Torah even presumes that we will live in the world and build it, imposing mitzvos on the homes we build (eg mezuzah, ma'akeh – building a fence around the roof of one's home), the way we grow our food (eg kela'im – prohibited mixtures), on the crops that we harvest (eg tithes, etc.), and even the clothes we wear (eg tzitzis, shatnez – a prohibited mixture of wool and linen), to name just a few examples. In fact, many mitzvos require some sort of physical object to perform them: from the wine on which we make Kiddush on Shabbos evening, to the matzos that we bake and eat on Pesach, to the temporary structures that we build and dwell in on Sukkos and the four species (lulav, esrog, hadassim, and aravos) that we shake.

The wicked Roman governor, Turnus Rufus, once debated this outlook with Rabbi Akiva⁵, who argued that the works of man were greater than even those of Hashem. To prove his point, Rabbi Akiva brought before Turnus Rufus raw stalks of grain and freshly baked rolls, but Turnus Rufus remained unconvinced, implausibly arguing that the rolls were no better than the stalks of grain. What Turnus Rufus was really after, however, was the reason why Hashem commanded us in bris milah (circumcision); if Hashem wanted baby boys to be circumcised, why didn't He just make them emerge from their mother's wombs that way? Rabbi Akiva, noting that the very same argument could be made regarding the umbilical cord which also has to be cut, explained that Hashem commanded us in mitzvos in order that we would become refined by doing them.

What we can learn from this is that G-d created the world for us in an unfinished form, so that we could take the building blocks with which He endowed it and improve upon them. Innovation is at the very heart of being Jewish. But we mustn't forget that we are also a part of Hashem's creation and we must strive to improve ourselves just as much as the world around us, if not more so!

From everyone here at JL, congrats to our art director, Rizelle Hartmeier, and her family on the birth of a baby boy.

ROBERT SUSSMAN, EDITOR

¹<http://world.bymap.org/LandArea.html>

²<http://www.indexmundi.com/g/r.aspx>

³See World Economic Forum's annual Global Competitiveness Report and the Bloomberg Innovation Index.

⁴See Mesilas

Yesharim, Chapter 13

⁵Midrash Tanhuma, Parshas Tazria 5.

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ON THE COVER: PIC BIGSTOCKPHOTO.COM. TO HIGHLIGHT THIS MONTH'S THEMES OF ISRAEL AND INNOVATION, A GRAPHIC IMAGE OF A FINGER PRINT PATTERN LEFT BEHIND ON A SCANNER, WITH THE IMAGE OF AN ISRAELI FLAG SUPERIMPOSED ON TOP OF IT.

