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MIZRACHI IN ISRAEL'S NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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“FOR MAN IS A TREE IN THE FIELD”¹

Much has been written about the metaphor of Man and tree, but there is also a less well-known comparison by the Maharal of Prague: “Just as a tree is rooted in the earth, Man has roots in Heaven.” Thus, Man forms the connection point between Earth and Heaven, the horizon at which Heaven meets the Land of Israel.

We are charged with a mission – to be the link that connects Earth to Heaven. Throughout history, from time immemorial, there has always been a symbiotic link between the Jewish people and the soil of the Land of Israel.

This connection originated 3,000 years ago with the call to our forefather, Avraham, to “Go up... to the Land that I will show you” – a bond melded and shaped through dispersions in the Diaspora; a bond which has survived the pangs of longing and lies deep within the heart of every Jew, wherever they may be.

This unique bond is embedded in the connection between the Jewish people and its past, its traditions, its spirit and its Torah. Rabbi Moshe Bochko explains that our forefather Ya’akov’s dream is the first expression of the task placed upon the Jewish people in this world: “A ladder... set up on the Earth... and the top of it reached to Heaven.”² Man sets the ladder in place and thus links Earth and Heaven. Rabbi Bochko says that this connection occurs only in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

As Binyamin Zeev (Theodor) Herzl once said: “We shall plant for our children in the same way as our forefathers preserved Jewish tradition for our sakes. Our lives are

but an instant in the eternity of our people, and each moment carries its own obligation.”

In just those few words, Herzl laid the foundations that would link past and future, Heaven and Earth. He understood that the bond between the people and its Land was intertwined with the connection between the people and its spirit. It was this insight that led Herzl to found the Zionist Movement’s National Institutions. He appreciated that having one’s head purely in heavenly matters was insufficient, and how crucial it was to have one’s feet firmly on the ground.

The WZO (World Zionist Organization) Settlement Division’s work is inspired by the same values: to plant more roots and ever deeper – both in Earth and in Heaven.

One example of this connection is the *Bein HaShitin* project in the Arava region, operating three pre-IDF preparatory academies that have nurtured hundreds of young men and women. All of them have been inspired to dedicate a gap year before their IDF service to a period of in-depth values clarification, social engagement, and exploring their identity, in conjunction with hands-on agricultural labor that has been making the Arava region bloom. The program is attracting a wide range of young people from all over Israel – from the *moshavim* and the cities, native-born Israelis and *olim*, religious and secular – standing together and connecting with the soil, the task and the mission, transforming the region into a vibrant and vital location.

In northern Israel, the Yogev farming organization offers young

women National Service alumni a framework in which they can engage in agricultural work in the Galilee. These young women assist farmers in different kinds of labor, from planting through harvesting, in a format that provides them with opportunities to study and acquire significant skills and tools for the future.

Another facet of this project is *Adam VeAdama* (Man and Earth), an amazing four-year high school program, which attracts teenagers from across all sectors of Israeli society. Here they have an opportunity to complete a full honors matriculation program, parallel to assuming responsibility for personal farming allotments where they clear rocks, plant, irrigate, weed and tend crops right through to the point of harvesting them themselves. These are outstanding young adults, the cream of our people – young adults who understand that Zionism still needs to be “hands-on,” even in 2020.

The Settlement Division is engaged in all these initiatives, and many others, and monitors them all year round. Without the people leading them out there in the field, with their feet planted on *terra firma* and their heads in the sky, these amazing projects would certainly never have existed, much less succeeded..

1 Devarim 20:19.

2 Bereishit 28:12.

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