

Kol Ha-Rav February 2019

According to the Midrash, the earth is the physical center of the universe. The reason Jerusalem was chosen for the Temple was because of the rock under the Temple, the *even shtiyah*, the foundation stone on which the world was built. This stone plugs up the chaotic abyss, and forms the physical center of the universe. On this model, the earth is the only thing fixed, and everything else revolves around it.

But in a physical sense, it is untrue; the earth rotates around the sun, the sun around the milky way, et cetera. And it can be dangerous to think we're at the center of the universe. It leads to abuse of animals and the earth—think mountain top mining and fracking or ignoring climate change. It leads to the offensive fantasy of non-Jews serving as our servants in the world to come. It leads to people thinking that tsunamis and earthquakes are punishments for some sin of the Jewish people, who are the only ones God really cares about.

In truth there is no center of the physical universe, no starting point. The starting point is really everything—what astrophysics calls the singularity, the entire universe being contained in this singularity at the first moment of the big bang, so every place was inside that singularity. It is what the Zohar calls the *botzina d'kardinuta*, the spark of blackness containing an infinite fire, but so infinitely small it cannot be seen. So Jerusalem isn't really the physical center of the universe, and it may be, like us, a speck whirling around on the outside of a pinball machine.

But spiritually, we need a center, and it's a mitzvah to see ourselves in relation to Jerusalem. We need to choose where to put that center point of our grids. When we are at home? When we are away, how do we locate ourselves? For most of us, the center is our home, we go out and come back. But in Judaism, our center is Jerusalem. We davven facing Jerusalem: all Jews, facing the same way, radiating from that same point. We are all in exile, having been once in Israel, and hopefully returning. It is also a mitzvah to orient ourselves Jewishly in time. The first mitzvah in the Torah is Rosh Chodesh, counting the Jewish months. Keeping Jewish time. There is a wonderful story about a Jew who sold his cow to his non-Jewish neighbor, and the cow wouldn't work on shabbes—it worked hard six days, but on shabbes it just lay down and wouldn't budge! The neighbor goes and complains, and the Jew explains to the cow that now that he is owned by a non Jew, he has to work on shabbes; and he gets up and works. The neighbor is so impressed that even the cow is so dedicated, that he converts to Judaism. Keeping shabbes is part of putting ourselves on a Jewish rhythm of time.

The writer on mysticism Aryeh Kaplan cites a midrash which says the world is an eye: the ocean is the white, the land is the iris, Jerusalem is the pupil, and the Temple is the image on the eye (reflecting the supernal Jerusalem). Based on this, he says that the

Temple is a focal point, where our spiritual energies converge and “break on through to the other side.” Perhaps the veil between physical and spiritual is thinner there, or perhaps it is simply the power of our prayers converging at a single point. But Jerusalem is the nexus between the physical and spiritual realms. It is like a magnifying glass which brings all the rays of light together to a single point, and can even start a fire at that point. This is why we all davven facing Jerusalem.

It also goes the other direction: spiritual energy flows into the universe through Jerusalem, spreading to the rest of the world. So our communities and our own souls can also be that spiritual center point where we can burn a hole in the veil between heaven and earth.

Ultimately, we are a speck on a pinball hurdling through space, hopefully not hitting other pinballs. But having this spiritual center, knowing where we are in relation to Jerusalem, to our spiritual home, holding on to the spiritual center of our hearts and our communities, can give us something we can lean on to, despite the world spinning around us.

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