

“Living Long In Virtual Israel”

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The gemara in this week's *Amud* teaches us in the name of *Reish Lakish* that a person should be careful to come early to shul to daven in order to be from the “first ten”. The advantage of being from the first ten is because then, even if 100 people come after, he will get reward equal to all of theirs, because the first ten are the ones who brought the Divine Presence to allow everyone to say *devarim sheb'kedusha* like *barchu* and Torah reading.

There is another advantage to coming to shul early, as we learned earlier on 8a. The gemara there relates that it was told to *Rebbi Yochanan* that there are exceedingly elderly people found in *Bavel* (Babylonia). *Rebbi Yochanan* was quite surprised by this information and he asked, “doesn't it say in the Torah *[do the commandments of the Torah and follow in its ways] in order to prolong your days...upon the land that Hashem has sworn to your ancestors*”? This verse implies that this blessing, to merit extremely lengthy days, is exclusive to those living on that land, *Eretz Yisrael*, and not outside of it. The *Gemara* continues that once *Rebbi Yochanan* heard that these elders come early and leave late from shul, he understood and explained that it was this merit that they lived long lives.

The *Maharsha* (Rav Shlomo Eidels 1555-1631) asks a basic question on this *gemara*. It seems that the *gemara* is saying that one who comes early and leaves late from shul earns the merit to live long. However, he asks, this would still seem to be a contradiction to the *pasuk* that indicated that this blessing would only be possible in the land that was promised to us by *Hashem*, *Eretz Yisrael*. How then can any merit, albeit a great one, be sufficient to contradict an explicit *pasuk*? The *Maharsha* explains that indeed the *gemara* does not mean to suggest that coming early and leaving late from shul is a merit that gives a boost to override the *pasuk*. He explains by way of quoting a *gemara* in Tractate *Megilla* (29a) that in the future, when *Mashiach* comes, all the shuls and Torah study halls will miraculously be uprooted from their places and brought to *Eretz Yisrael*. This being the case, a shul can be geographically thousands of miles away from Israel, but is closer than we think. It is in fact actually part of *Eretz Yisrael* and when we spend time in it, we are, to a certain extent, spending time in *Eretz Yisrael* itself.

This, continues the *Maharsha*, is the key to understanding our *Gemara*. What *Rebbi Yochanan* heard that helped him understand this phenomenon was not that they had a special merit for longevity. What he realized, was that these elderly people were not living in *Bavel*; they were living in the virtual “piece” of *Eretz Yisrael* by way of the *Beis Haknesses* (shul)! Since they spent a large chunk of their day immersed in prayer etc, they were subject to the blessings associated to *Eretz Yisrael*, including a long lifetime.

The lessons that we must take from this *gemara* are twofold. On a basic level, we must strive to live, regardless of our geographical location, in *Eretz Yisrael*. We achieve this by spending a significant portion of our day in shul, the “virtual” *Eretz Yisrael*. Additionally, however, there is a more fundamental lesson we must understand. If our Rabbis tell us that, with the coming of *Mashiach*, the shuls and Torah study halls will come with us to *Eretz Yisrael*, it means exactly that. It is not simply an analogy. It is fact, and it can have actual ramifications on us, to the extent that people lived longer because they attached themselves to these places.

Hashem should help that we should merit to see the fulfillment of these prophecies in Nissan, the month of redemption, Amen.