



Shavuoth- Megilat Rut

In the fifth chapter of Hilkhot Melakhim (*halakha* 9), Maimonides codifies a prohibition against leaving the Land of Israel to permanently settle abroad. He makes exception for people facing economic hardship in Israel and unable to earn a livelihood there, whom he permits to relocate in any region where they find a secure source of income. He adds, however, "Even though it is permissible to leave [Israel to escape financial hardship], it is not a measure of piety [to do so]; for Machlon and Kilyon were two great leaders of their generations and left [Israel] due to severe hardship, and they were deserving of death from God."

Maimonides refers here to the story told in the first chapter of Megilat Rut of the family of Elimelech, a wealthy landowner in Beit Lechem who left Israel to settle in the neighboring country of Moav to escape a harsh famine that ravaged *Eretz Yisrael*. Subsequent to his settlement in Moav, he and his two sons – Machlon and Kilyon – died. Maimonides describes Elimelech's sons as *gedolei ha-dor* – great spiritual leaders of the generation – who, despite their general piety, were severely punished for leaving *Eretz Yisrael* during a time of famine. Their punishment proves that although one is technically permitted to leave Israel to escape hardship, doing so falls short of the *midat chasidut* – the "measure of piety" which mandates remaining even in the face of economic hardship.

Several later scholars addressed the question of why Machlon and Kilyon deserved to die for violating a *midat chasidut*, an additional measure of piety which does not reflect the strict letter of the *Halakha*. True, we might expect of people described as *gedolei ha-dor* to observe not only the strict requirements of *Halakha*, but also the higher standard of *midat chasidut*. But why were they punished so harshly for failing to meet this special standard of piety?

The *Lechem Mishneh* commentary claims that in truth, Machlon and Kilyon were required to remain in *Eretz Yisrael* even at the level of strict *Halakha*. Maimonides had previously codified the ruling of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Bava Batra 91a) that even in times of economic hardship and exorbitant food prices, a person capable of affording food must remain in the Land of Israel. Only if one cannot afford adequate food is he permitted to seek permanent residence elsewhere, though as a "measure of piety" he should remain in *Eretz Yisrael* even under such conditions. The *Lechem Mishneh* suggests that Machlon and Kilyon, members of the wealthy, aristocratic family of Elimelech, had the means to purchase grain in Beit Lechem, and where thus required to remain, even according to the strict *Halakha*. They were punished for violating this law and relocating in Moav. Maimonides here makes the point that if these two otherwise righteous men were so severely punished for violating this *Halakha* and permanently residing in Moav, then certainly one should remain in Israel even in situations where *Halakha* technically permits him to remain.

However, the *Lechem Mishneh's* reading seems difficult to accept, as the straightforward implication of Maimonides' comments indicates that Machlon and Kilyon violated the *midat chasidut*, and were not technically required to remain in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Others explain differently, pointing to two factors that rendered Machlon and Kilyon's settlement in Moav so grave, even though this entailed merely a *midat chasidut*.

Firstly, as Maimonides mentioned, these two men were *gedolei ha-dor*, the religious leaders of their generation. It is quite possible that what for others is required as a *midat chasidut*, for the religious leaders entails a strict obligation of sorts. Machlon and Kilyon were to set an example of devotion to the strictest standards of Jewish observance, and they failed in their responsibility as religious leaders. Secondly, the context of their relocation in Moav perhaps lent this act a greater degree of severity. This famine struck *Eretz Yisrael* during the period of the *shoftim*, the judges, before the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, when the nation experienced ongoing instability and insecurity. Leaving the Land of Israel to resettle in Moav during a time of crisis sent a message of despair to the rest of the nation, essentially calling into question the entire enterprise of *Benei Yisrael's* conquest and settlement of their homeland. Even if the *midat chasidut* of remaining in Israel during times of trouble did not itself warrant their untimely death, Elimelekh's sons were perhaps punished for the far-reaching implications of their settlement in Moav, which reflect a sense of despair on the future and destiny of *Benei Yisrael's* establishment of a sovereign nation in the Promised Land.

(See Rabbi Yehuda Amichai's article on this subject at www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/emunat/10/01014.htm.)