

The Land: The Historical, Theological, Liturgical Significance of Eretz Yisrael

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In the month of May, Jews throughout the world gather in synagogues to celebrate the newest holiday of the Jewish year, Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day. Less than 60 years after the founding of the Jewish State, the first independent Jewish state to exist in nearly 2000 years, the Hebrew date of 5 Iyar has found its place together with such holidays as Purim and Hanukkah on the religious calendar of Judaism and has been given liturgical expression in our prayer books. This fact alone says volumes about the historical, theological and liturgical significance of Eretz Yisrael.

True, a distinction is to be made between Eretz Yisrael — the Land of Israel, and Medinat Yisrael— the State of Israel. The State is a secular-political entity which is a creation brought about by the Zionist Movement through the offices of the United Nations. It is, nevertheless, the modern embodiment of Jewish sovereignty (even though not all its citizens are Jews and not all Jews are its citizens) and as such is the inheritor of the status of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah and then of the post-exilic State of Judea. The Land of Israel, on the other hand is a geographic designation, the exact borders of which are difficult if not impossible to define since there are different definitions found in Scripture. It has theological implications in that it is the land promised by God to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Certain religious obligations exist only within it and it has the status of holiness both according to Scripture and to Rabbinic Tradition. The Mishnah, for example, speaks of "ten degrees of holiness," for "The Land of Israel is holier than all other lands" (*Kelim* 1:6). Of course the holiest of them all is the Holy of Holies within the Temple (*Kelim* 1:9).

There is no holiness to the state as a political entity and therefore theoretically it would seem that there is no religious significance to the state. Nevertheless in the perception of most Jews, these distinctions are— to put it mildly —blurred if they exist at all. Yom HaAtzmaut, after all, celebrates the creation of the State— within the Land. Thus Moshe Greenberg, one of the most distinguished of Jewish biblical scholars, writes:

As the sole political entity created by the combined and concentrated efforts of the Jewish people, the State of Israel is willy-nilly the most salient achievement of the Jewish people in our time...Jews in Israel and outside it share, then, the estimate of the state as somehow expressing the essence of the Jewish people. Jewish identity is inextricably bound up with the state. This is a new thing in the history of Jews and Judaism...Indeed one may play with the notion that for the health of Judaism the state is dangerous.¹

Greenberg recognizes at one and the same time that one cannot equate Judaism with any political entity and yet that the two are today inextricably intertwined.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, surely one of the most important theological figures —Jew or Christian— of the 20th century, wrote an entire book about the state, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. The title says it all. He wrote there:

¹ "The Task of Masorti Judaism," in *Zionism and the Conservative Movement*, ed. by John S. Ruskay and David Szonyi (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), pp. 137-139.

What is the meaning of the State of Israel? *Its sheer being is the message.* The life in the land of Israel today is a rehearsal, a test, a challenge to all of us. Not living in the land, non participation in the drama, is a source of embarrassment (p. 224). The ultimate meaning of the State of Israel must be seen in terms of the vision of the prophets: the redemption of all men. The religious duty of the Jew is to participate in the process of continuous redemption, in seeing that justice prevails over power, that awareness of God penetrates human understanding (p. 225).

Therefore although there is a definite distinction between the two, state and land, and from now on I will speak only of the land, it is obvious that for the Jewish people today, the state has a status more important than a mere political entity, and although the state can be challenged and criticized, since as a human creation it can be wrong, as were the rulers of the ancient states of Israel and Judah, its existence is nevertheless crucial to Jews and Judaism.

For many Jews, including many Zionist thinkers, the *raison d'etre* for the creation of the state includes the need for a place of refuge, a place to escape anti-Semitism (this long before the Holocaust). But for some it also includes the need for a place in which Judaism and Jewish culture would be the majority culture thus strengthening Judaism and Jewish communities throughout the world. In some cases this also includes a religious, almost a messianic vision as we see in these quotations from two early Zionist leaders at the beginning of the 20th century in America:

The rebirth of Israel's national consciousness, and the revival of Israel's religion, or, to use a shorter term, the revival of Judaism are inseparable...The selection of Israel, the indestructibility of God's covenant with Israel, the immortality of Israel as a nation, and the final restoration of Israel to Palestine, where the nation will live a holy life on holy ground, with all the wide-reaching consequences of the conversion of humanity and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth— all these are the common ideals and common ideas that permeate the whole of Jewish literature...History may, and to my belief, will repeat itself, and Israel will be the chosen instrument of God for the new and final mission; but then Israel must first effect its own redemption and live again its own life, and be Israel again, to accomplish its universal mission. ... "Out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

Solomon Schechter

Palestine is the land of Promise not only to the Jew but to the entire world – the promise of a higher and better social order.

Upon the gates of the Third Jewish Commonwealth will be inscribed the same prophetic words which greeted the establishment of the Second Jewish Commonwealth:

"Not by might, nor by power,
But by My spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."

Israel Friedlander

In this approach these thinkers come close to what I believe to be the Biblical view of the importance of the land, seeing it neither in terms of how it benefits other Jewries nor as a physical haven for Jews in danger, but in terms of its intrinsic value. The Torah envisions the creation of the Kingdom of God in the land as a necessary component of the fulfillment of God's divine plan. This is a utopian, not a utilitarian, concept in which Jewish sovereignty in the land becomes an end in itself.

To begin with, the story of the book of Genesis is the story of God in search of a people that will be His people and actualize His will on earth. It begins with the search for an individual. The first to be chosen is Noah, but his descendants disappoint and again one person is singled out for the task: Abraham. "I have known him so that he may command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment..." (Genesis 18:19). This is then passed on through Isaac and his son Jacob, after which all Jacob's progeny become the bearers of this promise and this task, becoming a people—the children of Israel (Jacob), the people Israel. The task assigned to that people is reiterated over and over again in the Torah and is best summarized in the prologue to the Decalogue itself: If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My particular treasure from among all the peoples, though all the earth is Mine. And you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). The ultimate purpose of this was enunciated clearly by Isaiah: On that day shall Israel be the third, with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth. For the Lord of hosts will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be My people Egypt, and Assyria the work of My hands, and My heritage Israel' (19:24-5).

The land is an integral part of this promise. Without the land they will not be able to fulfill their task. Indeed the greatest punishment that can be envisioned for the people is to be driven from the land (Deuteronomy 28:36ff.). The Sages put it as strongly as possible when they said, "Dwelling in the Land of Israel is equivalent to observing all of the Torah's commandments" (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 80).

An analysis of the Torah, Israel's constitution, shows that the narrative of the Torah is basically the story of how Israel got to the land and what they were to do there. It is entirely the story of a journey. Take away the chapters that deal with getting to the land and you would have a very brief book, ending with Genesis 11. According to Judaism's most authoritative traditional commentator, Rashi, even those chapters were including only to indicate that, as the Creator of the world, God had the right and the power to allocate the land of Canaan to whomever He wanted!

The granting of the land is not simply the gift of a place to live. As Amos points out (9:7), God has taken other nations out of captivity and given them lands. In the case of Israel, the land is there as a place in which they can live according to the terms of the covenant and actualize the commands that God gives to them. The grant of the land is, in fact, conditional, upon following God's ways. The confession made upon the first fruits (Deuteronomy 26) makes it very clear that the fulfillment of the covenant occurs when one has the fruit of the land in hand. As Heschel wrote, "To abandon the land would be to repudiate the Bible" (page 44). The extreme position on this matter is the rabbinic saying (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 43) that when exiled "you are to continue to observe the commandments *so that when you return they will not be new to you.*"

Just as the Torah is unfathomable without the emphasis on the land and its meaning, so Jewish prayer is incomprehensible without an acknowledgment of the centrality of the land. Judaism's basic prayer, known in Hebrew as the *Amidah*, recited at each service, three times a day, more on holy days, is a prayer for the restoration of life and sovereignty in the land. In it we recite such phrases as: "return to Your city, Jerusalem," "sound the great shofar for our freedom," and "gather us together from the four corners of the earth." At the conclusion of Yom Kippur and the Passover Seder we recite, "Next year in Jerusalem." At a wedding we break a glass and recite, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning..."

The centrality of Israel, then, lies primarily not in providing a safe place for Jews but in being the focus for the realization of the Torah's ultimate goal, as reiterated by the prophets and reaffirmed in rabbinic literature: God has found this people and appointed them His people and they will be able to fully fulfill His will only in the land, the end result of which will be the establishment of the Sovereignty of God on earth.

James Carroll, the Catholic author of *Constantine's Sword*, recently wrote a column in the *Boston Globe* (*International Herald Tribune*, April 4, 2006) in which he briefly traced Christianity's historic attitude toward Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. He wrote, "...Christian theology...required the exile of Jews from the Holy Land precisely as a proof of religious claims." Augustine, he continues, argued that Jews must be scattered throughout the world to give witness that Jesus fulfilled the ancient promises. This evolved into an understanding of exile as punishment for Jewish rejection of Christian claims. He points out that Pope Pius X replied to Herzl, who asked for support for Zionism, that "If you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will be ready with churches and priests to baptize all of you." How different this is from the Church's recent actions and statements, as demonstrated by the visit of John Paul II to Jerusalem and the Western Wall. Nevertheless, Carroll concludes with this warning, "Contempt for Jews and Judaism is ancient. Such impossible threads weave invisibly through attempts to reckon with Israel's dilemma, forming a rope that trips up the well-intentioned and the unaware, even as others use it, as so often before, to fashion a noose."

It should be noted that several Christian theologians have written with understanding about the importance of the land to Judaism. Perhaps no one better than Walter Brueggemann in *The Land*:

The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but always *a place with Yahweh*, a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him. It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel of its historicity, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place which is a repository for commitment and therefore identity. Biblical faith is surely about the life of a people with God as has been shown by all the current and recent emphases on covenant in an historical place. And if God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as an historical place in a special way. It will no longer do to speak about Yahweh and his people but we must speak about Yahweh and his people *and his land* (pp. 5-6).

In the post-Emancipation days of the 1800s, there were attempts by certain Jewish groups, eager to establish citizenship and equality for Jews in Western Europe, to reinterpret Judaism in such a way as to eliminate the place of the land within Judaism. Slogans such as "Berlin is our Jerusalem" were coined. Zion was eliminated from the prayers. The irony of these misguided reformations is bitter and obvious. The centrality of the land to Jewish belief has been restored and with it the responsibility of those who live there, those who govern there, and those who look to it to make certain that its meaning and its promise are fulfilled. It is vital that Christians understand and appreciate this as well and see the Return to Zion as a normative and positive part of Judaism.

In conclusion, let me cite a poem by Judah Halevi, a medieval poet and theologian (1075-1141), who expressed in many of his writings the feelings of Jews throughout the ages for the land of Israel. Living in Spain at the height of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, he nevertheless longed for the land:

My heart's in the east and I languish on the margins of the west. How taste or
savor what I eat?
How fulfil my vows and pledges while Zion
Is shackled to Edom and I am fettered to Arabia?
I'd gladly give up all the luxuries of Spain
If only to see the dust and rubble of the Shrine.

Happy is he who waits
And lives to behold your lights rising as dawn
breaks over him and he sees
your chosen prospering, and thrills
at your joy, when you regain the vigor of youth.
(Translated by Gabriel Levin)

For Judaism, the establishment of an independent Jewish society in the land of Israel stands at the very core of the message of Scripture. It is both the purpose of the Exodus and the means of fulfilling the Divine purpose. For the Jew it is the dream that has never died and the hope that is eternally new.