ERETZ YISRAEL, MEDINAT YISRAEL, AM YISRAEL: Negotiating Multiple Landscapes

BY DR. ZOHAR RAVIV

The word “Israel” in the phrase “Israel Education” is a complicating term. It connotes multiple and, at times, disparate meanings which often add confusion rather than consistency to the field.
“Israel” is on one hand a Land of old (Eretz Yisrael) whose presence and position in the Jewish narrative plays a central role in the biblical Exodus generations. That “Israel” was an Imagined Land of which the Hebrews in Egypt had only heard, without experiencing it firsthand. To the twelve settling tribes, known as “Bnai Yisrael,” the People of Israel, “Israel” was a Covenantal Land which embodied their pact with the Holy One at Sinai and whose precise borders had fluctuated during various monarchies and eras.

To the exiled and post-exilic generations, “Israel” became a Remembered Land which forced an ongoing dialogue between the ancient “Homeland” and the lands in which they lived and which had now become home. It became a semi-mythic entity whose immediate physical absence was replaced by diverse forms of memory, ritual, poetry, and even pilgrimage. For contemporary generations, “Israel” is both a Lived Land and an Envisioned Land: a Jewish, sovereign and democratic State (Medinat Yisrael) which continues to evolve among the family of nations since 1948.

Indeed, as many experienced educators of Judaism know, general perceptions of Israel usually traverse all these landscapes – Lived Land; Imagined Land; Contemporary State; and Peoplehood – albeit with varying emphases. Contemporary Jews living throughout the world and native Israelis, for example, see Israel in very different ways. Diaspora Jews often view Israel through romantic, religious or political lenses (often reflective of an Imagined and Remembered Land), whereas for native Israelis, Israel is the Lived Land, a modern and national country of their residence.

This country made us a people; our people made this country.

- David Ben-Gurion
This somewhat simplistic depiction does little to realize the fuller complexity of Israel. At the same time, it does point to the need for greater clarity on this issue—particularly to enable a systematic conversation among educators for the benefit of Israel Education. One of the most interesting—yet neglected—documents for engaging in such a conversation is the document known as Megillat Ha’Atzmaut, literally “The Scroll of Independence” but generally translated as “The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel.” It will be instructive for us to look at this document for both conceptual and pedagogic reasons as a way into elaborating the conceptual complexity of several linked but not identical terms.

This historic document, read by David Ben-Gurion on Friday afternoon, May 14, 1948 in what is today known as Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, begins as follows:

The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel, interestingly, starts by emphasizing the Land of Israel. A modern declaration of statehood (very much influenced by the American Declaration of Independence) begins with a conceptual-historical connection with ancient historical and religious contextualization (“For the land, whither thou go in to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence ye came out; … [It is] a land which the Lord thy God cares for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.” Deuteronomy 11:10).

Not only does this modern Declaration link the State with Eretz Yisrael as “the birthplace of the Jewish people,” but it also associates it with the concept of Am Yisrael—the People of Israel, a nation that left Egypt, wandered in the deserts of Sinai and Zion, and reached the Land as a cohesive nation after four decades of anticipation. This sense of imagination and anticipation has ever since been an integral component in the Jewish longing for Israel—and may well be an important aim of contemporary Israel education.

**Covenantal Land**

The distinguished historian Arthur Hertzberg once wrote, “The land of Israel is a central point in the Covenant between the people of Israel and God; [a land] which had been set aside for the authentic encounter between the seed of Abraham and the God who founded their community […]]. This land was fashioned by God for a particular service to Him, that its very landscape should help mold the character and spirit of His beloved people.” The traditional Jewish standpoint perceives the Land of Israel as a Covenantal Landscape, an active statement of the binding relationship which is at the heart of Jewish life and discourse. This Covenantal theme pervades biblical texts, Jewish ritual (e.g., circumcision, the Brit); the Sabbath (Shabbat); social justice (Tzedaka); and halakhic rulings. Eretz Yisrael is thus seen as an indispensable and inseparable part of the eternal contract between Land, People, and God. While contem-
Temporary life would seem to be light years and millennia away from such a conception, the contemporary educator is somehow faced with the challenge of dealing with this original and significantly powerful motif in Jewish experience.

**A Remembered Land**
The lengthy prologue of the Declaration of Independence continues by stating:

> Beginning with the first Babylonian Exile (586 BCE), and continuing through the destruction of the Holy Temple (70 CE), a failed Jewish revolt in 132-135 CE and subsequent banishments from the Land, Israel became transformed into a *Remembered Land* for the majority of Jews. Like the Hebrews in Egypt, Jews in Diaspora communities throughout the world related to Israel as an *Imagined Land*: a place they had never actually seen. The difference was that Israel now became both *Imagined* and also *Remembered*. Jewish law, lore, poetry, and life now created a cross-generational romantic “desire” to return to the *Remembered Land*. Some Jews did indeed journey to the land, but for most, the perpetuation of Zion as the Jewish Homeland became a powerful motif that informed Jewish texts and reshaped its institutions, architecture, customs, liturgy and rituals. This *Remembering* assumed a distinctively religious overtone, often expressing itself in the language of *Eretz Hakodesh* (the Holy Land) and *Galut* (Exile).

This motif was to be central for centuries until the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century national movement reshaped the lexicon and the impetus from a *Remembered Land* to an actual land in which Jews would aspire to live, build, create, and inhabit.

**A Lived Land**
In the following section of the Declaration, the tone changes dramatically and *Imagined* and *Remembered* and *Covenant* and *Spiritual* become translated into contemporary civil, legal, political, and existential terms:

> Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland.

> This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State. […] Accordingly we, members of the people’s council, representatives of the Jewish community of *Eretz-Israel* […], by virtue of our natural and historic right […] hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in *Eretz-Israel*, to be known as the State of Israel [*Medinat-Israel*].
At this point, while rooted in *Eretz* Israel, the Declaration of Independence ultimately aims to legitimize the sovereignty of the *State* of Israel and to secure its standing as a modern, Jewish and democratic State. Three issues are of significance in this context.

“We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in *Eretz-Israel*”

Given its deep reliance on the idea of *Eretz Yisrael*, the State is now called “a Jewish State” rather than “a State for the Jews.” This suggests a notion of a state that is somehow related to certain Jewish values, legal rulings and national symbols implied by the ancient theological narrative of the *Land*. The intricate associations between the Land and the State are at the backbone of the Zionist idea, although their nature varied dramatically from one Zionist branch to another.

“To be known as the State of Israel [*Medinat-Israel*].”

At the same time, the new entity will be a contemporary state reflective of norms consistent with democratic liberal Western standards of statehood. This central dimension obviously raises important challenges for such subjects as the Jewish nature of Medinat Israel, the concept of separation of Church and State, and issues of civil law and religious law. It poses the challenge of being a Jewish and a modern democratic state.

“Accordingly we, members of the people’s council, representatives of the Jewish community of *Eretz-Israel*”

Whereas authority in ancient Israel was rooted in either the Covenant or monarchies or rabbinic rule, the contemporary State is rooted in a “people’s council” – a political forum of men and women assuming responsibility for establishing and navigating the State. How does this new form of authority inform Israel’s path, and how does it correspond with Israel’s vision of being a “Jewish State?”

**An Envisioned Land**

**THE STATE OF ISRAEL**

will be open for Jewish immigration and for the In-gathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.
The last part of the Declaration of Independence is a vision of what a modern Jewish State will look like and aspire to. It postulates lofty and laudable principles rooted in the highest values of Jewish tradition and Western culture. The Declaration tries to merge all the aforementioned landscapes into a coherent Jewish narrative. It must negotiate the old with new; here, it envisions an edifice whose set of values echo both the Hebrew prophets and contemporary liberal democracies. The ideas of freedom, justice and equality traverse both landscapes and allow an important dialogue between a respected past and a viable future. The vision, however, is only as worthy as the willingness of each generation to see it to fruition – the desire of a people (old and young!) to partake in an evolving story and to assume responsibility for the path.

The Educator’s Challenge

This brief journey clearly highlights the challenge of Jewish educators in Israel education. They must deal with a long legacy of meanings of “Israel,” help explain them in their diverse and respective contexts, and find coherence amongst them in the contemporary context for the young twenty-first-century Jew. This is an educational task of great importance for the practice of Israel Education – and it is surely a holy task.

Note

1 Arthur Hertzberg, editor. The Zionist Idea (New York: Atheneum, 1982)