



THE PLACE OF ISRAEL IN JEWISH TRADITION

by Rabbi Asher Lopatin

Biblical Times

From the earliest days of the Bible—from the creation story itself—to the lives of most Jews today, the Land of Israel has been an important part of the Jewish story. The first verse of the Torah, “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the land,” was understood by the rabbis as indicating G-d’s sovereignty over the world and over all its lands. According to this interpretation, the biblical text implied that the Land of Israel was given to the Jewish people. Throughout the ages, no matter where Jews lived or which books or traditions spoke about the Holy Land, the Land of Israel always captured the imagination of the Jewish people. From the time that the land had no name and was denoted as “the Land I will show you” or “the Good Land” or “the Promised Land,” until today, Jews have been guided by a desire to connect with this

piece of real-estate connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe.

In the Torah we read that after G-d created the world, destroyed it (Noah), and then restored it again, Abram and Sarai (as they are initially known in the Torah) abandoned Abram's birthplace to go to the land G-d had chosen. Moreover, G-d commanded Abram to physically walk throughout the land, which he does while, according to rabbinic interpretation, establishing hospitality stations along the way. It is interesting to note that at this point in the Torah, the land was not yet called Israel nor were its boundaries specifically defined. The biblical Abram used the

land as a launching pad for spiritual and moral revival; he prayed for the safety of all the inhabitants of the land, his own relatives, and non-Hebrews.

The Biblical texts indicated that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all worked to establish good relations with the non-Hebrews in the land. They signed treaties and even bought land that they could have seized by right of Divine promise. The three Patriarchs worked the land, built religious sites, and raised their families in the land. Yet, they demonstrated that Hebrews and Israelites had lived in the land alongside the *other*—people who were not part of the Jewish people.

Interestingly, the text indicates that it was the Patriarchs who worked hard to preserve the Israelite *atmosphere* and personality of the land. Whereas the Patriarchs established a contractual model of the land where they lived peacefully with other nations, the Patriarchs attempted to preserve the familial and spiritual nature of the land as *home*.

The subsequent Five Books of Moses traced the ongoing contractual and spiritual relationship of the Israelites to the land. Even when the Israelites were forced to flee to Egypt, the Promised Land beckoned them and eventually they were freed from slavery and began the long journey back to the Promised Land. The Land of Israel was equated with both holiness and freedom; this implied that true freedom is both physical and spiritual; it was connected to belief in the divine and to a setting that is holy.

The biblical texts also very openly recorded the dilemmas and failures of the Israelite people, both spiritually and morally, to uphold the divine covenant



and the spiritual sanctity of the land. The prophets and others called the people to task for their moral and spiritual failures. At the same time, they emphasized G-d's love for his people, the unconditional connection to the land, and the vision of return and redemption. The biblical account of the relationship of a people, a land, divinity, and moral and spiritual values has served as a sustaining and powerful motif of Jewish life throughout the ages.

Rabbinic Judaism

With the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, the Kingdom of Judea ended, and Jews went into exile in Babylon and Egypt. Some Jews may have stayed behind in Israel. Even though only a fraction of Jews returned from Babylon to Israel in 538 BCE (perhaps only 50,000), it was these Israelites who created Rabbinic Judaism when they returned to the land of their ancestors. Rabbinic Judaism interpreted the biblical narratives and laws and ultimately created a resilient religious message, which has developed and re-defined itself over the centuries and lives on today. The prayers, kiddush on Shabbat, Havdallah after Shabbat, the intricate laws of Kashrut, laws of torts, borrowing, dealing with your neighbor's property—all of these are part of Rabbinic Judaism's read of the Torah and tradition, and all were developed by the newly established community in Israel. The community rebuilt the Second Temple, only to have it destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Rabbinic writings say the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred that ran rampant amongst warring factions and

denominations: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, zealots, and more.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the subsequent exiles from Jerusalem and other traditional cities in Israel led to traditions of Torah learning and practice that we are familiar with today.

These metamorphoses led to the creation of a religion and belief system that was relevant for life outside a national homeland and a ritual center in Jerusalem. Indeed, the rabbis created a resilient Judaism, not based on the Temple, and, in some ways, not based on where you live but how you live. Learning Torah and engaging in mystical practices became the new standard to get closer to understanding G-d rather than relying on prophets or the high priest.

Yet, even though Jews anywhere were able to find a meaningful Judaism based on praying, studying, and being kind to others, the rabbis still made sure that no one forgot to keep *Eretz Yisrael* in all of their activities. Anyone praying had to face Israel and Jerusalem, wherever in the world they were. Holidays were observed for an extra day outside of Israel, perhaps to remind everyone that they were not truly in the Holy Land. In Eastern European traditions, the priests would only bless the people in the Diaspora on holidays, whereas in Israel the people were blessed daily in the morning prayer. Perhaps most important, the Torah was read twice during the week and on Shabbat, so that everyone knew the story of the origins of the Jewish people in the Promised Land.

Holiday observances were adapted to guarantee the ongoing remembrance of the land. The Passover story highlighted the motifs of freedom along with the



My heart is in
the East and I
am in the West.

—Yehuda Halevi

beginning of the journey back to Israel. The Shavuot holiday combined the giving of the Torah as part of the return to Israel, along with agricultural ceremonies connected to the Land of Israel. Sukkot was linked to both the fall harvest and the journey in the desert on the way to Israel. Fast Days recalled the tragedy of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem (over the ages other Jewish tragedies were appended to this day). At the core of almost every custom and every holiday, there were symbolic reminders of the Land of Israel. Thus, while Judaism had become an exilic religion, the land continued to preoccupy the heads and the hearts of the Jewish teachers and the people. The rabbis and scholars over the ages created an elaborate religious system aimed at Jews wherever they lived, for which they never would forsake the connection to the Land of Israel.

Zionist Judaism

In Biblical times and in Rabbinical Judaism, a love of Israel was always at the core of every tradition, of every important religious moment. Weddings were ended with the Seven Blessings talking about a Jerusalem of the future, filled with joy and the sounds of the bride and groom—and, of course the

glass was broken to evoke sadness over the destruction of Jerusalem. Most Jews, however, continued to live outside of Israel and did not attempt to change that reality. Throughout the ages, Jews continued to retain the connection and the feeling for Israel as movingly described by Yehuda Halevi, “My heart is in the East and I am in the West.”¹

As Jewish life confronted modernity, new conceptions of the Land of Israel began to develop, including the call for Jews to physically leave the Diaspora and return to Israel. First, it was fully a religious movement heeding the calls of the poetry of Halevi and the legal and kabbalistic rulings of other rabbis. Then, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the notion of a political and secular Zionism, particularly championed by Theodor Herzl, espoused the actual return to Israel and the building of a national, political home in the land. Many agreed with Herzl’s idealistic program to enable the Jews to live as a free people in a Jewish homeland. There were also religious Zionists, such as Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, Yehuda Alkalai, and Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, who supported the notion of Jews helping to restore the homeland.

In the early twentieth century, important thinkers like Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook supported the vision of a Jewish homeland, building on the effort of religious and secular Jews. Rabbi Kook regarded every kibbutz and every person who planted a tree or built a home in Israel as doing a holy act. Religious Zionism made an important contribution to the rebirth of the Land of Israel.

While the traditional Jewish world remains divided on many of the ideas of Religious Zionism, and Zionism itself,

it remains united in its commitment to the centrality of Israel for the Jewish people and the need of the Land of Israel to be an integral part of the lives of all Jews wherever they live. Today, the reestablishment of the modern State of Israel is seen by many religious Jews as a fulfillment of *shivat zion*—“the Return to Zion” and *reisheet zmuchat geulateynu*—“the beginning of the flourishing of our redemption.” For others the challenge is to create values and contemporary modernity and tradition. For all Jews, Israel is a very critical link in a never-ending chain.

Endnote

1. Halevi, Yehuda. *The Selected Poems of Yehuda Halevi*. Trans. Hillel Halkin. Nextbook, Inc. 2011. Print.



Rabbi Asher Lopatin is the President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, an Orthodox rabbinical school that teaches an inclusive, open and welcoming Torah.

Previously, he was the spiritual leader of Anshe Sholom B’nai Israel Congregation, a modern Orthodox synagogue in Chicago, for 18 years. He received his ordination from Rav Ahron Soloveichik and Yeshivas Brisk in Chicago, and from Yeshiva University, as a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A Rhodes Scholar with a M.Phil. in Medieval Arabic Thought from Oxford University, Rabbi Lopatin is the author of numerous scholarly and popular articles.

