



## ERETZ, MEDINA, AM YISRAEL: NAVIGATING MULTIPLE LANDSCAPES

by Zohar Raviv

The word *Israel* in the phrase *Israel education* is a complicated term, and connotes multiple and, at times, disparate meanings which often add confusion rather than consistency to the field.

To begin our conversation we shall look at the opening paragraph of the single most important official document to address the historical context, the vision, and the new reality for Israel: the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel (proclaimed on Friday May 14, 1948 in Tel Aviv).

The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel (מדינת ישראל), interestingly, starts by emphasizing the *Land* of Israel (ארץ ישראל). This modern declaration of statehood (very much influenced by the American Declaration of Independence)

begins with a conceptual association with an ancient historical, theological, and religious contextualization.

Upon examining the evolution of both the idea and the term *Israel* in historical and conceptual perspectives, one indeed finds a fascinating development of five distinct landscapes which are arguably woven into our collective Jewish consciousness and historic memory. For the biblical Exodus generations in the Sinai desert, Israel was a *Land of Old (Eretz Yisrael)* whose temporary presence-of-absence and position in the Jewish narrative arrested the imagination and enticed national redemptive hope. That Israel was an *Imagined Land* of which the Hebrews in Egypt had only heard about, without experiencing it firsthand. To the ensuing twelve settling tribes, known as *Bnei Yisrael* (the People of Israel), Israel was to become a *Covenantal Land*, which actively embodied their pact with the G-d of Israel 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*, now forcing an ongoing dialogue between the ancient *Homeland* and the various lands which had become their home. To these generations Israel transformed into a semi-mythic entity whose immediate physical absence was replaced by the fundamental presence of diverse, and often radically different, forms of memory, ritual, poetry, and even pilgrimage. For contemporary generations, since May 14, 1948, 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 and aims to carve a



*Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.*

modern, thriving path into the future while heeding the voices of old and acknowledging the trails of its past.

Indeed, as many experienced educators of Judaism know, general perceptions of Israel usually traverse all these landscapes—*Imagined, Covenantal, Remembered, Lived, and Envisioned*—albeit with varying emphases or

breadths of context. For example, contemporary Jews living throughout the world and native Israelis see Israel in very different ways. Without denying the generalization offered here, it is arguably true that Diaspora Jews often view Israel through romantic, religiously oriented, or politically induced lenses (often reflective of the *Imagined and Remembered Lands*), whereas native Israelis often tend to set aside such views in favor of Israel as a *Lived Land*—what they perceive as a more realistic, nuanced, and down-to-earth understanding of both the achievements and challenges of a modern state, a national homeland, and the country of their residence.

This somewhat simplistic depiction does little to realize the fuller complexity of the idea and the term *Israel*. At the same time, it does point to the need for greater clarity on this issue and may serve in offering a shared conceptual language to enable a systematic conversation among educators for the benefit of Israel education in particular, and Jewish education in general.

## The Imagined Land

The Imagined Israel is the landscape described to the Exodus generations during their wanderings in the deserts of Sinai and Tzin. It is a land which holds allure, from the biblical narrator's perspective, in its standing as unique; that is, different from any other land by virtue of G-d's eternal promise to the patriarchs. In the words of *Deuteronomy* 11:10:

For the land you are entering to take over is not as the land of

Egypt, from which you came out; ... [It is] a land which the Lord your G-d cares for; the eyes of the Lord your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

This *Imagined Land* is indeed described in great detail to the bewildered Israelites as they wander the deserts. Scores of *mitzvot* (religious rituals and intricate sets of laws) are associated with it, to be mastered by the abiding Israelites—yet the land itself remains beyond any foreseeable horizon. This wondrous tension, this moment of disparity between knowledge and experience, serves to amplify anticipation and elevate the people in preparation for encountering the land in the future. The Land of Israel thus functions at this juncture as a significant landmark on two important levels: first, it becomes a perpetual aspiration for a people now forged into a nation—the People of Israel (*Am Yisrael*), a people that left Egypt, wandered in the deserts of Sinai and Tzin, and are bound to reach this hitherto *Imagined Land* as a cohesive nation after four decades of anticipation. Second, by being a land not yet physically encountered—a land of future promise—*Israel Imagined* serves to better articulate the people's own past, bind it in a shared collective narrative, and offer a renewed sense of appreciation in its encounter.

As we move from the historical-mythical and into our contemporary educational domain, we can suggest a fascinating cognitive similarity between the Exodus Israelites and contemporary Jews for whom Israel remains an Imagined Land, as they may have heard or even learned about it, yet have never experienced it firsthand. This moment of disparity

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between knowledge and experience may become a powerful educational tool, as we strive to harness imagination and anticipation as positive objectives of contemporary Israel educational settings and curricula.

## The 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 G-d; [a land] which had been set aside for the authentic encounter between the seed of Abraham and the G-d who founded their community... This land was fashioned by G-d for a particular service to Him, that its very landscape should help mold the character and spirit of His beloved people.<sup>1</sup>

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 and is persuasively demonstrated in a number of covenantal rites, establishing *Eretz Yisrael* as a land held to the same standards as the Jews who now inhabit it, and an indispensable player in the covenantal triangle G-d-Man-Land.

Primary among these covenantal rites is the Shabbat. *Exodus 31* commands the People of Israel:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak thou also unto the

children of Israel, saying: Verily ye shall keep My sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that ye may know that I am the Lord who sanctify you.

The Land of Israel is also expected to keep its own Shabbat, albeit once each seven years, in what we know as *Shmita*. Thus reads *Leviticus 25*:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses in Mount Sinai, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the Lord.

*Brit Milah* (circumcision) is another central example of the covenant, or, more precisely in our context, the command to cut off the *foreskin (orlah)*. *Genesis 17* reads:

And G-d said unto Abraham: And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant, thou, and thy seed after thee throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which ye shall keep, between Me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and you.

Similarly, the laws that pertain to the fruit of the trees of the Land of Israel are also covenantal signs, as *Leviticus 19* reads:

And when ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as forbidden (lit. uncircumcised); three years shall it be as

forbidden (lit. uncircumcised)  
unto you; it shall not be eaten.

Even the moral acts of righteousness, helping the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the destitute, expressed in agricultural laws constitute part of the covenantal bond.

Indeed, the covenantal aspect of the Land of Israel has been regarded as so vital that it merits its own *Talmud*! The *Jerusalemite Talmud*—composed circa fourth-fifth centuries, roughly a century prior to its gigantic Babylonian brother—revolves almost entirely around mitzvot that pertain exclusively to the Land of Israel (מצוות התלויות בארץ). *Eretz Yisrael* has thus been seen as an indispensable and inseparable part of the eternal contract between the People of Israel and their G-d.

While certain aspects of contemporary Jewish thought and life would seem to be light years and millennia away from such a conception, the weight of this narrative should be appreciated and addressed by the contemporary Israel educator. The need to face the challenge of dealing with this original and significantly powerful motif in the Jewish experience is arguably central in order to unpack not only past, but also current perceptions and attitudes towards Israel in contemporary discourse. It is also an important step toward a fuller appreciation of the multiple narratives that inform Israeli society in its articulation of connection to the land, as well as a significant contextualization of the landscapes, as discussed below.

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## The Remembered Land

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 whose existence had permeated their daily lives through religious rituals, cultural customs, literary expressions and emotional ties, but nonetheless a land they had never actually experienced. The difference was that Israel

now became both *Imagined* and *Remembered*. As Israel's Declaration of Independence summarizes:

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

The above statement may be true for some. In truth, 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) vs. *galut* (exile).

This motif, however, was not devoid of its own evolution and variants; attitudes toward this *Remembered Land* ranged from vehement calls to return to Zion, whilst others upheld sanctifying attitudes to Israel's mythical standing as desirable and denying all aspiration to realize it as an actual home for the Jewish people. These views have shaped Jewish discourse around the Land of Israel for centuries, until the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century national movement—known as *Zionism*—reshaped the lexicon and the impetus from a *Remembered Land* to an actual land in which Jews would aspire to build, create, inhabit, and live.

## The Lived Land

There are undeniably many facets to the ideological-political movement called *Zionism*; there is no single conceptual canopy to host its different branches, sub-divisions and interpretations, save one—again, articulated in the Declaration of Independence: The move to establish a national home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel is based upon “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.” From this point on, the language of the *State of Israel* is set to move beyond the realms of the *Imagined, Covenantal, and Remembered* lands to which it owed its *raison d’être* and would inform its vision with contemporary civil, legal, political, and existential vocabularies. Based on a theological constitution of antiquity, and shaped through the memory of a hundred generations of diverse Jewish life in the Diaspora, the *State of Israel* (מדינת ישראל) is a fascinating tapestry of ancient justification and new vision, religious impetus and secular expressions, ideological fervor and calculated politics, a G-d who may have authored, but men and women who assumed the authority, as the Declaration states:

We, members of the people's council, representatives of the Jewish community of *Eretz Yisrael*..., 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 Yisrael*].

The *State of Israel*—in many ways in accordance with Theodor Hertzl's vision—now aims to master the language of world nations and immerse

itself in the experience of liberalism, democracy, social, and global welfare. Yet it aims to do so without losing sight of its Jewish backbone, fully cognizant of the impending tensions that are likely to surface once *Jewish* and *democratic* need to negotiate their respective places in the social, legal, cultural, and political spheres.

Three issues are of significance in this context: first, 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 of Israel. 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.

Second, 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 Yisrael*, the concept of separation of Church and State, and issues of civil law and religious law, and so forth. It poses the profound challenge of harmoniously being both a Jewish and a modern democratic state.

Third, while authority in ancient Israel was rooted in the Covenant, monarchies, or rabbinic rule, the contemporary *State of Israel* 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?

## The Envisioned Land

Whereas all four previous landscapes are based on our historical knowledge and narrative formation, the fifth one—the *Envisioned Land*—is rooted in the aspirations, hopes, and beliefs of all who have a stake in Israel’s ongoing and thriving future, irrespective of the place they call home. The vision of what a modern Jewish State will look like and aspire to may postulate lofty and laudable principles, and usually those are rooted in the highest values of both Jewish tradition and Western culture. The merger of all the aforementioned landscapes into a coherent Jewish narrative in a meaningful contemporary context is nothing short of vital. It has to negotiate the wisdom of old with a viable new vision, and do so in a manner that affords both a seat of honor in the intricate unfolding story of Israel. 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 active responsibility for the path taken must resonate. Not merely remember, but re-member!

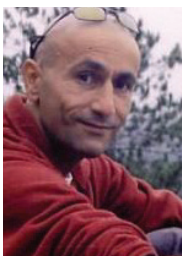
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## The Educator’s Challenge

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 explicate them in their diverse and respective contexts, and find coherence amongst them in the contemporary sphere for the young contemporary Jew. This is an educational task of great importance for the practice of Israel education—and it is surely a holy task.

## Endnote

1. Hertzberg, Arthur, ed. *The Zionist Idea*. New York: Atheneum, 1982. Print.



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