

It Isn't Easy
Parashat Lech L'cha
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When I was a child, I was introduced to the Book of Genesis not once, but several times! The reason is that, several years in a row, we began the year in Hebrew School with Genesis. Year after year, we'd read the stories that I came to love: the stories of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the stories of their adventures going here and there. Each year we would read them a bit differently.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea, for it taught us that there are different ways of reading Genesis.

For example, it wasn't until I was an adult that I was introduced to a *political* reading of the Book of Genesis. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized that, as important as Abraham, the first "Jew,"¹ is to the book, in a sense there's another really important character in the book, and that is the Land of Canaan, later to be known as the Land of Israel.

If we read, or re-read the Book of Genesis, paying close attention to the role played by the Land, we realize how central to the book's concerns the Land is.

It's easy, though, to miss that. Why? Well, think about how today's parashah, Lech L'cha, begins. God tells Abraham, who comes from Ur, in Babylonia, to go to the "land that He will show him." In a few verses we realize that that land is the Land of Canaan. So Abraham goes to the Land and moves through it. It's a beautiful moment.

But then, in the very next verse, we're told that there's a famine in the Land, and before the end of the verse, Abraham leaves the Land. He goes to Egypt. Now, you could say that this tells us something about Abraham, but I think it tells us something about the Land of Canaan. It's a tough land to live in! Life isn't easy in the Land of Canaan. It's a place that later (in the Book of Numbers) will be described as a "Land that consumes its inhabitants." (Numbers 13:32)



A few verses after leaving, Abraham does return to the Land and re-settles there. But then, again within a verse or two, we discover that the Land is not big enough for him and his nephew to dwell within it together. One of them has to leave. He offers Lot the choice, and Lot chooses to settle down in the region of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Throughout the story, God repeatedly promises Abraham the Land (see, e.g., Genesis 13:17). And he tells Abraham, again, to walk the land: north, south, east and west (Ibid., 13:13). We don't know whether Abraham literally does that, but we do know that he settles in Hebron. That is where he's living when, a few chapters later, after Sarah dies, he buys a plot of land in which to bury her, a plot in which he himself will one day be buried.

At some point Abraham asks God, "How do I know that I'm going to possess this Land?" And God says, Well, I'll tell you: your offspring will in fact leave the land. They'll be strangers in a land not theirs. In fact, they'll be enslaved for a long time; 400 years. But in the end they shall go free with great wealth. And then, God says, "The 4th generation shall return here." Got that? "The fourth generation shall return here."

Now, leaving aside whether 400 years = 4 generations, there's something that is curious about that sentence. We'll come back to that.

Clearly, this *parashah* (Torah portion) emphasizes that the descendants of Abraham will one day inherit the Land of Canaan.

Stepping back, this is clearly a political reading of this *parashah* – and one could go on and do a political reading of the entire book of Genesis, which would only reinforce this theme.

After all, Abraham's son, Isaac, almost leaves the land. He goes about as far as you can go without leaving.

Isaac's son, Jacob, eventually is forced to leave, just as Abraham was, because of famine. But when he gets down to Egypt, he makes his son Joseph promise: You must return me here! And Joseph does, burying him in the family plot in the Cave of Machpelah.

And Joseph too, before he dies, makes his brothers promise that when they or their descendants eventually leave Egypt, they will take his bones with them, and re-inter them in the Land of Canaan. (Genesis 50:25)

Sure enough, in the Book of Exodus, we're told that when Moses and the Children of Israel left Egypt, they took Joseph's bones with them. (Exodus 13:19)

And they carried the coffin containing Joseph's remains with them all through their forty-year journey through the wilderness. And if you look in the Book of Joshua (24:32) you can see that, when the people entered the Land of Israel, they fulfilled the promise: they buried the bones of Joseph in the Land. Where? In Shechem, the city known today as Nablus.

In Genesis Rabbah (79:7), Rabbi Yudan bar Simon points out that this is one of the three places in the Land where all must agree that the Jews have property rights, and can't be said to have stolen the land from anyone. Those three places are the Cave of Machpelah (because the text tells us that Abraham bought and paid for that land from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:15); the Temple in Jerusalem (because again the Bible says that David purchased the land from Arnon (I Chronicles 21:25: "So David paid Arnon 600 shekels' worth of gold for the site") and Joseph's Tomb, for , as Genesis says, "The parcel of land where he [Jacob] pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred *kesitahs*." (Genesis 33:19). And in the book of Joshua it says that "the bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred *kesitahs* from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father." (Joshua 24:32)

Of course, the argument presented in that midrash assumes that everyone holds the Bible to be accurate and authoritative, something that seems ludicrous to us, but which seemed obvious and unassailable to the rabbis.

So, not only is the political reading of this *parashah* reinforced in the rest of Genesis, but it's reinforced in the rest of the Torah, and in the rest of the Bible. It's reinforced by stressing that, even though we, the Jewish People, may be living outside of the Land – and that's been the case since we Jews arose as a People— we have a right to be there, in the Land of Israel.

Now, for over two thousand years, we Jews may have read the Bible this way, but we didn't do much to act on our supposed rights. We remained dependent, vulnerable, stateless. Living all over the world, not where we belonged, not daring

to try to return *en masse* to the Land. Yes, there were several “Back to Israel” efforts through the centuries, but it wasn’t until the Zionist revolution that we succeeded. And the rest, as they say, is history. We returned. We fought for a state of our own. We won.

And yet, the same concerns that motivated the rabbis like Yudan bar Simon in the Rabbinic period or Rashi in the medieval period to write about the need to defend our claims to the Land with gentiles who might not recognize them—those same concerns exist today.

Our rights are challenged right and left, to an absolutely absurd and frankly infuriating extent. So, if we take for instance, the three places which, according to that midrash EVERYONE should agree belong to us: lo and behold, this is a week when we recognize that that just isn’t true.

Let me rattle them off:

- 1) First, **Joseph’s Tomb**. This was just torched, set on fire by a mob. Not for the first time.
- 2) Second, the **Cave of Machpelah** in Hebron. I just learned that three days ago, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, decided that the Patriarchs’ Cave is a Muslim holy site.²

Now, that, in and of itself, is not objectionable. Of course it’s a Muslim holy site. It’s been a Jewish and Muslim holy site not just for centuries but for millennia!!!

But to declare it a Muslim holy site without also acknowledging that it’s been a Jewish holy site for an awfully long time, indeed going back well over a thousand, maybe even 1,500 or more years before Islam arose, is, well, to re-write history.³

It goes on. Consider the third of these sites, the **Temple Mount**. Even though, in the 1920s, Muslims readily acknowledged, proudly, that the Haram al Sharif is built on the site of the Temple of Solomon, that didn’t stop UNESCO from considering a resolution declaring the Kotel to be a Muslim shrine – without any mention of it being a Jewish shrine.

Outrageous.

The absurdity is that because historians are modest about the precision of our historical knowledge (the Temple might have stood here; it might have stood a few yards away), that's been taken as a sign that we Jews really don't have a claim at all, certainly not one as strong as that of the Muslims who know where the Dome of the Rock (built in 691) is, or where the Al Aksa Mosque (built in 705) is. (The reason, of course, is that both those structures are still standing!)

What we are witnessing, though not as obviously brutal as the blowing up of those ancient sites in Palmyra, is no different in its intention or its effect. I don't like to use inflammatory language, but it's an effort to wipe out evidence of our links to the Land. ⁴

There is an asymmetry here. Most Jews accept the fact that Christians and Muslims also hold the Land and certain sites within it to be holy; but it seems as though that approach is not always reciprocated.

And yet, the Land, even the Holy Land, is not the end in Judaism. It is a means to an end. We must never worship the Land. We must never make a fetish of the Land. An Israeli, *as an Israeli*, whatever his or her religious background, has the right and indeed the duty to be patriotic, but as Jews we take a more philosophical approach to our national rights. After all, we survived for two thousand years without access to the Land.

Also, already back in Genesis it was clear that other nations existed in the Land and would continue to exist. Abraham spends a lot of his time trying to get along with his non-Jewish neighbors. And even when the Jews returned, even though the Book of Joshua seems to imply that the Jews wiped out everybody who wasn't Jewish, when you turn the page to the next Book, the Book of Judges, you realize that there still are plenty of other nations living there.

And so our destiny, as Jews, is to inherit a Land that wasn't empty, isn't empty and won't ever be empty of other peoples. That's just a fact, and that fact has to be lived with.

Of course, it's absolutely intolerable to live in fear of an imminent knife attack by those seeking to resist the Jewish presence in the Land. But the reaction to that must not be transferring those "foreigners" from their homes. We must never do to others what was once – actually more than once – done to us.

And so, I read Genesis as predicting the challenging times in which Israel finds itself today: Genesis reminds us that it won't be easy. It won't ever be easy. Other peoples of the world will be there, and we'll have to deal with that.

After all, they're important to our mission.

As Abraham was told, all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. And in next week's *parashah*, God remarks that Abraham's mission is to practice righteousness and goodness. That's got to say something about how we're supposed to get along with others.

I want to come back to one line in today's *parashah*, a line that confirms the sweetness of our connection to the Land. I quoted the verse earlier: "And the fourth generation shall return." (Genesis 15:16)

The medieval commentator, Al Sheikh, (1508 – 1599, Safed) raises a question on this. The Bible says that "the fourth generation will *return*." But if they, their parents and their grandparents were born and raised and have lived outside of the Land all their lives, how can you say that they "returned"?

Al Sheikh says: the spiritual roots of every Jew are indeed within the Holy Land; thus, even one who was born outside the Land, is to be seen as returning to his or her roots when he or she reaches Israel.

I'm reminded of the famous speech that the great Jewish author Shmuel Yosef Agnon gave when he received the Nobel Prize (on December 10, 1966): "As a result of the historical catastrophe that occurred when Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish People was exiled from its Land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But I always regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem."

Let's hold onto that.

Now, as we know, two can play at that game, and Palestinians—some, at least—claim the same feelings of loyalty, the same feelings of attachment, to the Land. Let them have those feelings. But let no one deny our own claims, claims that have endured for thousands of years, since long before the birth of Muhammed (in fact, long before the birth of Jesus). We were weeping by the waters of Babylon long before there were any mosques or churches in the Holy Land, and that weeping

inspired the author of Psalm 137 to urge us never to forget Jerusalem even during our happiest hours.

Al Sheikh goes on to quote Psalm 87:5 which says, “It shall be said of Zion, [the Land of Israel], that “this one” and “that one” were born there.” He asks, “What do these words, ‘this one’ and ‘that one’ refer to?” And he quotes the answer given in the Talmud (Ketubot 85a): Both those born in the Land of Israel and those who anticipate seeing her. אחד הנולד בה ואחד המצפה לראותה

Let’s always anticipate seeing the Land.

Let’s never lose our connections with our legacy, the place of our destiny. However comfortable, however happy we may be, in places like the United States, this great land of opportunity in which we are privileged to live, let’s never forget the message of Genesis, the political reading of Genesis, that beckons us, even today.

Shabbat shalom.

¹ I am using the term “Jew,” here and below, anachronistically.

² This may or may not have happened. UNESCO declared the cave to be “an integral part of Palestine.” Several internet sites have presented this as though it were akin to declaring the cave to be an exclusively Muslim holy site, but that may not be as accurate. See, e.g., <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/51910/unesco-declares-rachels-tomb-cave-of-patriarchs-muslim-holy-sites-jerusalem/#mQfgLAqDI7eEEOJH.97> , <http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/unesco-decides-rachels-tomb-and-patriarchs-cave-are-muslim-sites/2015/10/21/> , <http://honestreporting.com/idns-10212015-unesco-israel/> , http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/unesco_votes_to_rachels_tomb_the_tomb_of_the_patriarchs_in_hebron_as_muslim , and http://community.beliefnet.com/go/thread/view/59723/30604145/UNESCO:_Tomb_of_t_he_Patriarchs_and_Rachels_Tomb_Are_Islamic_Holy_Sites . I want to thank Larry Denenberg for drawing this distinction to my attention.



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As a colleague of mine, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, puts it: “King Herod the Great, who died in the year 4 BCE, was the first to build a structure over the site revered *even then* as the tombs of all our patriarchs and matriarchs except for Rachel (the story of whose death on the road to Bethlehem is told explicitly in the Torah). Later on, in Byzantine times, the Christian rulers of the Eastern Roman Empire built a church over the ruins of Herod’s structure. Later still, in the seventh century, when the Land of Israel came under Arab control, the church was demolished and a mosque was built there instead. In the twelfth century, the Crusaders threw the Muslims out and refurbished the mosque, turning it back into a church. Nevertheless, the place remained a place of Jewish pilgrimage. In October of 1166, Maimonides himself came to worship there, praying inside the tomb and kneeling to kiss the graves he found there. A few years later, the great Jewish traveler and diarist, Benjamin of Tudela came to call. Later on, the Muslims vanquished the Crusaders and turned the structure back into a mosque, formally forbidding Jews to come closer than the seventh step leading down from the front entrance to the street. And that is where things stood until 1967, when Hebron came under Israeli rule and the ancient Jewish right to worship at the tombs of our patriarchs and matriarchs was restored *without* the parallel rights of Muslims being abrogated. Indeed, the local Muslim Religious Council, called the *waqf*, was granted control over most of the property, with the Israeli authorities serving only to safeguard the rights of Jewish visitors to enter and prayer without being molested or bothered. And that is where things stand. Or rather where they stood until UNESCO this week took it upon itself to declare the Tomb of the Patriarchs to be a Muslim holy site, thereby choosing ... to ignore the fact that it has been a holy site for Jews for centuries longer than there even *were* Muslims in the world (King Herod predated the Prophet by about seven centuries). ... Yes, Muslims have worshiped there for centuries. But the site was at its inception a Jewish holy site to which Jews have always flocked. And that was the detail UNESCO chose willfully to ignore as though it were an annoying detail rather than a crucial piece of historical reality.”

⁴See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/rubble-palmyra-syria-isis/403921/> .