

An Eternal Bond  
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“When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it...” These are the opening words of this morning’s Torah portion.

If I were to just say that sentence without identifying where it came from, it would be easy to conclude that we are not reading something from a contemporary newspaper. The mention of the Lord your God is a dead giveaway. But let’s omit that part for a moment, and just focus on the very first words: “When you enter the land...”

Some may think it refers to something that transpired in the last century, about the settlement of the Jews in the land of Israel. But as we know, although there may be parallels, it does not describe a recent event.

We must never forget, and we need to remind ourselves and others, it refers to the prayers of gratitude the people of Israel were to recite upon returning to the land of Israel with Joshua after 400 years of Egyptian bondage. The words come from the Bible, and are at least 2500 years old, if not older. They refer to what happened over 3,000 years ago.

The Palestinians intend to present a proposal to the United Nations this week that will surely be approved, asking for recognition of its declaration of statehood. How appropriate then that our Torah reading reaffirms that the connection between the people of Israel and the land of Israel is not recent, and not a result of any action by any international body. It is not arbitrary or contrived. It is not the result of a desire to assuage any feelings of guilt. To put it in positive terms: it is as inherent, intrinsic, natural and long lasting as the association of the Chinese people with China -- which reminds me of a joke I haven’t told in a while.

A Chinese guy and a Jew are comparing notes as to how old each people is. The Chinese guy proudly says that the Chinese civilization is over 3,000 years old. The Jewish guy says, “That’s nothing. The Jews have been around for almost 4,000 years.” So the Chinese guy asks his Jewish friend, “If you have been around for 4,000 years, then where did your people eat for 1,000 years?!”

Our association with the land of Israel goes back further, with the possible exception of certain Asian nations than any other land and people. The Torah is teeming with references and testifies in countless places to this historic reality. So even if we leave out any reference to the land being given to the people of Israel by God, the historical reality of the ancient presence cannot be denied.

And yet there are those who seek to portray Israel and the Jewish state and the Jewish people as interlopers, as intruders not entitled to its eternal homeland.

As Melanie Phillips, British Jewish author and columnist for the English paper, *The Daily Mail* stated recently in a lecture in Jerusalem, the conflict in the Middle East is not about the division of land between two equal and rival claims, but about an existential threat to Israel. She explains that the historical clock starts either in 1967, when Israel committed what is seen by some as the crime of occupying Palestinian land, or in 1948, when, as others see it, "European Jews with no connection to the land were parachuted into Palestine as a result of Holocaust guilt and drove out the indigenous Palestinian Muslims, whose land it had been since time immemorial."

Phillips explained, "Every part of that story is untrue. The problem is that not only do people in the West not know it's untrue, but even many Diaspora Jews and Israelis don't know it's untrue."

Instead, she said, Israel should be telling the world that "the Jewish claim to the land was recognized by the international community after World War I as an overwhelming claim from historical right, and that as a result, a binding international treaty required Jews to be settled throughout what is now Israel and the disputed territories."

Motivated by this week's Torah portion, I suggest we go one step further and assert the extent of how ancient this connection is. In the current climate, Israel is put on the defensive and forced to justify its very existence.

Somehow Turkey has become the great defender of the rights of the downtrodden by sending a ship armed to the teeth to break a legal, justified blockade of Hamas governed Gaza. They are indignant and demand an apology from Israel for the audacious act of its soldiers defending themselves for stopping a vessel headed for Gaza filled with weaponry to be used against the Jewish state.

Rather than be on the defensive, the time has come to raise and ask tough questions of those hostile to Israel: Why did Turkey send this ship in the first place? What would they do if the situation were reversed and weapons were being sent to the Kurds? Or perhaps even more importantly, why are they engaged in slaughtering Kurds who seek their independence? And when do they intend to end their 40 year old occupation of parts of Cyprus?

Why is it that those who so readily denounce the Jewish state and call it an apartheid state, in spite of the fact that Arabs are granted citizenship, serve in its Parliament and receive benefits, such as social security and health care from the Jewish state say nothing when the Palestinian Authority blatantly declares that Jews will not be allowed to live in the Palestinian state?

Why is it that at a time when the agreements that the state of Israel has signed with Egypt and Turkey are held together by a fragile thread, and the threat of their being abrogated is held over Israel's head like the sword of Damocles, there are those clamoring and calling for Israel to make even greater concessions to equally authoritarian unstable rulers?

I don't usually like to make predictions, especially about the future. But this week Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas will present his case to the United Nations, as will Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And it won't really matter what either will say. Netanyahu will be cogent, logical and coherent. He will rationally explain what concessions Israel will be willing to make, but the minds of the nations that comprise the bloc of Arab and Moslem nations in the United Nations will have their minds made up already.

But let us keep in mind what we heard in synagogue this Shabbat, that upon entering the land of Israel, several thousand years ago, the people were commanded to bring an offering to the priest of the Temple. They would recount the Jewish historical experience of having wandered in Egypt and of the oppression we experienced there in a strange land until we were brought to this place and given this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And then they would say in Hebrew, the very same language of modern day Israel, "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign to us." That bond is eternal and binding.

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