

What Makes the Land Holy? Parashat VaYera

The story of the first family of the Jewish people continues with today's Torah reading. Abraham's wife, Sarah, who has accompanied him throughout his journeys, who has been a helpmate to him, and who has been by his side throughout all that has transpired since their departure from their homeland in Haran until now, dies. Sarah is not just a marginal figure, but at the very center of the saga: giving advice, counsel, guidance, and even directives to Abraham along the way. Abraham, being a good Jewish husband, listens to her voice. Their years of wandering have brought them to the land of Canaan, where Abraham negotiates the purchase of a piece of land in Hebron to be used as a burial plot for his wife and for the rest of the family. In so doing, he makes it clear that from the moment he first heard the call to leave his homeland and come to the land of Israel, his fate, and the fate of his descendants will forever be tied to this land.

For Jews it becomes holy land.

Since I just returned yesterday from a trip to Israel, and in part inspired by a debate in the Middle Ages between Yehudah HaLevi and Moses Maimonides over what it is that makes the Land of Israel holy, I want to share a few vignettes with you about this notion: what makes the land holy.

In Jewish tradition a cemetery is hallowed ground. In Israel there are few places more hallowed than Mt. Herzl, the military cemetery that is likened to our Arlington National Cemetery. Every grave tells a story, and on this visit, we stopped at the final resting place of Nahshon Wachsman, an Israeli soldier kidnapped by Palestinian terrorists, who was killed when Israeli commandos tried unsuccessfully to rescue him. Next to him lies one of the soldiers who died trying to save him, two men whose personal stories and whose lives were very different. But the thing I will remember is the elderly gentleman standing off to the side, the uncle of a young man buried at Mt. Herzl, who said as we were leaving, "*Todah shebatem*: Thank you for coming. Thank you for not forgetting us."

It is memory that makes a land sacred.

In the Golan Heights we visited the site known as the Valley of the Tears, and heard Avigdor Kahalani explain how he led an Israeli tank battalion during the Yom Kippur War. He sat before the battleground where in October of 1973, he commanded a platoon of 40 Israeli tanks who somehow succeeded in holding off 500 Syrian tanks during the Yom Kippur War from overtaking the north. His bravery and determination, his fearlessness, ability to inspire his soldiers and unwillingness to give up made the land where he fought sacred ground.

We visited the secure, below ground, Situation Room of the Foreign Ministry where we were briefed by Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, as well as the situation room on an army base where young Israeli female soldiers take 4 hour shifts monitoring the border with the Gaza strip on computer screens and who dispatch soldiers to trouble spots. They are protecting the land, not just because it is sacred, but because they are protecting the lives of Israel's citizens.

The town of Sderot had been subjected to shelling of 9,000 rockets over an eight year period from the Gaza strip. As a result, children cannot play outdoors. They have 15 seconds to run and take shelter when an alarm is sounded. To address this problem the Jewish National Fund, the JNF, built an indoor, covered playground, so kids can play and have birthday parties without having to worry that they have to find shelter and take cover within 15 seconds. I remember when I first heard about the project – I

thought they were crazy and it couldn't be done. But within 8 – 9 months funds were raised, and it was built and operational. This beautiful, colorful indoor playground is sacred ground.

Israel is filled not just with places of conflict or sadness, but also places that reflect the Israeli spirit of innovation, the vitality of Israel. We visited Tefen Industrial park in the north, where the saying, "necessity is the mother of invention" is true. Steph Wertheimer spoke about his experience coming to Israel as a child after escaping Nazi Germany. In the 1970's, after France refused to sell spare parts to Israel for its planes, encouraged by its leaders, Wertheimer expanded his work and started a company called Iscar to make precision metal parts. A few years ago Warren Buffet invested and obtained 80 % ownership in it for \$4 billion. This industrial park, which did not miss a day of production, even as rockets were being shelled upon it unrelentingly by Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 is holy ground.

It is said that water is the next oil. And Israel is leading the way in this regard. Israel recycles 80% of its waste water and uses it for agricultural purposes. Spain, the country that is in second place, recycles 17%.

At the offices and visitor center of A Better Place we saw how Shai Agassi is trying to wean the world away from its dependence on oil by developing an electric battery operated car, which we test drove. It has the added benefit of no exhaust since there are no fumes, and therefore, no pollution. The grid and system should be operational by early next year. You might not normally think of hi-tech places as being sacred ground, but while we were there, I thought to myself, these sites are sacred land.

Needless to say, the traditional places, such as the City of David, where archaeologists believe David built his palace, the Wall on Friday night, with thousands of Jews are praying, as well as a small Sephardic synagogue in Yemin Moshe are all places that evoke a sense of holiness. But more than these places, including the city of Tzefat, where our mystics wrote and came up with the Kabbalat Shabbat service, and where we heard a lecture about Jewish mysticism, the sanctity is in the people and in their spirit.

In Afulah, a sleepy town in the north, with a large number of immigrants from Ethiopia and elsewhere, we saw a program sponsored by our Federation designed to help children from impoverished backgrounds advance, for in Israel they take the principle "no child left behind" seriously. A few years ago Danny Glicksberg was speaking with his uncle of his plans to travel to the Far East following his military service. His uncle said to him, that if our generation would have been like yours, we never would have built the State of Israel. Stung by the criticism, he decided to do something about it and founded a program called Ayalim to help strengthen underserved towns in the Negev and Gallilee. Supported by the Federation the pioneering spirit of the early pioneers is evident, as young Israelis volunteer for a year of service before the army, or for several years after the army to live and work with underprivileged families in these communities. Today they have more applicants than positions and must turn away hundreds of Israelis who want to participate in this extraordinary program.

I would prefer not to conclude on an ominous note, but one message that we heard consistently, wherever we went, whether it was from former Ambassador to the UN Dore Gold, or Deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon, or others, was of the danger posed by allowing Iran to continue its march towards acquiring nuclear technology and knowhow. To preserve the sacred land, and the people who live on it, the problem must be recognized as jeopardizing not just Israel, but the security of the entire world.

Whenever I tour Israel, I think of the song sung by the early *halutzim*, the pioneers who came to Israel. “*Anu banu artza livnot u’lehebanot*: We have come to Israel to build and to be built.” The same is true for those who go to Israel today. You must visit there, for you come away, as did our group of 30, touched and inspired, with an appreciation of some of what it is that makes Israel a holy land today, as much as it was in the time of Abraham.

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