

The relationship between Judaism and the State of Israel

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayetze*, God tells the patriarch Jacob:

And, behold, the Lord stood beside him, and said: 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land where you lie, I will give to you and to your seed. [Genesis 28:13]

The land in question is, of course, the Land of Israel. That promise is made over and over in the Torah. Let us review some of these passages. First, God tells the patriarch Abraham:

I will give this land [of Canaan] to your seed. [Genesis 12:7]

All the land that you see, I give to you and to your seed forever. [Genesis 13:15]

Arise, and walk through the land, in the length of it and in the breadth of it, for I give it to you. [Genesis 13:17]

I am the Lord, who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land as a possession. [Genesis 15:7]

I give this land to your seed, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. [Genesis 15:18]

I give to you, and to your seed after you, all the land... of Canaan, as an everlasting possession. [Genesis 17:8]

Then, God tells Abraham's son Isaac:

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your seed I will give all these lands, fulfilling the oath that I swore to Abraham, your father. [Genesis 26:3]

Then, God tells Isaac's son Jacob:

The land on which you are lying, I will give to you and to your seed. [Genesis 28:13]

When Jacob has to flee from Esau and go to Haran, God says to him:

Remember: I am with you and I will protect you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. [Genesis 28:15]

After the Exodus, God tells the Israelites:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God. [Leviticus 25:38]

Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. [Deuteronomy 1:7]

Every spot on which your foot treads shall be yours. Your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon, and from the river (the Euphrates) to the [Mediterranean] Sea. [Deuteronomy 11:23]

Later, the Book of Numbers [Numbers 34:1-12] has very detailed boundaries of the Promised Land:

- The Southern boundary is from the lower Dead Sea southwest to the middle of the Negev desert, then northwest towards Egypt's Wadi-el-Arish at the sea;
- The Western boundary is the Mediterranean Sea, from Wadi-el-Arish to Byblos, in northern Lebanon;
- The Northern boundary is 100 miles from Byblos to a point inside Syria, east of Damascus;
- The Eastern boundary is from that point in Syria to 50 miles south, then west to the southern end of Sea of Galilee, then the Jordan river and the Dead Sea.

The modern State of Israel was founded on three independent pillars: theological, historical, and humanitarian. We have just reviewed, the first, the theological pillar: The land was given to the Jews by God. The return to Zion is a recurrent theme in Jewish liturgy. Every Passover seder ends with the line: "Leshana habba-a birushalayim -- Next year in Jerusalem".

The second pillar is the historical pillar. For 1,500 years, Jews were the vast majority in the land of Israel, until the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70 and exiled most of the Jews as slaves. Up to that point, most of that time the Jews had an independent state ruled by Jews. Most of the early Zionists may have been secular, but this historical, or nationalistic, argument was important to them. Because of that, they rejected the British offer of a corner of Uganda in 1898.

The third pillar is the humanitarian pillar: A safe haven for Jews everywhere. Israel has a "Law of Return", guaranteeing rights and citizenship to any Jew who desires to emigrate there. The humanitarian argument was the selling argument to convince the world to agree to the state, especially after the Holocaust. With such a long history of vicious

persecution, Jews have the right to a national home, where they can go in times of trouble.

The claim to the land "from the Nile to the Euphrates" is sustainable under the theological pillar, but not under the historical pillar. Different Jews support different arguments, but few Jews reject all three. These three arguments appeal to different constituencies.

Other, less compelling arguments have been advanced.

One is: Who "deserves" the land? Gentiles have dominated it for 2,000 years and have let it run down. It was always a dusty backwater of their empires. Historical travelers have always reported a desolate, hostile, impoverished land. The Bible calls it the "land of milk and honey", and that's what it was when the Jews were in charge. When the Jews returned, they made the desert bloom.

Note also that this argument -- who "deserves" the land? -- was advanced to justify the worldwide European conquests of centuries past. Indeed, people of European stock are still the ruling majority in these conquests, such as the Americas, Australia, etc.

Another argument is "Might makes right". The Jews fought for the land of Israel, and won it on the battlefield. Note that this argument was always the main one for most of recorded history.

What about the Palestinian Arabs who live there today? Several points:

First, a claim is a claim. No matter what the present situation on the ground, the legal owner has a valid claim. If you unknowingly live in stolen property, the law says you must still give it back, and be out the money. But the Israelis are not expelling anybody: There are 1.7 million Arabs living within 1967 Israel, and they live a better life than any other Arabs in the Middle East.

Second, even if length-of-stay is the criterion, Jews have more of a claim than Arabs. Jews were the majority in the Holy Land longer than Islam has been in existence. Many Palestinian Arabs do not have deep roots there -- one or two generations at most. Some were even imported by the British

for a so-called "balance" with Zionist immigrants, as documented by historians. [E.g., Joan Peters' *From Time Immemorial*]

Third, should the Arabs be expelled? No. Peaceful coexistence with non-Jews in the Land is an old story. God said in the Torah to expel or even kill the idolaters who lived in the land of Israel, but this was not done. The Bible tells us that Jews lived with non-Jews, intermarried with them, and even adopted their idolatrous practices, much to the chagrin of the prophets. Obviously, that is what most people wanted then, and that is what most Israelis want today.

Are the Gentiles in Israel to be mistreated, second-class citizens? No. The Bible says 36 times: "Love the stranger, for you were a stranger in the Land of Egypt."

Fourth, Jews must be completely in charge of security. Moshe Dayan once said: "Given the choice between peace and security, we'll take security." This reflects what most Israelis think. The third pillar of Israel, the "safe haven", is paramount in Israel's mind. For 2,000 years, the security of Jews was entrusted to others, and the result was the Holocaust, Crusades, Inquisition, and other massacres.

What about a Palestinian State? Looking at the current violence and the degree of Palestinian hatred of Jews, there is little doubt that such a state would be a base for the destruction of Israel. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, and in exchange it got Hamas terrorism and rockets thrown at its civilian population. Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon in 2000, and in exchange it got Hezbollah terrorism and rockets thrown at its civilian population. It would be suicidal for Israel to assume Judea and Samaria would be any different if they withdrew from them.

Besides, there are already two independent Palestinian states today. One is Gaza. The other is Jordan, an invention of the British, which used to be one unit with what is today Israel. In that country, a minority of Hashemites rules a majority of Palestinians.

Finally, Palestinians have always said they were in favor of a single large Islamic Arab nation with a single powerful leader. That being so, why should they want a state of their own, to add to the 21 Arab states that already exist today?

In conclusion, the Land of Israel is burnt into the Jewish consciousness, the Jewish psyche, the Jewish soul, and it cannot leave it. In the words of the psalmist:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand wither;
Let my tongue stick to the roof of my palate
If I stop thinking of you,
If I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
Even at my happiest hour. [Psalms 137:5-6]

Shabbat shalom.