

The Religious Significance of the State of Israel

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I would like to discuss the religious significance of the State of Israel. This contrasts with the popular political explanation for the State, namely, that Israel is necessary as a refuge for Jews from Gentile persecution. The Holocaust experience proved to Jews in the most tragic way that the Enlightenment's promise of liberty, equality and fraternity was false. Jews emerged from the extermination camps with the firm conviction that they would never be secure without self-determination and sovereignty that would give them the means to defend themselves. Hence the justification for the Jewish State.

One should not minimize the importance of the physical protection that the State of Israel provides Jews. It has transformed much of Jewish culture and psychology, in addition to saving Jewish lives. Nevertheless, while it is true that physical survival is a great value in Judaism, this political argument has two defects. First, in America Jews have achieved a great deal of security in a non-Jewish polity—some would even say greater security than the Jews who live in Jerusalem with the horrible risk of terror striking at any time.

More importantly to a religious Jew, Herzl and political Zionists reverse the correct order of things. Political Zionists believed that the critical Jewish problem was persecution in the Diaspora; its solution was for Jews to live in their own state in the Land of Israel. Security for Jews would be achieved with their own country, and Herzl's dream was to build something like Vienna (or Austria) on the Mediterranean. Then Jews would be 'normal' like all other peoples. This proved empirically incorrect (life in Israel is anything but normal), and it also inverts the biblical narrative of Jewish life on the Land. According to the Bible, Israel is not the result of persecution from exile. Rather, it is the natural state of Jewish life, and it is (improper) life in the Land that is the cause—not the result—of exile and persecution. The Bible posits that if Jews violate their covenant with God by adopting pagan practices in the Holy Land, they will be exiled. It is also clear that return to God (*teshuvah*) will be the cause of Jews returning home. In Leviticus 18 God warns that:

All the nations which I cast out [of the Land] before you were defiled by these practices, and the Land was defiled. I punish iniquity and the Land vomits out her inhabitants. Therefore keep My statutes and My judgments and do not commit any of these abominations, neither any of your nation, nor any stranger that lives with you; all these abominations men of the Land have done before you and the Land was defiled. [Therefore do not do them] so the Land does not vomit you out also if you defile it. (18:24-27)

And in Deuteronomy:

When all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have set before you, you shall call them to mind among the nations into which the Lord your God has driven you. You shall return to the Lord your God and shall obey his voice according to all that I command you this day—

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you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul. Then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. (30:1-4)

According to biblical history, Jewish life in the Land of Israel is the normal state of affairs, not the solution for exile and persecution. If so, there must be a different narrative of Jewish history and a different understanding of Israel for the religious Jew. I would like to present one person's understanding of the biblical covenant and why the Land is an essential component of that covenant.

The Jewish people is born with God's call to Abraham:

The Lord said to Avram, "Go out of your country and from your kin, from your father's house to the Land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those you curse you; through you all the families of the earth will be blessed...And the Lord appeared to Avram and said, "To your seed will I give this Land." (Genesis 12:1-3,7)

This is the beginning of the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham and Abraham's descendants—the Jewish people. The covenant is a holy contract, and as in every contract, each party assumes benefits in return for responsibilities. For Abraham, the benefits of this covenant are clear: blessing, nationhood, and title to the Land. But yet no obligations or responsibilities are stipulated. Note also that Abraham and his descendants are destined to play a role in universal human history ("Through you all of the families of the earth will be blessed.") The covenant demands that Abraham's children not be a parochial or ghetto people, but a central influence on human history.¹

It is also critical that immediately after hearing the terms of the covenant, Abraham builds an altar and calls the name of the Lord (v. 7-9). This is the first time of many when the covenant is articulated. The next instance is chapter 13, when Abraham again responds by calling the name of the Lord, i.e. makes the presence of God known to the people around him. In Christian terms, it is "bearing witness" to the presence and majesty of God in the world. Although this phrase seems Christian, it is authentic to Jewish scriptures. The Talmudic rabbis said that, "before Abraham, God was called "God of the heavens;" after Abraham people called Him "God of the heavens *and the earth*." Abraham was to be the vehicle to show the world that God also dwells on earth and is a partner in human affairs. That is the mission of the covenant thus far.

Throughout the Torah, every time there is a redefinition or reassertion of the covenant, the gift of the Land appears as a central condition. The Torah does not tell us why the Land is essential, yet it cannot be denied that the texts treat it as an

¹ This universal dimension of the covenant is reiterated in Genesis 27:13-14, when God passes the covenantal destiny to Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Here too it is conjoined with affirmation of title to the Land.

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intrinsic part of the covenant. Logically, this is quite perplexing. Why could not Abraham fulfill this divine mission in Ur of Mesopotamia or in Haran—or why, thousands of years later, cannot his descendants carry out this mission in New York? If Abraham and his people contract a holy covenant with the Creator of the universe, a God Who is not physical and therefore not limited to any specific space, and if Abraham's mission is to teach that this omnipresent God is available to all the families of the earth in all places, then a specific geographic location seems irrelevant to this spiritual task.

In Genesis 17, the Torah provides an initial glimpse of what the covenant God demands of Abraham (“Walk before me and be whole”), but is Genesis 18 where we see the first specific definition of how Abraham and his descendants are obligated to live and the way they are to bring God's name into the world. Before God sets out to punish the cities of Sodom and Gemorah, for some reason He decides to engage Abraham in his decision:

Shall I hide from Abraham what I intend to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and righteousness, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He (previously) spoke to him. (v.17-19)

Destined to be the covenantal partner with God, Abraham stands obligated to “keep the way of the Lord,” which is “to do justice (*tsedeqah*) and righteousness (*mishpat*).” This is the primary way that the covenant is to be manifested, and the hallmark characteristic of covenantal commitment. Abraham and the Jewish people are commanded to be teachers and doers of justice and righteousness. This explains why God chooses to inform Abraham about His planned destruction of the residents of the two wicked cities. God is testing Abraham to determine if he is truly committed to justice and is willing to fight the injustice of punishing any innocent persons in the cities. The failure to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty is the heart of retributive injustice. Were Abraham was not so committed, perhaps he would have been disqualified as the father of the covenantal people. As we know, Abraham passed the test by protesting God's plan and challenging God with an audacious moral argument: “Heaven forbid that You destroy the righteous with the wicked” (v. 25), and finally, “Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (v.26). This is what distinguished Abraham from Noah, who did not evince any concern to God whether innocent people would perish in the flood. It also explains why Noah never merited becoming the father of the covenantal people and why rabbinic tradition was skeptical regarding whether Noah was truly righteousness.

The book of Genesis is a family story. This family becomes a nation in the Book of Exodus. And the covenant is also transformed from a contract with a clan to one with a people, i.e. it becomes a national covenant. This occurs most explicitly when the Jewish people stood at Sinai immediately before experiencing revelation:

Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying: “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell *Benei Yisrael*:

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You have seen how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to Me. Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure from among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (19:3-6)

This is the moment of election, and it is the statement of the covenant with the Jewish people *as a people, rather than with individuals*. The nation as a collective assumes the same destiny and mission as did Abraham, namely, to be witnesses to the presence of God on earth by living a life of holiness. Election is responsibility, not superiority, and it is not always a blessing for the Jewish people. They will not be a *normal* people like all other people (as Herzl dreamed), but a people with special responsibilities and painful punishments that are part of a unique destiny in history.

The quest for holiness is not confined to the Jewish covenantal mission. Holiness is a fundamental spiritual sensibility, necessary to all those who seek transcendent meaning. Thus every spiritual tradition has a conception of holiness. The Torah spells out its own idea of holiness and its program for the holy life in the Book of Leviticus. In chapter 19:1-2 God formally commands the Jewish people with the obligation to lead a holy life:

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to all the congregation of *Benei Yisrael* and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'"

The Hebrew is instructive: "*Qedoshim tehiyu*." The command is issued in the plural form to emphasize that the *mitsvah* is directed to the nation as a collectivity, not to individual members. The Jewish people *as a people* are charged to mirror God through the holy life. This may be the source of a major distinction between Jewish and Christian theologies. Jews do not talk of individual salvation. When we are faithful to the biblical narrative, we do not find the promise of individual redemption. There is national salvation and return and the covenant is played out on a collective level.

Hence it is the Jewish people that must exhibit holiness through their behavior in society, and verses 9-18 of that chapter detail how holiness is achieved:

You shall leave them (i.e. the crops of the corners of the field) for the poor and the stranger. (v. 10)

You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. (v. 11)

You shall not defraud your peer, nor rob him; the wages of a daily worker shall not stay with you over night. (v. 13)

You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind (v. 14)

You shall not do any unrighteousness in judgment; you shall not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the strong. In righteousness you shall judge your peer. (v. 15)

You shall not be a talebearer amongst your people. You shall not stand by idly in the blood of your peer. (v. 16)

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but surely rebuke your neighbor and commit no sin on his account. (v. 17)

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You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against your people,
but you shall love your peer as yourself. (v. 18)

In this text all manifestations of holiness are in a social context. *Qedushah* is achieved by Jews relating to each other as a community, as a people. Holiness is constituted by the quality of interpersonal relations and action. This text is concerned with what values, norms and standards of interpersonal behavior exist in the community. According to the medieval rabbinic authority Nachmanides (Ramban), those values of holiness are encapsulated by the concluding generic *mitsvah*, "Love your peer as yourself." What kind of society is a holy society? Is it one where there is an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, or is one where that disparity is minimized? Is it one where people are considered finite commodities to be used, or where each person regards his neighbor as having intrinsic sanctity because he is created in God's image? Is it one where the less fortunate are abused by power, or where law protects their dignity? Is it a society of intense competition causing loss of dignity and alienation of one person from another, or one where people feel deep identification and responsibility for each other? To be a holy people means to construct a society in which the biblical norms of behavior are rooted in the society's essential structure so that those values become society's primary ethos.

The Bible articulates another value at the end of chapter 19: "If a stranger lives with you in the Land, do not oppress him. He shall be like a native. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt." (v. 33) This is no insignificant part of the Torah, or some isolated passage that clashes with the biblical corpus *per se*. There is one commandment that appears in various guises no less than 36 times. It is the *mitzvah* to avoid oppressing the vulnerable in society, i.e. the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor. The ideal of the holy society not a monolithically Jewish society, but a society in which Gentiles are welcomed, and the dignity of all disadvantaged persons is respected.

The end of the Five Books of Moses occurs after the generation that committed itself to the divine covenant revealed at Sinai has died. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' last address to the children of those who left Egypt, his last opportunity to teach them prior to turning over his leadership to Joshua who will lead them into the Land. God tells Moses that it is necessary to reiterate the covenant to the new generation and have them affirm their commitment to the covenant of their parents:

Stand here by Me and I will speak to you about all the commandments, the statutes and the judgments that you shall teach them, so that they may observe them *in the Land that I gave them to possess*. You shall keep and do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn away to the right or to the left. But you shall walk in all the ways that the Lord has commanded you, so that you may live and be well and *lengthen your days on the Land* that you possess. This is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments that the Lord your God commanded to teach you so you will fear the Lord your God to keep all His statutes and His commandments that I command you, and your son, and your son's son all the days of your life....Hear O Israel and take care to do it, so that it will be well with you and

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that you increase as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you *in the Land that flows with milk and honey.* (5:28 – 6:3)

Here again the Land appears as essential to the divine biblical mission. We are logically forced to conclude that life on the Land is constitutive and therefore intrinsic to the covenantal idea of the Jewish people.

If holiness is achieved by constructing a society according to the values the Torah enumerates in Lev. 19, then one must have the control to determine the values of the society. Building a society based specific values—one that mirrors the biblical dream—requires that Jews be in a position to fashion the laws, institutions and culture of that society. This is only possible when they have the autonomy to live according to their dream. To have the impact on humanity that God and His covenant promise, Jews must be able to set their social norms. Even as a minority in the wonderfully benevolent country of America, the Jewish people, *qua* people, have only minimal ability to shape society and influence culture. True self-determination has little to do with persecution and much more to do with sovereignty and majority influence. As the Bible correctly understood, this has proven impossible in exile. All this is because *the covenant is addressed to a people, not to individuals*. In other words, only national independence can realize the biblical dream. (Of course, as even secular political Zionists understand today, statehood is but a necessary condition for redemption, not a sufficient one.)

The issue for the Bible, therefore, is not whether the dust of the Land of Israel is holy, or whether the Land has unique metaphysical properties. It is about the possibility of shaping a society where covenantal ideals can inform actual behavior and become the common social norm. In this sense, the correct political conditions are indispensable to realizing the spiritual vision. That is the biblical meaning of the Land and sovereign freedom. This nexus is something Christian theology has a hard time understanding, since from the time of Origen it tended to metaphorize the Land of Israel, and substitute for it, “the body of Christ.”

What will the society to look like when the covenantal destiny is achieved? What is the messianic vision, the dream of the “end of days,” when holiness suffuses the world and the Jewish mission is fulfilled? The prophet Micah describes the fulfillment of the covenant as follows:

In the end of days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills. And peoples shall stream onto it. And many nations shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob so that He will teach us His ways and we will walk in His path. For the Torah shall go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” He shall judge between many peoples, and decide concerning strong nations far off. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore. But every man shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make him afraid, for the mouth

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of the Lord of hosts has spoken it. Let all people walk, everyone in the name of his god and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever. (4:1-5)

This is the vision of universal recognition of God's authority and obedience to His ways, of peace for all, of personal and national security. Micah concludes with one additional startling claim, the assertion of theological pluralism: "Let all people walk in the name of his god....." There is no mass conversion to one universal religion or church, only recognition and tolerance of each nation's right to understand God on its own terms. The whole world is neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor Moslem. Jerusalem is a place of social and religious diversity, not a monolithic Jewish society where everyone calls God by the same name. Jerusalem is a place where Jews and Gentiles coexist in harmony with each other, respecting each other, and worshiping along side each other while they are faithful to their respective spiritual traditions.

This is the magnificent vision of the covenant. Jerusalem, the Land, and by extension all the earth is to be a place where Jews, Christians, Moslems, indeed all people, live in dignity and worship faithfully. Religion is not a zero-sum game, where one group attains dignity at the cost of the others. Jews are charged by God somehow to bring about this ideal state of affairs, to be the agents "through whom all of the families of the earth shall be blessed." And Christians who see themselves as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant also participate in this divine responsibility.

Let us ponder the significance of Israel, particularly in the heart of the Middle East. What role has the State of Israel played in human religious and cultural history? On a theological level, it was the reality of the State of Israel that forced a change in Christian theology. The traditional Christian doctrine of contempt, which originated in early Church history with Augustine, taught that God decreed Jews to remain homeless and humiliated as punishment for their rejection of Jesus. This doctrine could not be maintained after the Jews in fact returned to their biblical homeland in 1948. The establishment of the State of Israel constituted a powerful empirical refutation of this thesis that has caused so much suffering and hatred throughout the ages. Ultimately, after much soul-searching, the Christian world recognized Israel and thereby implicitly rejected the old doctrine. This has enormous theological consequences, for it implies that the Jewish covenant can no longer be seen as an "old" covenant, but a living one. It means that Judaism remains a valid path to God for Jews.

To the Moslem world, Israel as a sovereign Jewish state represents the possibility of non-Moslem legitimacy and equality in *Dar Al Islam*. This is new and threatening to traditional Islam. Orientalists agree that there has never been a concept of equality for non-Moslems in traditional Arab society. Jews and Christians have always been considered second-class citizens, "*dhimmis*", who are sometime protected and sometime abased, but never equal in law or social status to Moslems. This explains why there is such fierce rejection of Israel by the Arabs throughout the Middle East. It is not merely—not even primarily—a territorial dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. To Moslems in Mecca, Teheran, and Cairo, Israel represents the end to exclusive monolithic control of the Middle East by Moslems, the end to the

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traditional Islamic conception of politics and religious superiority in that part of the world.

After the Holocaust, Jews had the audacity to demand that they not be second-class citizens, dependent on the benevolence of others for their fate. They understood that the only way Jews could be secure and could possibly realize their biblical dream was with sovereignty. As such Israel represents the principle of pluralism in the Middle East. It is the ongoing test of whether a non-Moslem can have equality, whether he does not need to be subordinate to Moslem sufferance and whether he can take responsibility for his own security and well-being.

Jews and Christians share a common challenge in the Middle East. Can we live with equality and dignity together with the overwhelming majority of Moslems in the region? The ideological and religious question regarding the tragic conflict is precisely this: Will the Middle East be a monolithic, monist world in which only Moslems have legitimacy and respectful place, or will it be the location of Micah's dream where everyone lives in dignity, security and peace?

Christians are suffering horribly today in the Middle East. Most who have the means to leave are doing so, primarily because of Islamic intolerance. If Israel makes it in the Middle East, i.e. if the principle of non-Moslem legitimacy and equality is accepted in the region because Israel as a Jewish State is accepted, then Christians too will be more easily accepted and their rights, interests and welfare will become more secure. The real battle is not between Islam and Christianity, or between Moslems and Jews, but between the extremists with a monistic vision and the moderates with Micah's pluralistic dream. Israel is the front line of the cultural and moral war that will determine whether the Middle East will be a place of monistic intolerance or pluralistic blessing. That is why the conflict is so great, why it transcends the Israeli and Palestinian communities to vitally affect all Jews and Christians—indeed all who cherish freedom, religious liberty and human dignity.

As Christians and Jews who believe in messianic redemption, we are obligated to believe in Micah's dream and to work to help it become a reality. We are not allowed to despair and fall prey to skepticism born confining our vision to the brutal politics of the day. Like Queen Esther in Persia, perhaps God has put us in these painful circumstances of raging violence that murders so of God's Images and breaks so many hearts, for us to work for Micah's vision. Somehow we must create the possibility for Jews, Christians and Moslems, Bhuddists, Hindus and all peoples to each call God in his own name, and for the peoples of the region to beat their swords into ploughshares and transform their instruments of destruction into vessels of creativity and blessing. That is the challenge of the covenant and with God's help, the spiritual role that the State of Israel can play in human history.

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