



Our Tie to Eretz Yisrael: Devine Right or National Destiny?

Parashat Lekh L'kha, Genesis 12:1-17:26 | By Mark Greenspan

“Israel” by Martin S. Cohen (pp. 339) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

Our connection to the land of Israel is religious and spiritual. Not only is it central to the Biblical narrative, but it is expressed in the *halachic* way of life. While the major decisors of Jewish law argued about whether or not settling in the land of Israel is a commandment, there is no question that they agreed unequivocally that living in the land is the fullest and most authentic expression of Jewish life. The existence of the modern state of Israel is a special challenge for people who are serious in their commitment to the ‘observant life;’ questions that were only theoretical for hundreds of years are now a practical concern at a time when living in Israel is a very real choice. Our understandings of Zion and Diaspora have changed: we no longer see ourselves living in ‘exile,’ and we wonder what it means to be a Jew committed to the land of Israel while living outside the land. How is our commitment to *Eretz* Israel expressed not only politically (which is, in itself, a complex question), but also religiously?

Some would argue that the Zionist dream began with Abraham. God makes three promises to our forefather: nationhood (“You shall become a great nation”), blessing (“You shall be a blessing”), and national territory (“I will assign this land to your offspring”). As we explore the sources and resources below, we see that the question is much more complicated. How we define our relationship to the land has far reaching implications for living an observant life.

Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the Terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “I will assign this land to your offspring,” and he built an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him.

- Genesis 12:6-7

And the Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the North and South, to the East and West. For I give all the Land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted. Up, walk about the Land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you.”

- Genesis 13:14-17

Sources and Resources

- a. ***I will assign this Land:*** This refers back to [Genesis 12,] verse 1, “the land that I will show you.” Its identity is now established. More than this, the original promises of nationhood and blessings are now supplemented by the grant of national territory through which those promises may be consummated. The divine declaration, oft repeated, is one of the seminal texts of the Torah. Henceforth, the history and the destiny of the Jewish people are inextricably bound up with the Promised Land.

- Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis

- b. ***In the beginning (Genesis 1:1):*** Said Rabbi Isaac: It was not necessary to begin here. Rather the Torah should have started with “This month is to you,” (Exodus 12:2) which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded, (since the main purpose of the Torah is its commandments). Why did God commence with “In the

beginning?” Because of (the verse) “The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations” (Psalm 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan,” the people of Israel can reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When God wished, He gave it to them, and when God wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.”

- Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 1:1

- c. ***The land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people.*** *Here their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world. Exiled from Palestine, the Jewish people remained faithful to it in all the countries of their dispersion, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return and the restoration of their national freedom. Impelled by this historic association, Jews strove throughout the centuries to go back to the land of their fathers and regain their statehood. In recent decades they returned in masses. They reclaimed the wilderness, revived their language, built cities and villages and established a vigorous and ever-growing community with its own economic and cultural life. They sought peace yet were ever prepared to defend themselves. They brought the blessing of progress to all inhabitants of the country. In the year 1897 the First Zionist Congress, inspired by Theodor Herzl's vision of the Jewish State, proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national revival in their own country.*

- Israel's Declaration of Independence, May 14, 1948

- d. ***Rabbi Levi said:*** *When Abram was travelling through Aram Nabaraim and Aram Nabor, saw its inhabitants eating and drinking and reveling. “May my portion not be in this country,” he exclaimed. But when he reached the promontory of Tyre and saw them engaged in weeding and hoeing at the proper season, “Would that my portion be in this country!” Said the Holy One to him, “I will assign this land to your offspring.”*

- B'reishit Rabbah 39:8

- e. ***In what sense did the forbearers “own” the land?*** *Time and again, the forefathers are “given” the land as part of the covenant...in the forefathers' time, theirs was the promise, not the possession; the legal deed, not the control. Much later the Israelites would be told that they were to be only strangers in residence (Leviticus 25:23)... Genesis thus projects a striking aggregate picture, a picture of the homeless at home. A young clan claims ownership, but not control, while forging nonpolitical ties to bind itself to the territory. It is some fascination that for millennia these patterns of burial, traversal and purchase remained the active models for the Jewish people in maintaining their ties to the land.*

-Rabbi Benjamin Segal, “Land of Israel,” *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, pp. 1373

Reflections

Both in ancient and modern times, the connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel begins in a narrative. But there is more than one version of what that narrative might be. The Declaration of the State of Israel also begins with a narrative, tracing our national and culture origins in the land of Israel but this document hardly even mentions the theological roots of our connection to Zion. In contrast, the Bible begins not only with God's call to Abram to go forth from his ancestral home but a threefold promise of nationhood, blessings, and land. The three are inextricably linked not only in the patriarchal narrative but in the story of the Exodus and in later Biblical history. One might argue that the leitmotif of homelessness and homecoming begins in the Garden of Eden and is an expression of the Jewish notion of land.

But there are other narratives as well. The very first statement in Rashi's commentary is the question of why the Torah begins with the story of creation rather than commandments. If the purpose of the Torah is to present us with a way of life, why not proceed immediately to Exodus, chapter 12, the first chapter of the

Torah that contains primarily legal material? Israel's 'right to the land' is justified by the creation story. If God is the creator that it is God's right to do with the land as he sees fit – no one can question God's decree. On the other hand, the sages depict Abraham in the *Midrash* as not simply being assigned the land but choosing the land because of the ethos he witnesses there.

In all of these narratives, the right to the land is neither political nor nationalistic but spiritual. Israel is assigned the land by God but they are not given the land as a political entity. Abraham remains homeless in the land and must learn to live with the peoples who are already present in the land. Genesis is not about the birth of a nation but the birth of a people whose existence grows out of their connection to the land and not necessarily to a country that exists in the land.

Today we struggle to understand what our relationship to the nation of Israel should be and what responsibilities we have as members of the Jewish people. It is somewhat ironic that there is a lively debate in Israel today regarding the status of *Ha-tikvah*, Israel's national anthem. Non-Jewish citizens of Israel are troubled by the words of this anthem, but we as 'diaspora' Jews are not as troubled. This poem is an expression of our own connection to both the people and land of Israel.

Our relationship to the land of Israel is defined by ethnic, historic, political, and religious considerations. Sometimes we must serve as advocates for the state of Israel and sometimes as critics. We are concerned about how Israel is perceived by the governments of the world but we are also concerned about how we are perceived as non-orthodox Jews by the Israeli rabbinate. Our relationship is complex but it should include active and positive engagement.

Rabbi Cohen explores some of the areas of concern from a *halakhic* perspective. Are we obligated to defend the state of Israel? Is *aliyah* a commandment or is it a national aspiration of the Jewish people? How can we turn tourism into a religious act rather than a simple vacation? Should the practice of pilgrimage become a renewed commandment for contemporary Jews? And for those people who have settled in Israel, what *mitzvot* are unique to their new life as Israelis? How can we apply the rules of the Sabbatical and Jubilee year, *t'rumah* and other agricultural laws from the Torah to a modern state? Underlying all these questions, however, is the broader question of what our relationship to the land should be if our narrative is more political than religious.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a) **The Mitzvah of Aliyah:** *"One should ever strive to live in the Land of Israel even in a city in which most of the inhabitants are idolaters and one should prefer that over living outside the Land, even in a city mostly inhabited by Jews. For one who lives in the Land of Israel is like a person who has a God while those who lives outside the Land are like those who live without a God."*
- Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot*, 110b, quoted in *The Observant Life*, pp. 339
- b) *Nowhere in the code does Maimonides actually declare unequivocally that it is a scriptural or rabbinic commandment to move to the Land of Israel or to live there... in the Sefer Ha-mitzvot, aliyah is not listed as one of the divine precepts every Jew must strive to fulfill...Nahmanides, Maimonides' younger contemporary, was convinced that aliyah to Israel was a mitzvah incumbent upon every Jew...*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339
- c) *Rabbi David Golinkin...concluded that it would be a misreading of all the relevant biblical and talmudic passages not to acknowledge that one of the foundational ideas of Judaism is that all Jews are supposed to live in the Land of Israel.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339

- d) **Pilgrimages:** *Although, technically speaking, the Torah commandment to visit Jerusalem three times a year on the festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot is no longer in effect, visiting Israel, and especially visiting Jerusalem should still be considered a laudatory practice of the most sacred order.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339
- e) **Visiting the Temple Mount:** *It would therefore be acceptable in our day either to enter all parts of the Temple Mount except the Dome of the Rock or else to avoid the central parts of the Mount entirely. Of course it would also be acceptable to adopt a stricter position and follow Maimonides by avoiding the entire Temple Mount.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339
- f) **The Sabbatical and Jubilee Years:** *Rabbi David Golinkin proposes that moderns rely neither on the view that the observance of the sabbatical year in our time is a Torah-based commandment nor on those many earlier authorities who considered it to be rabbinically required...he considered it to be inoperative in the modern era so that those who follow them do so as an act of piety... this approach encourages those who wish to observe the laws of sh'mitah to do so but without placing an unbearable strain on the efforts of struggling Israeli farmers*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339
- g) **Serving in the Israeli Defense Forces:** *The Torah clearly considers the relation of Jewish individuals to the Land of Israel to be a function of Jewishness rather than Israeli citizenship, and so it is not at all unreasonable to ask what obligations the halakhah places on Jews who are not Israeli citizens with respect to the defense of the Land of Israel*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 339

Questions to Ponder

1. Why was territory a necessary part of God's threefold promise to Abraham?
2. To what extent was God's promise of land an essential part of the covenant between Israel and God? How would Judaism be different without the promise of land?
3. In what ways are the biblical narrative and the modern narrative (as found in the Israel Declaration of Statehood) similar to one another? How are they different from one another? Which one makes a stronger case for Zionism?
4. To what do you attribute the differences between Maimonides and Nachmanides on the question of whether or not *aliyah* is a commandment? Should we consider *aliyah* a commandment today, incumbent on all Jews? Why or why not?
5. What makes the land of Israel, "Holy?"
6. What responsibilities do we have as Diaspora Jews to the land of Israel? Should we see the defense of the land as a Jewish responsibility? Do we have a right to be critical of Israel's policies?
7. Is Israel a Jewish state or is it the state of the Jewish people? What is the difference between these two expressions? How might the differences effect our relationship to Israel?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan