

The Holy Land, and What Makes it So

by [Ehud Neor](#) (July 2024)



Praying at the Western Wall, Jossi Stern, 20th C

When people use the term “The Holy Land,” what do they mean? They mean, and by “they” I include many Jews who should know better, such as myself, the geographical area of Israel, wherein “holy” events occurred in the past. It is a useful

phrase, seeing service for hundreds of years. Christian tours to Israel are always marketed as tours of the Holy Land. Nowadays "Palestine" is sometimes used in conjunction with "Holy Land," Palestine being a word created two thousand years ago by the Romans to erase the memory of the Jewish presence after the Jews revolted against Rome, and today fittingly refurbished by the KGB and adopted for use by another people who want to erase the renewed Jewish presence in the Holy Land.

Traditionally, for Jews, the term "Holy Land" means something different. Judaism sees the land itself as holy. It possesses qualities beyond those of a physical nature. The substrate of this earth of the Holy Land is Morality. The word of the Creator is embedded in this soil and the land itself demands obedience. This is expressed in many ways in the Bible.

For one, the Holy Land will not suffer the presence of an immoral people. This is made plain to the people of Israel from the start. Though the land was promised by the Creator to Abraham, Abraham's descendants were not allowed to conquer the land until the inequity of the previous inhabitants reached a full measure. There had to be a certain level of moral debasement before even the Creator's promise could be upheld, a remarkable thought in and of itself. The same rules apply to the People of Israel. The catchphrase for immoral behavior, of the nations and of Israel, is idol worship. "High places," unauthorized altars, "holy" trees—all of these and more are prohibited because of the attendant human misbehavior. Sexual promiscuity and deviancy, along with child sacrifice, were the ancient norm, and it proved difficult for the Jews to completely disassociate themselves from such activities over the years. In a great simplification of the story, this moral failure of the Jews led to two lasting exiles. The first was of the ten tribes of the Kingdom of Israel, banished by the Assyrians to lost lands east of the Sambation River of Jewish lore, to be assimilated beyond recognition. Jewish prophesy

has it that in the final ingathering of the exiles, these tribes will miraculously reappear and return to the Holy Land. Over the years, some ethnic groups have made claim to being descendants of one of the tribes. Of late, the group Bnei Menashe (sons of Menashe, one of the ten tribes) from the region once known as Burma, have put forth their claim convincingly enough so that thousands of them have been officially converted and have returned as fully recognized Jews with full Israeli government support.

The second disastrous exile was of the Jews of the Kingdom of Judea, the tribes of Judea and Binyamin. The Judeans had revolted against Rome and were soundly defeated and had their holy Temple destroyed. However, Rome did not disperse the Jewish population until a second revolt sixty years later. This time, Rome had no mercy, and after executing over a million Jews (by most counts), forced most of the remaining Jews to flee. These Jews took their identity with them, and thus was created the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora. The great return of these Jews to the Holy Land began in the late nineteenth century and continues to this day. In the small farming community of forty-five families in which my wife and I raised our four children, Jews of the following national backgrounds were to be found: Iraqi, American, Canadian, Tunisian, Yemenite, Moroccan, Persian, Dutch, Cochin (Indian), French, Polish, German, Burmese (Bnei Menashe). This is what is meant by the term "Ingathering of the Exiles."

For the two thousand years until the Jews began to return, the Holy Land was a wasteland. It held some strategic and religious importance as a crossroads of the fertile crescent, and as a crossroads for the three monotheistic religions, but it was never settled overall, rather, different towns rose and fell in importance, such as Acco, Jaffa, Tiberius and always, on the hill, Jerusalem. In Mark Twain's immortal words:

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince ... Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens; the wonderful temple which was the pride and the glory of Israel, is gone ... Palestine is desolate and unlovely. And why should it be otherwise? ... Palestine is no more of this work-day world. It is sacred to poetry and tradition—it is dream-land. —[Mark Twain](#), Innocents Abroad, Chapter 56

Who are you going to believe? Mark Twain or Yasser Arafat and his KGB handlers?

Shortly after this observation by Twain, the ingathering of the exiles began, at first a trickle of small groups of observant Jews from Yemen, Poland and surroundings, until it grew into a flood of, surprise, non-traditional Jews belonging to the Zionist movement, meaning nationalistic and socialist. Why would a land infused with God's morality be welcoming to such Jews as these? Such Godless types should be prime candidates to be spewed out by the Holy Land or vomited out. Lest that seem too vulgar, that is the exact terminology of the Bible, when a nation is to be expelled by the land. The Holy Land vomits the nation or people out. So the Jews, in two distinct stages, were vomited out of the Holy Land, and after two thousand years of exile, and only when led by Jews furthest from the Jewish tradition, and only after cataclysmic destruction in the Diaspora, did the masses of Jews return to Israel in numbers sufficient to allow a modern state to be born, and to flourish in ways that even the most irreligious describe as miraculous.

The answer, if I may proffer one while skipping along the swift brook known as the Oral Law of the Jewish tradition, is

surprising. These New Jews, nationalistic in the way that characterized vast swaths of the European intelligentsia of the time, focused their efforts on the far Levant, the Zion of yore, the home of their forefathers, with a new dream, that of reclaiming the long-barren soil through blood, sweat, and tears. Yes, on the face of it this was a Godless religion, seeming to border on the worship of the old agricultural gods of Canaan. Idol worship! But only just on the face of it. Because aside from lock-step political commitment to socialism and communism, there was no theology behind their plowing out dunam after dunam, finding what crop grows best where, solving irrigation problems and in short, spilling every bit of themselves into the great Zionist reclamation project. In terms of religious belief, there was nothing but a void beyond the furrows of the fields. Except that there is never a void in human interaction with the world, never a void in life. Life, the Good, abhors the Void. These early Zionists saw in the clods of soil, in the drained malarial swamps, in that last stubborn boulder that refused to budge, an image of themselves, a vision of a New Jew. According to ancient Jewish commentary, that was enough: "Living in the Land of Israel is equal to observing all of the commandments of the Torah."

For three generations, this was the ethos that drove the Zionist project. It worked, as it has never worked anywhere in the world, at any time. You wouldn't think of mentioning the word "miraculous" in front of these Jews, but at the same time you couldn't avoid thinking it. However, the fervor with which they nourished this ethos of the New Jew bordered on Jewish evangelism-without-a-God, and enthusiasm of this sort, even when it is successful beyond dreams, does not transfer easily to generations that did not know the hunger, malaria, marauding Bedouins, or back-breaking work from dawn to dusk that preceded the success. The great-grandchild is not willing to rise early to milk the cows.

With all that, there is not a honest Jewish soul living in the

Land of Israel who does not pause at the mention of the achievements of these pioneers, and silently salute them, knowing that without their drive and self-sacrifice, the nation of the Jews that has become the only true democracy in the Middle East, a capitalist hi-tech powerhouse with a taste of socialism in its health care system, would not have come into being. It is as simple as that, and everyone knows it, whether they believe in the God of Israel or not.

A touching example of this connection with the actual soil of the land, soil that a farmer might hold in his or her hand, was the occasion of Menachem Ussishkin's burial. He was one of the earliest Zionist leaders and oversaw the pre-state budget used for the development of Jewish settlements. Representatives of more than 250 settlements arrived at his grave, each carrying a scoop of soil from their settlements and used that soil to bury him. This is the antithesis of idol worship; it is a simple human gesture of thanks for a job well done, given in the exchange of the currency of tilled earth.

Being an immoral nation will get you vomited out of the Holy Land, but there are other characteristics of the land that if not tended to properly will activate the ejection sequence.

Speak to the children of Yisra'el, and say to them, When you come to the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath to the Lord. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in its fruit; but in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. That which grows of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, nor gather the grapes of thy undressed vine: for it shall be a year of rest for the land. ([Lev 25:2](#))

As revolutionary as the Sabbath seventh day of rest was in a world imbued with human slavery, this, the idea that there is also a limit to what one may urge forth from working the earth, is no less revolutionary. How is it possible to survive without working the land?

And if you shall say, What shall we eat in the seventh year? behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our increase: then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years. And you shall sow the eighth year, and eat yet of old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in, you shall eat of the old store. ([Lev. 25:20](#))

A close look at these verses reveals a reversal of natural or logical progression. The reward for keeping the commandment of the Sabbatical year is received during the previous year, the sixth, which will be so productive as to supply enough food to carry the people over until the new crops after the Sabbatical year come in. This intertwining of the agricultural activity of a people with an inherent blessedness of the land is what connects the ancient Jews to the secular Zionists who drove the establishment of modern Israel. No, they were not looking to re-establish the Sabbatical year, but they were looking to reclaim a barren land as a home for the Jews, and to make it flourish. Interestingly, Jewish tradition holds that keeping the Sabbatical Year is itself equal to observing all the commandments of the Torah. The contribution of the secular Jewish pioneers was the first essential step in reclaiming the soil, and in reclaiming the holiness of the soil: that fistful of soil, testing, tasting, weighing its potential. It is for observant Jews to continue the process of redeeming the Holy

Land, and for them, reinstating the Sabbatical year is of utmost importance, not least considering the punishment for non-observance:

And I will make your cities waste, and bring your sanctuaries to desolation, and I will not smell the savour of your sweet odours. And I will bring the land into desolation: and your enemies who dwell in it shall be astonished at it. And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. Then shall the land enjoy her sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, and you are in your enemies' land; then shall the land rest, and enjoy her sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall rest; because it did not rest in your sabbaths, when you dwelt upon it. ([Lev. 26:31](#))”

The Sabbatical Year has been observed for the last fifty or sixty years. Today there is a [major research institute](#) dedicated to the study and implementation of the “commandments connected to the land,” including the Sabbatical Year.

Are we now witnessing the final and definitive test of the “other worldliness” of the Holy Land, and even the “chosenness” of the Jewish people? The major Jewish commentators determined that the observance of the Sabbatical Year becomes mandatory when the majority of the world’s Jews live in Israel. Ever-increasing Antisemitism has already jump-started immigration to Israel, and what is now a steady stream of immigration will soon become a flood. The unstoppable wave of Antisemitism is ironically creating the conditions for the final Redemption of the Holy Land and of the Jewish people in the Holy Land. Haters and lovers of Jews alike want to see

this issue resolved for the last time, both yearning for a manifestation to their liking, either the demise or the rise of the Jews.

Thou wilt arise, and have mercy upon Ziyyon: for it is time to favour her; for the set time is come. ([Psalms 102:14](#))

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