Thoughts on the Promised Land--for Parashat Masei, August 2, 2008

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This article was included in a

recently published book, A Dream of Zion, edited by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin,

published by Jewish Lights Publishing Co.

The volume includes essays by a variety of authors, on the theme: American Jews Reflect on Why Israel Matters to Them. Rabbi Salkin is a Reform rabbi, and many of

the contributors to this volume are also Reform. There are a number of other

Orthodox contributors as well.

Israel: A Tiny Nation, A Great Destiny

By Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel

A tiny nation, often misunderstood and maligned, changed the course of history for the good. This tiny nation produced the Bible and its prophets; sages and mystics; poets and dreamers. This tiny nation, generation after generation, in many ways has been the conscience of humanity, the litmus test of human civilization.

This tiny nation lived in a tiny land in antiquity. Its King David established Jerusalem as its capitol city a thousand years before the dawn of Christianity and more than

1600 years before Mohammed. It was seldom allowed to live in peace: other
nations threatened, attacked, made war. It saw its capitol city razed by
vicious enemies, its Temples destroyed
by Babylonians and Romans, its citizens ravaged and exiled.

This tiny nation, scattered throughout the world, faced persecutions and
humiliations. Its men and women and children were confined to ghettos, deprived
of elementary human rights, subjected to pogroms and pillage. Millions of them
were murdered during the Holocaust.

Exiled from its land for nearly 2000 years, it always dreamed of returning to its ancestral soil and re-establishing its sovereignty. It prayed daily

for the return. Many of its members made pilgrimages, and some remained living
in the land throughout the generations, in conditions of poverty and oppression.

In spite of the persecutions it suffered and in spite of the callousness of so many nations of the world, this tiny nation maintained faith in One God
and in the mission He assigned it to bring the lofty teachings of Torah to
humanity. In spite of all its sufferings, this tiny nation maintained faith in
humanity: it strove to make the world a better place for all human beings, with
an eternal optimism that is truly a wonder.

This tiny nation, born 3500 years ago, wove its way through history and

refused to be destroyed or silenced.

This tiny nation, scattered throughout the lands of the world, found the

will and the courage to return to its historic homeland after nearly 2000 years

of exile. The return home has been difficult. It has had to fight wars, withstand

terrorism, overcome economic boycotts, endure political isolation, and combat

hateful propaganda.

Yet, this tiny and ancient nation, against all reasonable odds, has re-established its sovereignty in its historic homeland; it has created a vibrant, dynamic, idealistic society, dedicated to the ideals of freedom and

democracy. With its memory spanning the millennia, it has created a modern,

progressive state.

My wife Gilda and I first visited this historic land in the summer of 1968, a year after our marriage. When we glimpsed the shoreline from the airplane window, we both found ourselves with tears in our eyes. We were not born in this land; we had never been there before; and yet we were returning—we and all the generations of our families were returning through us. “When the Lord turned back the captivity of Zion, we were as in a dream (Psalm 126:1).”

This tiny people is Israel. This tiny land is Israel. This nation of dreamers and visionaries, builders and farmers, sages and scientists, warriors and peace makers—this nation is Israel. This tiny nation is a great nation. This tiny land is a holy land. “The tiny shall become a thousand, and the least a

mighty

nation (Isaiah 60:22).”

Israel is a bastion

of hope in a world filled with despair. It is a wellspring of human dignity in

a world filled with shameless hatred and strife.

To stand with Israel is to

stand for the redemption of the people of Israel and

humanity. To stand with Israel is to recognize

the sheer wonder of the survival and contributions of the people of Israel. It is to

affirm the preciousness of life over a culture of death; righteousness over

hypocrisy; idealism over despair. This tiny nation in its tiny land is a testament to the greatness of the human spirit. It is a testimony to God’s

providence.

It is a privilege, beyond words, to dream with Israel and share its destiny.

“For Zion’s sake I shall not be silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I shall not rest, until her righteousness go forth as brightness and her salvation as a flaming torch (Isaiah 62:1).”