The Land of Israel in the Bible

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by Hayyim Angel

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I. **Israel in the Book of Genesis**

The Land of Israel as Divine Gift, Heart of the Covenant, and Oath

The Torah does not begin with Abraham, nor does its story begin in the Land of Israel. Instead, the Torah opens by presenting a vision for all of humanity. In his introduction to the Book of Genesis, Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (1470–1550, Italy) observes that only after the three failures of Adam and Eve, the generation of the Flood, and the Tower of Babel, does God choose Abraham and his descendants to teach religious morality to the rest of the world. The Torah celebrates Abraham as the first person who was not only personally righteous, but who was also committed to teaching righteousness to his family and society:

> For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him. (Genesis 18:19)

Abraham's family is filtered through the rest of Genesis until it becomes clear that God selects the descendants of Jacob as the Chosen People.[2]

After Abraham arrives in Israel. God promises the land to Abraham and his descendants:

> The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your heirs." And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12:7)

God reiterates this promise after Abraham's nephew Lot—his presumed heir until that point—moves to the wicked city of Sodom:

> 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).

God again solemnly promises the land to Abraham and his descendants in the "covenant between the halves":

> On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...." (Genesis 15:18)

In these three instances, God grants the Land of Israel to Abraham as a unilateral gift. In chapter 17, however, God introduces the idea of a mutual covenant, fulfilled through circumcision:

> I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God. (Genesis 17:7–8)

In addition to God's promises to Abraham, God reaffirms the land covenant to Isaac and to Jacob. God's gift of the Land of Israel to Abraham's descendants specifically goes to Jacob's line:

> [God said to Isaac:] I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. (Genesis 26:3)

> And the Lord was standing beside [Jacob] and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants….” (Genesis 28:131–14)

> And God said to [Jacob], “I am El Shaddai. Be fertile and increase; a nation, yea an assembly of nations, shall descend from you. Kings shall issue from your loins. The land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac I assign to you; and to your offspring to come will I assign the land.” (Genesis 35:11–12)

Before Jacob leaves home to go to Laban, Isaac also gives Jacob the blessing of Abraham, which includes possession of the land:

> May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham. (Genesis 28:3–4)

In addition to the divine gift of the land and the centrality of the land in the God-Israel covenant, God swears the land to Abraham following the Binding of Isaac:

> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.” (Genesis 22:15–17)

After Abraham demonstrates his absolute commitment, God gives Abraham the greatest assurance. Professor Jon Levenson observes that there is no explanation in the Torah as to why God chose Abraham initially, but God’s oath ratifies the covenant when Abraham passes this ultimate test. Abraham has vindicated God’s choice.[3]

To summarize, God repeatedly promises the Land of Israel to the Patriarchs and their descendants through Jacob. In addition to the land serving as a divine gift, it also plays a central role in the mutual God-Israel covenant. God also makes an oath to give the land to Abraham and his descendants following the Binding of Isaac.

Purchasing Land in Israel

Although the Israelites conquer the land at the time of Joshua, several land purchases merit biblical attention. Abraham purchased the first family holding in Israel, the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron and its adjacent field in which he would bury Sarah:

> Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial…. Let [Ephron] sell me the cave of

> Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst.” (Genesis 23:3–4, 9)

The Torah repeatedly refers to the sale of Machpelah, highlighting its significance. Abraham is buried there:

> His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife. (Genesis 25:9–10)

Jacob’s dying words are about this transaction. When his sons bury him, the Torah again mentions the purchase:

> Then he instructed them, saying to them, “I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site—there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites.” (Genesis 49:29–32)

> Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. (Genesis 50:12–13)

Later in Israel's history, David purchases the plot that will be used as the future Temple in Jerusalem. The acquisition was originally the threshing floor of Araunah (known as "Ornan" in the book of Chronicles). Like Abraham, David refuses to accept the area as a gift and insists on paying for it instead. He even uses the same term that Abraham did: *be-kesef malei*, "the full price":

> But King David replied to Ornan, "No, I will buy them at the full price [*be-kesef malei*]. I cannot make a present to the Lord of what belongs to you, or sacrifice a burnt offering that has cost me nothing." So David paid Ornan for the site 600 shekels' worth of gold. (I Chronicles 21:24–25)

The other Patriarchal land purchase occurs when Jacob purchases a plot of land near Shechem, establishing the first land holding for the living in the nation's history:

> The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred *kesitahs.* (Genesis 33:19)

When the people bury Joseph's bones in Shechem at the end of the Book of Joshua, the narrative mentions the original purchase:

> The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred *kesitah*s from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites. (Joshua 24:32)

The Bible's ongoing interest in these purchases suggests a desire to guarantee Israel's ownership of these three areas. One Midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 79:7) similarly concludes that nobody can claim that Israel stole Machpelah, Shechem, or Temple Mount.

The Land of Israel as Central to the People's Identity

At the end of his life, Jacob asks Joseph not to bury him in Egypt but rather in Israel. Joseph agrees. Surprisingly, Jacob then makes him swear:

> And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial place." He replied, "I will do as you have spoken." And he said, "Swear to me." And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed. (Genesis 47:29–31)

Rashi and Ramban explain that although Jacob trusted Joseph, he believed that Pharaoh never would allow Joseph to go unless he was bound by an oath. Joseph in fact invoked the oath when requesting permission of Pharaoh:

> And when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court, saying, "Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh: 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan." Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return.'" And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath." (Genesis 50:4–6)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin,[4] however, observes that when Joseph appeals to Pharaoh, he speaks to Pharaoh's court, that is, to Pharaoh's underlings. Joseph was second in command in all of Egypt, so why did he not personally ask Pharaoh?

Rabbi Riskin explains that this was a moment of truth for Joseph. He had been struggling with his identity ever since he had become second in command some 25 years earlier. Pharaoh gave him the Egyptian name Zaphenath-Paneah and married him to a daughter of the priest of On (Genesis 41:45). Joseph was a success, and Pharaoh made it clear that Joseph was an Egyptian.

Rabbi Riskin explains the names of Manasseh and Ephraim in light of Joseph's identity conflict. Manasseh represents Joseph's new Egyptian identity: "God has made me forget completely [*nashani*] my hardship and my parental home." Ephraim, on the other hand, reminds Joseph that Egypt never will become his true home: "God has made me fertile [*hifrani*] in the land of my affliction" (Genesis 41:51–52).

Jacob understood that Joseph's identity would be tested severely by this request to be buried in Israel. Therefore, he made him swear. Joseph understood that by honoring his father's will, he would be making a public declaration that his family identity belongs to Israel and not to Egypt. He therefore was afraid to confront Pharaoh directly.

Joseph addresses his brothers on his deathbed: "Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here'" (Genesis 50:25). Joseph thereby confirms his Israelite identity by insisting that he will join his people in the future exodus.

Summary

From the time Abraham arrived in Israel, God promises him and his descendants the land. This promise manifests as an outright unilateral gift, an essential part of a mutual covenant, and is ratified by divine oath after the Binding of Isaac. God repeats this promise to Isaac and Jacob, and the land goes to their line of descendants.

Abraham’s purchase of Machpelah in Hebron and Jacob’s purchase of land in Shechem both receive significant attention, highlighting the permanence of these acquisitions prior to Joshua’s later conquest of the land.

Jacob insisted on being buried in Israel, and Joseph needed to make a public statement that he too identified as an Israelite rather than as an Egyptian. On his deathbed, Joseph expressed his ultimate desire to be buried in Israel.

I. **Israel in Exodus through Deuteronomy**

In Genesis, God makes an absolute, unbreakable covenant with Abraham. God promises that He will give the Land of Israel to Abraham’s descendants (through Jacob’s line) as an everlasting holding. The land is a gift under divine oath, and also is a central aspect of the God-Israel covenant:

> I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God. (Genesis 17:8)

In the rest of the Torah, however, God introduces a conditional aspect of this mutual covenant of the land. The blessings and curses in Leviticus 26, and several other passages, threaten exile if Israel sins:

> I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors. I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin. (Leviticus 26:31–33)

> Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you. (Deuteronomy 11:16–17)

One passage in Leviticus adds a poetic dimension. The Land of Israel is depicted as having a sensitive stomach, and it cannot tolerate grave sins. Sins cause the land to become ill and vomit out its inhabitants, whether Canaanite or Israelite:

> Do not defile yourselves in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you; for all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you. All who do any of those abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people. You shall keep My charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices that were carried on before you, and you shall not defile yourselves through them: I the Lord am your God. (Leviticus 18:24–30; cf. Leviticus 19:29; 20:22–25)

In addition to sexual crimes, the Torah also includes Molech worship (Leviticus 20:3; Deuteronomy 18:9–12), murder (Numbers 35:33–34), leaving a corpse of an executed person unburied (Deuteronomy 21:23), and violating the sanctity of marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1–4) as sins that pollute the land. Later prophets present idol-worship as a sin that defiles the land.[5] Thus, sin causes the land to become defiled, leading to the exile of its inhabitants.

The Torah presents antecedents for the ideas of exile and land defilement from the outset of creation. After Adam and Eve sin in Eden, God curses the earth and banishes Adam and Eve from Eden:

> To Adam He said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field”…. So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. (Genesis 3:17–18, 23)

The Torah also expresses the poetic notion that the land cannot tolerate sin after Cain murders Abel. Having swallowed Abel’s blood, the land no longer will produce for Cain, and Cain may not remain in his land:

> Then [God] said, “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.” (Genesis 4:10–12)

Throughout Tanakh, God reminds the Israelites that the land is not truly theirs, and they can be exiled if they fail to live up to the God-Israel covenant.

Joshua reiterates this threat shortly before his death, after the people already have possessed their land:

> If you break the covenant that the Lord your God enjoined upon you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you shall quickly perish from the good land that He has given you. (Joshua 23:16)

God also reminds Israel of the threat of exile for infidelity to their covenant, precisely at the ideal moment when Solomon dedicates the Temple:

> [But] if you and your descendants turn away from Me and do not keep the commandments [and] the laws which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will sweep Israel off the land which I gave them; I will reject the House which I have consecrated to My name; and Israel shall become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. (I Kings 9:6–7)

Sabbatical and Jubilee Years

When Abraham needed a burial plot for Sarah, he faced a paradox. On the one hand, God had promised the land to him and his descendants for the future. On the other hand, he did not own any of that land and therefore was a resident alien (*ger ve-toshav*) among the Canaanites:

> I am a resident alien [*ger ve-toshav*] among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial. (Genesis 23:4)

Abraham wanted to gain a foothold in the land to bury Sarah as a landowner, rather than simply finding a spot on the roadside to bury her as a nomad.[6]

Even as the people of Israel are crossing the desert to possess their land, God insists that the land does not truly belong to them. Rather, it belongs to God and therefore the people must observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. They are resident aliens, just like Abraham:

> But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident [*gerim ve-toshavim*] with Me. (Leviticus 25:23)

The Torah also links the threat of exile to the violation of the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years:

> I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin. Then shall the land make up for its Sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its Sabbath years. Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your Sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.... For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its Sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws. (Leviticus 26:32–25, 43)

Non-observance of these laws demonstrates that the Israelites do not recognize that the land is God's, but instead consider the land to be their own.

At the very end of Tanakh, the Book of Chronicles reiterates this understanding when the people go into the Babylonian exile after the destruction of the Temple:

> Those who survived the sword he exiled to Babylon, and they became his and his sons' servants till the rise of the Persian kingdom, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, until the land paid back its Sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, till seventy years were completed. (II Chronicles 36:20–21)

Although Israel's continued presence in their land depends on their faithfulness to the covenant and their recognition that the land belongs to God, the land remains a permanent inheritance of the people of Israel. If they go into exile, they will always return to their land and no other nation will possess the land:

> I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God. (Genesis 17:8)

The Book of Deuteronomy similarly reiterates the divine gift of the land to the people of Israel.[7] The Torah also restates God's oath guaranteeing this gift.[8] Specifically at times of great sin and crisis, the prophets invoke God's oath and eternal covenant with Israel. These include the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:13–14) and the destruction of the Temple (Jeremiah 7:3–7; 33:25–26).

The Threat of Prosperity and the Need to be Grateful to God

In addition to the Torah's concern that the people of Israel never consider the land to be absolutely theirs, the Torah repeatedly praises the beauty and fertility of the land and warns against losing sight of the fact that all blessings come from God.

During Moses' initiation prophecy at the burning bush, God praises Israel:

> "I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites…." (Exodus 3:6–8)

This is the first of some twenty biblical references to Israel as the land of milk and honey.

In Deuteronomy, Moses repeatedly warns against the hazard of prosperity. If the people forget that all is from God and they become ungrateful, they will soon lapse into unfaithfulness:

> For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without limit, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper. When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Take care lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, and His laws, which I enjoin upon you today… and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers, as is still the case. (Deuteronomy 8:7–18)

The Talmud derives the commandment for the Grace after Meals from 8:10, “when you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.” The passage describes divine blessing, rather than using the typical language of commandment. However, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik observed that this verse must be read as a commandment. The continuation of the passage warns against what occurs when people do not bless God for their produce—they will forget God. Therefore, 8:10 must be a commandment of what Israelites must do to avoid this hazard, rather than a prediction of what they will do.[9]

Israel’s Dependence on Rainfall as a Religious Value

The beautiful land depends on rainfall, requiring constant providential attention:

> For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year’s beginning to year’s end. (Deuteronomy 11:10–12)

Because of its consistent agricultural cycle, Egypt became a refuge during famines. The Torah likens Egypt to the Garden of Eden. Lot also moved to the wicked city of Sodom because it resembled Egypt and Eden in that the Jordan River watered the area and guaranteed fertility:

> Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. (Genesis 13:10)

God gave Israel a fertile land, but it is not consistently fertile as Egypt or Sodom. The latter are much easier places to obtain predictable prosperity. The consistent rising of the Nile and Jordan Rivers led to a state wherein people felt a sense of security and entitlement. There were no consequences to their sinful behavior, and both developed wicked cultures. Israel's dependence on rainfall, in contrast, fostered a culture of constant attention to relationship-building with a personal God.

Ramban (on Deuteronomy 11:11–12) similarly explains that all people depend on God, but a sick person feels that sense of dependence much more than a healthy person. Egypt is like a healthy person, and Israel is like a sick person. Since Israel depends on rain, the people must constantly remain conscious of their dependence on God.

Professors Uriel Simon and Moshe Greenberg

Professors Uriel Simon and Moshe Greenberg contribute additional dimensions of understanding to the religious significance of the Land of Israel in the Torah. Professor Simon[10] observes that Abraham's bond with the land is not natural, since he was not born there. Although God promises the land to Abraham and his descendants, Abraham must wait some 400 years for the fulfillment of this promise (Genesis 15:13–16). There is further uncertainty regarding the fulfillment of the divine promise because of the delay in Abraham's fathering an heir who would perpetuate the covenant.

Israel’s connection to the land is not a natural bond; it is a connection of covenantal destiny. When a nation has a natural bond to its land, there is no constant threat of exile looming over the people. In contrast, when a nation has a covenantal relationship of destiny, this means that their rights to their land are based on a divine promise and are conditional on faithfulness to God.

A nation with a natural bond to its land loses that connection when it is exiled, and that nation ceases to exist. In contrast, a nation of destiny can temporarily lose its land, but retains an eternal bond to its land even when it goes into exile. Natural possession of one’s land feels safe, but it deadens the heart of the nation since the people take their land for granted. Possession of land through destiny forces a nation to have constant attentiveness to God. Thus, the people of Israel never could take their land for granted, but also could retain their identity through their exile and long for a return to their land.

Professor Moshe Greenberg[11] explains that the Torah was given in the desert and its narrative ends with the people still in the desert. While many of the Torah’s laws are applicable only in Israel, the basis for the God-Israel covenant is the exodus and revelation at Sinai. If Israel is faithful to the Torah covenant, they will live safely in their land forever. If Israel is unfaithful, they can be exiled from land. Since the Torah transcends the Land of Israel, it remains fully binding outside of the land.

Summary

The Torah makes the conditional aspect of the covenant explicit, threatening exile for certain grave sins. One passage in Leviticus adds the poetic dimension of the land becoming ill from sin, leading it to spew out its inhabitants. There are no purification rituals for the land, and only exile can allow the land to recover from its defilement.

The Sabbatical and Jubilee years convey the message that the land belongs to God and not to Israel. Non-fulfillment of these laws leads to exile, since Israel makes the false assumption that the land belongs to them. Even with exile, the land remains an eternal possession of the people of Israel and they will return

to their land.

In addition to Israel's need to recognize that God owns the land, they also must be eternally grateful to God for the bountiful land and its produce. Proper gratitude lies at the heart of faithfulness to God, whereas ingratitude leads to unfaithfulness.

The Land of Israel's dependence on rainfall similarly creates a state of constant God-consciousness. Unlike Egypt and Sodom, which had the consistent rising of the Nile and Jordan Rivers, Israel felt their dependence on God at every moment.

Professor Uriel Simon develops the idea of the people of Israel's connection of destiny to their land. God's promises to Abraham are delayed—and are contingent on—Israel's faithfulness to the covenant. On the other hand, Israel's bond to its land cannot be severed by an exile, unlike nations that have a natural bond to their lands. The people of Israel always will return to their land.

Professor Moshe Greenberg highlights the fact that the Torah begins and ends outside of the Land of Israel to stress that it is an eternal covenant that transcends all land borders and applies wherever the people of Israel live. Israel is the place of ultimate fulfillment of the God-Israel relationship, but Israel has a covenantal relationship with God through the Torah everywhere.

I. **Israel in the Prophetic Books**

The Book of Joshua

There is no biblical holiday to celebrate Israel's entry to its land or Joshua's conquest of the land. Joshua even uses the Torah's language of a "proto-Seder" to commemorate the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River:

> This shall serve as a symbol among you: in time to come, when your children ask, "What is the meaning of these stones for you?" you shall tell them, "The waters of the Jordan were cut off because of the Ark of the Lord's Covenant; when it passed through the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off." And so these stones shall serve the people of Israel as a memorial for all time. (Joshua 4:6–7)

> He charged the Israelites as follows: "In time to come, when your children ask their fathers, 'What is the meaning of those stones?' tell your children: 'Here the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry land.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you crossed, just as the Lord your God did to the Sea of Reeds, which He dried up before us until we crossed. Thus all the peoples of the earth shall know how mighty is the hand of the Lord, and you shall fear the Lord your God always." (Joshua 4:21–24)

Israel's memory is codified through the Torah's holidays to perpetuate the foundational experiences of the exodus, the revelation at Sinai, and the sojourn through the wilderness. Although the Land of Israel is a central aspect of the God-Israel relationship, the Torah applies everywhere, and not just in Israel.

The Temple in Jerusalem

David establishes Jerusalem as the political capital of Israel by moving there and building his palace (II Samuel chapter 5). He then establishes Jerusalem as God's capital by moving the Ark there (II Samuel chapter 6). God does not permit David to build the actual Temple, but assures him that his son will rule and build the Temple (II Samuel 7). Solomon goes on to build the Temple and a palace for himself near it (I Kings 6–7).

Ramban (on Exodus 25:2) explains that the Tabernacle (and the Temple) create a perpetual re-enactment of the Revelation at Sinai. Both Sinai and the Tabernacle had a tripartite division of holiness: (1) The mountain's summit is analogous to the Temple's Holy of Holies, accessible only to Moses or the High Priest. (2) The middle of the mountain is analogous to the Temple's Holy section, accessible only to the elders or the priests. (3) The base of the mountain is analogous to the Temple courtyard, where all people could gather to experience God's revelation.

In addition to Ramban's association of the Tabernacle-Temple with the Revelation at Sinai, several Midrashim ascertain connections between the Temple and the Garden of Eden. Ideally, Adam and Eve were supposed to follow God's commands and remain in the Garden. Instead, they sinned and were expelled, and God guarded the Tree of Life with Cherubim:

> [God] drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24)

In the time of Moses, the Torah replaced the Tree of Life with the Ark of the Covenant. Cherubim were placed above it, to guard it. The Tabernacle is the only other reference to Cherubim in the Torah, and the Book of Proverbs refers to Torah and Wisdom as a Tree of Life: “She is a tree of life for those who grasp her” (Proverbs 3:18) (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, Genesis 3:24). Thus, the Tabernacle and Temple become a manifestation of the perfection in the Garden of Eden, where all humanity can live in harmony and serve God.

In addition to the Temple serving as the heart of the God-Israel relationship, Solomon also recognized the universalistic dimension of the Temple. In his prayer at the dedication of the Temple, Solomon stressed that all God-fearing people always are welcome. He expresses a longing for all humanity to recognize God:

> Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name—for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm—when he comes to pray toward this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built.… And may these words of mine, which I have offered in supplication before the Lord, be close to the Lord our God day and night, that He may provide for His servant and for His people Israel, according to each day’s needs—to the end that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord alone is God, there is no other. (I Kings 8:41–43, 59–60)

The worldview underlying Solomon’s prayer becomes a central feature of later prophetic visions, where the Temple serves as the religious center for both Israel and a God-fearing humanity.

The narratives in I Kings chapters 3–10 present Solomon’s reign as the ideal period in Israel’s history. Solomon is a wise king who judges the people fairly and is a prophet. The nation is religious and unified. There is peace and

prosperity. God’s Presence is manifest in the Temple. The nations of the world flood to Jerusalem to see the Temple and to admire Solomon’s wisdom.

Later prophets use this imagery to depict the ideal messianic age. The only element they must add to their visions is that Israel’s exiles will return to their land. During Solomon’s reign, the Israelites still lived in their land and were not yet in exile.

The Destruction of the Temple and Exile

At the ideal moment in Israel’s history, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, God warns that Israel can remain in this pristine state eternally only if they remain faithful to the Torah. If they violate the God-Israel covenant, they will lose the Temple and forfeit their right to remain in the land:

> [But] if you and your descendants turn away from Me and do not keep the commandments [and] the laws which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will sweep Israel off the land which I gave them; I will reject the House which I have consecrated to My name; and Israel shall become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. (I Kings 9:6–7)

Tragically, King Solomon opened the door to idolatry toward the end of his life (I Kings 11), leading to the division of the monarchy. Sustained idolatry through much of the remainder of the period led to the eventual exile of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians, and ultimately the destruction of the Temple and exile by the Babylonians.

Living at the time of the destruction, the prophet Jeremiah understood that God's very creation was coming undone and returning to its primeval chaotic state:

> I look at the earth, it is unformed and void [*tohu va-vohu*]; at the skies, and their light is gone. (Jeremiah 4:23)

This reference harks back to the second verse of the Torah, before God created order:

> The earth was unformed and void [*tohu va-vohu*], with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water. (Genesis 1:2)

The destruction of the Temple ends the vision of its serving as a new Garden of Eden. The people of Israel are exiled to Babylonia and to Egypt (see II Kings 25), reversing Abraham's journey from the area of Babylonia as well as the exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses.

The Temple and Solomon's palace are destroyed together, as God's kingdom and Israel's kingdom fall to Babylonia:

> He burned the House of the Lord, the king's palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem; he burned down the house of every notable person. (II Kings 25:9)

The destruction of the Temple and the exile sound like they are absolute, and most surviving Jews believed that God had abandoned them. The end of the Book of Lamentations poignantly reflects this dark despair of the people:

> Why have You forgotten us utterly, forsaken us for all time? Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old! For truly, You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us. (Lamentations 5:20–22)

Prophetic Visions of Hope

Confronting the people's feelings of rejection, the prophets envisioned a time beyond the current reality and offered much-needed hope to the despairing people. In Isaiah 50, the prophet invokes the notion that the exile should be likened to a separation, but not a divorce:

> Thus said the Lord: Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed? And which of My creditors was it to whom I sold you off? You were only sold off for your sins, and your mother dismissed for your crimes. (Isaiah 50:1)

Alternatively, Jeremiah posited an even more extreme position that the exile was a divorce, but God still was prepared to remarry Israel if the people were to abandon their idolatry:

> [The word of the Lord came to me] as follows: If a man divorces his wife, and she leaves him and marries another man, can he ever go back to her? Would not such a land be defiled? Now you have whored with many lovers: can you return to Me?—says the Lord. (Jeremiah 3:1)

Regardless, the reality was the same: The God-Israel relationship is eternal. Either there never was a divorce, or there was a divorce with an ongoing invitation to return.

In his celebrated prophecy of the Dry Bones, Ezekiel depicts the people as feeling dead. God, however, will miraculously restore them to their vitality and to their land:

> And He said to me, "O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone [*avedah tikvatenu*]; we are doomed.' Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel…." (Ezekiel 37:11–12)

This vision was intended as a parable to Israel. Like dead bones, Israel felt hopeless. God promised that He would restore life to the nation and bring them back to their land.[12]

In Isaiah 51, the prophet invokes God's eternal covenant with the Patriarchs, prophesying the nation's return to Israel and the restoration of the state of being like the Garden of Eden:

> Listen to Me, you who pursue justice, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock you were hewn from, to the quarry you were dug from. Look back to Abraham your father and to Sarah who brought you forth. For he was only one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. Truly the Lord has comforted Zion, comforted all her ruins; He has made her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the Garden of the Lord. Gladness and joy shall abide there, thanksgiving and the sound of music. (Isaiah 51:1–3)

Israel’s mission is to serve as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), the religious capital of the world that teaches humanity to return to the ideal state of the Garden of Eden:

> In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord’s House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: “Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. (Isaiah 2:2–4)

> The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play over a viper’s hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder’s den. In all of My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord as water covers the sea. (Isaiah 11:6–9)

Prior to the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah corresponded with the community already exiled to Babylonia in 597 bce with King Jehoiachin, instructing them to build a Jewish life while they waited for the restoration to their land. That restoration would come some seventy years after the rise of the Babylonian Empire:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons

> and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper…. For thus said the Lord: When Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will fulfill to you My promise of favor—to bring you back to this place. (Jeremiah 29:4–10)

The Jews were to retain their identity while living in the Diaspora, but they always knew that they would return home to Israel.

Summary

There are no biblical holidays to commemorate Israel's entry into the land. The Torah thus creates a national covenantal identity that transcends the Land of Israel. Joshua's ceremony of acceptance of the Torah after the people entered the land teaches that faithfulness to God lies at the heart of Israel's remaining in its land. The Talmud adds that the Torah's vision also looks outward to all humanity, as Israel has a role to play in building a model society and inspiring the nations of the world to the Torah's level of religious morality.

David and Solomon establish Jerusalem as God's capital in ruling the world as well as the political capital of Israel. The Temple reenacts the Revelation at Sinai, and also functions as a taste of the Garden of Eden. Solomon expresses the vision of the Torah, that the Temple is open to all God-fearing people, and not only to Israel. Solomon's reign reflects the messianic age.

Tragically, the sin of idolatry contributed to the division of the monarchy, the exile of the ten Northern tribes, and ultimately the exile of Judah along with the destruction of the Temple. God's very creation had come undone, and the Israelites returned to Babylonia and Egypt, reversing the journeys of Abraham and Moses. The people thought that the God-Israel covenant had come to an end.

It required prophetic vision to look beyond the dark reality of the destruction and exile. Prophets proclaimed that the exile was a separation from God, not a permanent divorce. Israel might feel dead, but God will revive them. The Patriarchal covenant is in full, eternal force, and God will restore the Eden-like state of Israel. While in exile, the people must build institutions to retain their identity. But they always will return home to Israel.

I. Israel in the Second Temple Period and in the Contemporary Period

A Miracle of History

Despite the intense despair of the people in the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the exile, Jeremiah offered a prophetic vision beyond the misery. There would be a full restoration to the land, but in the interim the Jews would need to build a strong Diaspora life:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper…. For thus said the Lord: When Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will

> fulfill to you My promise of favor—to bring you back to this place. (Jeremiah 29:4–10)

After generations of exile, the nation experienced a shocking turn of events. Approximately seventy years after its inception, the seemingly invincible Babylonian Empire suddenly collapsed in the wake of the Persian onslaught under Cyrus. Even more remarkably, Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. All of a sudden, the once seemingly impossible prophecies of Jeremiah were being realized before the people's eyes. The Book of Ezra opens with a reference to Jeremiah's prophecies, celebrating this miracle of history:

> In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows: "Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone of you of all His people—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the House of the Lord God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem; and all who stay behind, wherever he may be living, let the people of his place assist him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, besides the freewill offering to the House of God that is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:1–4)

Ezra chapter 2 contains a lengthy list of the people who returned to Israel. The extensive coverage gives the initial impression that the Jewish response to Cyrus' permission to return was overwhelmingly positive. This impression is diminished by the fact that only 42,360 people returned (Ezra 2:64). Evidently, most Jews chose to remain in exile.

Zechariah's Vision of a Wall of Fire Surrounding Jerusalem

The prophet Zechariah received a series of visions to encourage the Jews to complete the rebuilding of the Second Temple. One element he addressed was the shame people felt over the walls of Jerusalem, which continued to be breached after the Babylonian invasion:

> I looked up, and I saw a man holding a measuring line. “Where are you going?” I asked. “To measure Jerusalem,” he replied, “to see how long and wide it is to be.” But the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him. The former said to him, “Run to that young man and tell him: ‘Jerusalem shall be peopled as a city without walls, so many shall be the men and cattle it contains. And I Myself—declares the Lord—will be a wall of fire all around it, and I will be a glory inside it.’” (Zechariah 2:5–9).

Zechariah challenged the public perception of the broken walls of Jerusalem as being shameful, as later reported in the Book of Nehemiah:

> They replied, “The survivors who have survived the captivity there in the province are in dire trouble and disgrace; Jerusalem’s wall is full of breaches, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” (Nehemiah 1:3)

> Then I said to them, “You see the bad state we are in—Jerusalem lying in ruins and its gates destroyed by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and suffer no more disgrace.” (Nehemiah 2:17)

In Zechariah’s vision, the breached walls presented an opportunity to expand the borders of the city through a massive population increase. Instead of requiring physical walls for security, God would serve as a wall of fire to protect His people.

Prophecies are not fulfilled automatically. People need to do their part to realize the potential of the moment.[13] In this spirit, Zechariah immediately follows his vision with a call to the Jews still living in Babylonia:

> “Away, away! Flee from the land of the north—says the Lord—though I swept you [there] like the four winds of heaven—declares the Lord.” Away, escape, O Zion, you who dwell in Fair Babylon.... The Lord will take Judah to Himself as His portion in the Holy Land,[14] and He will choose Jerusalem once more. (Zechariah 2:10–16)

If the people want Jerusalem’s population to expand beyond the city walls, then the exiles need to leave Babylonia *en masse* and move to Israel!

Zechariah also prophesies that God will personally purify the land from its stains of sin:

> I will remove that country’s guilt in a single day. (Zechariah 3:9)

In Zechariah chapter 5, the prophet explains that God will eliminate sinners, and then sin itself from the land.[15] In our discussions of the Land of Israel in the Torah, we observed that there is no ritual to purify the land from severe sin. Only exile of the sinners and God’s intervention can allow the land proper opportunity to recover. God’s Presence and the people now can return to a restored land.

Unfortunately, most Jews ignored Zechariah’s call to return and chose to remain in exile. The ideal vision never was fulfilled. In the final analysis, Jerusalem

was better off with a wall. Approximately 75 years after Zechariah's prophecy, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem (445 bce). The city was so desolate that he decreed that one-tenth of the Jewish community must resettle in Jerusalem so that it would remain a viable city (Nehemiah 11:1–2).

Within two generations of exile, there was a severe change in the mentality of the Jews. Those who had been exiled feared that the God-Israel relationship was over, and they could not even envision praying to God while in exile: "How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?" (Psalm 137:4). Two generations later, most Jews were comfortable remaining in exile. They lived a robust life in the Diaspora, and evidently no longer perceived the exile as the supreme punishment of the Torah.

Putting the evidence together, several rabbinic sources consider the Second Temple period as a missed opportunity for the full messianic redemption:

> If she be a wall, we will build upon her a turret of silver; if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar. Had you made yourself like a wall and had all come up in the days of Ezra, you would have been compared to silver, which no rottenness can ever affect. Now that you have come up like doors, you are like cedarwood, which rottenness prevails over. (*Yoma* 9b; cf. *Kuzari* II:24)

Simultaneously, the very existence of the Second Temple and a flourishing Jewish community in Israel convincingly demonstrated that the God-Israel relationship endures beyond the exile and is eternal. Malachi invokes the rebuilding of the land as a sign of God's abiding love of Israel:

> I have shown you love, said the Lord. But you ask, "How have You shown us love?" After all—declares the Lord—Esau is Jacob's brother; yet I have accepted Jacob and have rejected Esau. I have made his hills a desolation, his territory a home for beasts of the desert. If Edom thinks, "Though crushed, we can build the ruins again," thus

> said the Lord of Hosts: They may build, but I will tear down. And so they shall be known as the region of wickedness, the people damned forever of the Lord. Your eyes shall behold it, and you shall declare, “Great is the Lord beyond the borders of Israel!” (Malachi 1:2–5)

Similarly, the leaders during the religious revival under Ezra and Nehemiah highlight God’s eternal covenant with Abraham and his descendants:

> You are the Lord God, who chose Abram, who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and changed his name to Abraham. Finding his heart true to You, You made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite—to give it to his descendants. And You kept Your word, for You are righteous. (Nehemiah 9:7–8)

Professor Yehudah Elitzur

Professor Yehudah Elitzur[16] wrote from the vantage point of Jews returning to Israel after nearly 2000 years of exile, rather than simply after seventy years of Babylonian exile. This afforded him a broader perspective of the biblical passages.

In an essay on the religious significance of the Land of Israel in the Bible, Professor Elitzur reiterates the eternality of the covenant of the land alongside the threat of exile for unfaithfulness. Even if there would be an exile, no other nation will settle permanently in Israel. The land eternally belongs to Abraham’s descendants:

> I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God. (Genesis 17:8)

The ingathering of Jewish exiles to Israel in the contemporary period is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that the land is an everlasting holding.

Lands typically do not remain desolate when they are conquered. Normally, other people occupy them. However, God promises that the Land of Israel would remain desolate if the people go into exile:

> I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin. (Leviticus 26:32–33)

In the ancient halakhic Midrash *Sifra*, the Sages remark that the uninhabited land is a positive dimension within this prophecy of doom. The land remains uninhabited so that Jews could return to an empty land.

In the thirteenth century, Ramban witnessed the desolation in Israel when he moved there toward the end of his life. He understood this desolation as proof of God's promise that the land eternally belongs to the Jews, and that God would return them to Israel one day:

> [The desolation] constitutes a good tiding, proclaiming that during all our exiles, our land will not accept our enemies.... Since the time that we left it, [the land] has not accepted any nation or people, and they all try to settle it... This is a great proof and assurance to us. (Ramban on Leviticus 26:16)

In the nineteenth century, Mark Twain was flabbergasted by the fact that Israel was almost completely desolate. In his *Innocents Abroad*, he remarked:

> Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince... Can the curse of the Deity beautify a land? Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies.

Professor Elitzur observes further that the Canaanites who lived in the land prior to the Israelites succeeded in exploiting the natural resources of the land:

> When the Lord your God brings you into the land that He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to you—great and flourishing cities that you did not build, houses full of all good things that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and you eat your fill. (Deuteronomy 6:10–11)

However, the Canaanites never became a unified nation. Joshua defeated 31 kings, each a ruler of an independent city-state. In contrast, the people of Israel formed a united nation, the only people ever to do so in Israel. Moreover, no nation after Israel could exploit the natural resources of the land. Instead, the land remained a barren wasteland for nearly 2,000 years.

Professor Elitzur invokes another rule of history: All other exiled people either assimilate into the dominant culture of the host nation, or else they are dominant because they come in large groups and take over the culture of the new land (e.g., the British in America, the Spanish in Argentina).

Despite being a minority, the Jews never totally assimilated into their host nations. They also remained a minority and never were able to set up a Jewish land outside of Israel. The Torah's curse that the people of Israel would be scattered and downtrodden in exile contains a hidden blessing, since they would always remain outsiders and therefore return one day to Israel.

The Jewish people and the Land of Israel belong to one another, and *need* one another. When they are together, both land and people flourish. When they are separate, Jews suffer and the land lies desolate.

Summary

At the beginning of the Second Temple period, the Jews were miraculously allowed to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. While many Jews did return, the vast majority chose to remain in exile. Instead of the full redemption occurring then, the opportunity was squandered. It appears that the non-return of many Jews contributed meaningfully to the failure to realize the messianic era.

Although the ideal age did not occur in the Second Temple period, the Jews realized that God's covenantal promises were indeed eternal. Their return to their land demonstrated God's abiding love and commitment to the people of Israel.

In the Torah, God promises that the Land of Israel is an everlasting holding for the people of Israel. The ingathering of exiles in the modern era, the land blooming after remaining desolate for nearly 2,000 years, and the fact that

the Jews never completely assimilated nor formed a dominant culture elsewhere all fulfill divine promises. These facts are unique in human history, all attesting to the eternality of God's promises.

We live in a miraculous age with the Jewish people returned to Israel after such a lengthy exile. We cannot know how everything will unfold without prophecy. However, we may derive several religious lessons from the biblical corpus: (1) The return of the Jewish people to Israel confirms the biblical covenantal promises dating back to Abraham. (2) It is a fulfillment of God's promise that the land would remain a barren wasteland in the absence of the Jews, and that it would flourish once again when the Jews return. (3) The people of Israel must be grateful to God for this gift, and never take sole credit for this remarkable achievement or for the rehabilitation of the land. (4) The modern State of Israel poses a challenge to world Jewry to live up to God's covenant through the Torah, and to participate in rebuilding the land.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared in Hayyim Angel, *Cornerstones: The Bible and Jewish Ideology* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2020), pp. 1–51.

[2] For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "'The Chosen People': An Ethical Challenge," in Angel, *Increasing Peace Through Balanced Torah Study. Conversations* 27 (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2017), pp. 38–47.

[3] Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 84.

[4] Shlomo Riskin, *Torah Lights: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2005), pp. 307–312.

[5] See, for example, Jeremiah 2:7–8, 23; 7:30; 19:13; 32:34; Ezekiel 20:7, 18, 31; 22:3, 4; 23:7, 30; 36:18; 37:23.

[6] See Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua* vol. 1 (second series) (Hebrew) ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004), pp. 90–91.

[7] See, for example, Deuteronomy 5:16, 28; 6:10–11, 23; 7:13; 8:10; 9:4–6, 23; 10:11; 11:9, 17, 21, 25; 12:1, 9; 15:4, 7; 16:20; 17:4; 18:9; 19:1–2, 8, 10, 14; 20:16; 21:1, 23; 24:4; 25:15, 19; 26:1–11, 15.

[8] See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:10, 23; 7:13; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 19:8; 26:3, 15.

[9] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Birkon Mesorat HaRav*, ed. David Hellman (New York: OU Press, 2016), pp. 11–12.

[10] Uriel Simon, "Biblical Destinies: Conditional Promises," in *Jewish Bible Theology: Perspectives and Case Studies*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 79–87.

[11] Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), pp. 9–17.

[12] This prophecy is so powerful that the writers of the *Hatikvah* drew from it when composing what became Israel's national anthem. Ezekiel speaks of the exiles saying that "our hope is gone"—*avedah tikvatenu*. The anthem triumphantly responds, *od lo avedah tikvatenu*, "Our hope is still not lost!"

[13] For further discussion of this principle, see Hayyim Angel, "Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1–12 in Context," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 117–126.

[14] This verse is the only time in all Tanakh where the Land of Israel is called the Holy Land. Harry M. Orlinsky observes that Christians preferred calling the Land of Israel "the Holy Land," whereas Jews preferred *Eretz Yisrael*. Only as Jews left their ghettos did some adopt the term "the Holy Land." The term "*Eretz Yisrael*" referring to the entire Land of Israel also is rare in Tanakh, found only in I Samuel 13:19; Ezekiel 27:17; 40:2; 47:18; and II Chronicles 34:7 ("The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant between God and Israel," in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986], pp. 54–55, 64).

[15] See further analysis of this passage in Hayyim Angel, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: Prophecy in an Age of Uncertainty* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016), pp. 66–70.

[16] Yehudah Elitzur, "The Land of Israel in Biblical Thought" (Hebrew), in Elitzur, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra: Mehkarim Geografiyim, Historiyim, va-Hagotiyim*, ed. Yoel Elitzur and Amos Frisch (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 261–279.