

***Eretz Yisrael* in Tanakh and Jewish Thought**

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A. *ERETZ YISRAEL* – HOMELAND OR MISSION

The first time that *Eretz Yisrael* is connected to *Am Yisrael* in the Torah is in God's command to Avraham:

Go you out of your country, and from your homeland, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. (*Bereishit* 12:1)

Eretz Yisrael is not presented here as Israel's homeland. On the contrary, *Eretz Yisrael* is portrayed here as the land on behalf of which one leaves one's house and homeland. *Eretz Yisrael* is presented as the antithesis of a homeland, as Avraham's place of "exile," as a place whose name is not even mentioned. *Eretz Yisrael* is not the natural homeland of the Jewish people, but rather the land that God gave them so that they may serve Him there.

The Torah emphasizes the fact that *Eretz Yisrael* is not our natural homeland. There is a two-fold danger in seeing *Eretz Yisrael* as the Jewish people's natural homeland: viewing it as an absolute value and viewing it as an absolute fact. The "*ma'apilim*" mentioned in *Parashat Shelach* (*Bamidbar* 14:40-45) exemplify those who see the land of Israel as an absolute value. After having been informed of their punishment for their part in the sin of the spies, the people wish to correct their mistake and enter the land of Israel. Moshe warns them: "Go not up, for the Lord is not among you; so that you may not be smitten before your enemies!" (*Bamidbar* 14:42). But the *ma'apilim* ignore the warning; they fail to understand that the value of living in *Eretz Yisrael* is conditional upon the will of God, and that when God commands not to go to Israel, going to Israel is a sin. The *ma'apilim* erred in their understanding of the true lesson of the sin of the spies, mistakenly concluding that *Eretz Yisrael* is above and beyond all other values. In the end, the *ma'apilim* were routed: "Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites who dwelt in that hill, and smote them and discomfited them, as far as Chorma" (*Bereishit* 15:45). This is what happened to those who transformed the land into an absolute value.

There are others who turn the settlement of *Eretz Yisrael* into an "absolute fact," as if the holiness of the land guarantees that its inhabitants will never be driven out into exile. To counteract this idea, the people of Israel are warned over and over again:

You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations ... **that the land vomit not you out also**, when you defile it. (*Vayikra* 18:26-28)

The prophet Yechezkel also comes out against this perception of our continued existence in *Eretz Yisrael* as irrevocable:

Son of man, they that inhabit those waste places of the land of Israel speak, saying, "Avraham was one man, and yet he inherited the land: but we are many; the land is given us for inheritance."

Therefore say to them, "Thus says the Lord God: You eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood; and shall you possess the land? You stand upon you sword, you carry out disgusting deeds, and you defile every man his neighbor's wife; and shall you possess the land?" (*Yechezkel* 33:24-26)

The land of Israel is a temporary dwelling place; our continued living there depends at all times upon the will of God, who rewards us for our good deeds. Not only does our very existence in *Eretz Yisrael* depend upon God, but also the quality of that existence. The verses in *Devarim* compare the land of Egypt to the land of Israel:

For the land, into which you go to possess it, is not as the land of Egypt, from whence you came out, where you sowed your seed, and watered it with your foot, like a garden of vegetables. But the land into which you go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinks water of the rain of heaven; a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:10-12)

The commentators explain the significance of this passage. In *Eretz Yisrael* adequate watering of the fields is not guaranteed; it depends upon the rainfall. For that reason, those who live in Israel depend at all times, openly and explicitly, upon the grace of God. Once again, the same principle is emphasized: Even from an agricultural perspective, *Eretz Yisrael* is "a temporary dwelling," its living conditions being dependent upon the will of God. These verses are meant to counter the very natural inclination to see our settlement in Israel as self-evident, an inclination that in certain circumstances may receive theological support, relying on the sanctity of the land and the eternal connection between it and the people. Over and over again, the Torah stresses in unequivocal manner: Our settlement in *Eretz Yisrael* is neither absolute nor unconditional.

Rashi's opening words to his commentary on the Torah are often cited in this context:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: The Torah should have commenced with (*Shemot* 12:1) "This month shall be unto you the first of the months," which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with [the account of] creation? Because of (*Tehillim* 111:6): "He declared to His people the strength of His works, in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations." For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, "You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan]," Israel may reply to them, "All the earth

belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom it seemed proper in His eyes. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us." (Rashi, [Bereishit 1:1](#))

It is important to emphasize that Rashi is not asserting that it is God's **arbitrary** will that the land of Israel should **always** belong to the Jewish people. It is God's will that the land pass over to Israel because of "the sin of the Emorites," because the land vomits out its inhabitants, as is mentioned many times in Scripture. Therefore, Israel too, if they are not heedful of the Torah, will be spewed forth from their land. (The land will never, however, be given to another nation.)

The *midrash's* statement that God gave the land "to whom it seemed proper in His eyes" is rooted in the book of *Yirmiyahu*:

I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and I have given it to whom it seemed proper in My eyes. And now have I given all these lands to the hand of Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Bavel, My servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. ([Yirmiyahu 27:5-6](#))

Here, the same expression – “and I have given it to whom it seemed proper in My eyes” – is used with respect to Nevuchadnetzar; and later in the chapter Tzidkiyahu is warned that he too must submit himself before the king of Bavel! In other words, the very formulation used by Rashi emphasizes that our presence in *Eretz Yisrael* is not assured, that it is in need of constant reinforcement. *Eretz Yisrael* is not our natural homeland, but rather our mission and destiny. This point is explicitly stated by Ramban, who explains the *midrash* cited by Rashi:

Rabbi Yitzchak then gave a reason for it. The Torah began with the chapter of "In the beginning God created" and recounted the whole subject of creation until the making of man, how He granted him dominion over the works of His hands, and that He put all things under his feet; and how the Garden of Eden, which is the choicest of places created in this world, was made the place of his abode until his sin caused his expulsion therefrom; and how the people of the generation of the flood were completely expelled from the world on account of their sin, and the only righteous one among them – he [Noach] and his sons – were saved; and how the sin of their descendants caused them to be scattered to various places and dispersed to different countries...

If so, it is proper that when a people continues to sin it should lose its place and another people should come to inherit its land, for such has been the rule of God in the world from the beginning. This is true all the more regarding that which is related in Scripture, namely that Canaan was cursed and sold as a servant forever. It would therefore not be proper that he inherit the choicest of places of the civilized world. Rather, the servants of God – the seed of his beloved one, Avraham – should inherit it... That is to say, He expelled those who rebelled against Him, and settled therein those who served Him so that they know by serving Him they will inherit it, **whereas**

if they sin against Him, the land will vomit them out, just as it vomited out the nation before them. (Ramban, commentary to *Bereishit* 1:1)

It is important to note that, according to Ramban, Rabbi Yitzchak means to say that the primary message of the creation saga is that man is judged according to his actions, and that when an individual or nation sins before God – they are cast out of the land. This message is directed at *Eretz Yisrael* even when its inhabitants are Jews.

This notion also comes to expression in the Torah section that is read when first-fruits are offered:

And you shall go to the priest that shall be in those days, and say to him, “I profess this day to the Lord your God, that I am come to the country which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.” And the priest shall take the basket out of your hand, and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God. And you shall speak and say before the Lord your God, “An Aramean nomad was my father, and he went down to Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous... And the Lord brought us out of Egypt... And He brought us to this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (*Devarim* 26:1-9)

What nation opens the description of its connection to its land with the assertion that that the nation's founding father was an Aramean nomad, a foreign stranger? This, indeed, is the essence of the passage recited when bringing first-fruits: a declaration that we are strangers in the land, and therefore what we bring to God belongs to Him, and not to us. Ibn Ezra and Rashbam offered different suggestions regarding precisely who the “Aramean nomad” was, but they both agree that the declaration emphasizes the same idea – dependence on God in conquering the land.

And the simplest explanation is that the Aramean is Ya'akov, as if the verse said: “When my father lived in Aram, he was *oved*” – meaning that he was impoverished... For I did not inherit the land from my father, as he was poor when he came to Aram; he was also a foreigner when he came to Egypt, and he was few in number, but he later returned as a great nation. And You, *Hashem*, released us from slavery and gave us a good land. (Ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 26:8)

Avraham was an Aramean who was wandering (*oved*) and exiled from the land of Aram... In other words, our fathers came from a foreign land to this land, and God gave it to us. (Rashbam, *ibid.*)

This perception is also the basis of the laws pertaining to the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, as well as the laws of tithes: the land belongs not to us, but to God.

The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. (*Vayikra* 25:23)

Let us conclude this section with the piercing words of the *Shelah*, Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz:

One who lives in *Eretz Yisrael* must always keep in mind the name Canaan, which denotes servitude and submission [*hakhna'a*]... On the contrary, in the land which God cares for, one must be more of a servant and more submissive. As King David, may he rest in peace, says: "I am a stranger in the land." That is to say: I make myself more of a stranger in the holy land... The rule that emerges: Those who live in the land [of Israel] must live in submission, like strangers; they must not see themselves as living in a strong dwelling place. (Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, *Shenei Luchot ha-Brit*, III, 11)

B. DIVINE PRESENCE

There is another fundamental idea regarding *Eretz Yisrael* that finds expression in Scripture. Even though God is sovereign Lord of the entire universe, *Eretz Yisrael* is His unique and outstanding portion. This idea is reiterated many times throughout Scripture. Thus, for example, the tribes who settled in western *Eretz Yisrael* said to the tribes who settled on the eastern side of the Jordan as follows:

However, if the land of your possession be unclean, then pass over to the land of the possession of the Lord, where the Lord's tabernacle dwells, and take possession among us: but rebel not against the Lord, nor rebel against us, in building an altar for yourselves besides the altar of the Lord our God. (*Yehoshua* 22:19)

King David expressed the same idea:

For they have driven me out this day from being joined to the inheritance of the Lord, saying, Go, serve other gods. (*Shemuel* 26:19)

Modern scholars see this as a remnant of ancient idolatry which restricted the realm of each god to the borders of a particular country. Yechezkel Kaufmann dismissed their arguments:

Monotheism teaches that there is but one God in the world, creator and master of the entire universe, and therefore, of necessity, "universal" in the cosmic sense. However, monotheism is not bound in any essential way to the idea that the one God reveals Himself to all people in equal measure, or that He extends His grace to all of them in the same way...

God rules over all the lands, He acts in Sodom, in Shin'ar, in Egypt, in Nineveh, in Tarsus, and in all places. But His cultic sanctity He gathered into one land, the place where He is to be worshipped. (Yechezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit*, pp. 613-616)

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas argues that we are not dealing here with a decision on God's part to reveal His Presence in one particular country. He understands that God reveals Himself everywhere in equal measure. But because of the unique qualities of *Eretz Yisrael*, its residents are specially prepared to reveal and give expression to that providence:

As for whether there is more providence in one place than in another, many verses in the Torah indicate that there is a great difference between places... What must be explained is the reason for this difference in providence between places, if God relates to all of them in the same way. This is not difficult to explain. Even if God relates to all places in the same manner, if those over whom He extends His providence do not relate to them in the same manner, there will perforce be a difference in the providence. Since those over whom He extends His providence do not relate in the same manner to all places, this explains why in different places there will be a difference in the preparations necessary for true service, such as abstinence and seclusion. This is for heavenly and terrestrial reasons, as alluded to by the Sages that *Eretz Yisrael* is unique, to the point that they knew by tradition that prophecy rests only in *Eretz Yisrael*. (Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, *Or Ha-Shem, ma'amar* II, 2, chap. 6)

C. THE UNIQUENESS OF ERETZ ISRAEL

What is the uniqueness of *Eretz Yisrael*, and why was it chosen over all other countries? Many Jewish thinkers did not relate to this question at all. Many others, however, suggested a variety of explanations.

During certain periods, rational explanations prevailed, which spoke of the climactic or other such advantages of *Eretz Yisrael*. Thus, for example, writes the author of the *Keli Yakar*:

And similarly, the Holy Land is home to peaceful harmony because of its combination of opposites and because it is midway between cold and heat, it being the center of the world and having the middle climate and elevation among the seven climates and elevations, as the verse states: "Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth." The mixing of cold and heat corresponds to the quality of peaceful harmony. (*Ollelot Efrayim*, Jerusalem, 1991, I, p. 67)

Jewish scholars of the early modern period adopted this position with certain modifications:

So, too, *Eretz Yisrael*, called Canaan from time immemorial, is distinguished in its merits and qualities over all other lands... Physical features that distinguish it from all the neighboring countries effect not only its yield and produce, but also the traits of the people living therein... The winds that blow from the mountains and the ocean blend the air, and therefore the climate of *Eretz Yisrael* is good, bringing good health to the body. (Heinrich Graetz, *Sefer Divrei Yemei Yisra'el*, I, p. 9)

The scholar and traveler Henry Baker Tristram emphasized that the variety in climate and terrain found in *Eretz Yisrael* allowed it to become a universal focal point:

This land, which was chosen as the place where God revealed Himself to man and the cradle of the faith that was to spread across the entire world, has two impressive qualities: First, there is nothing romantic in its terrain – nothing to shock the imagination or reinforce superstition; and second, the amazing variety of climate, terrain, and yield... It would have been impossible to find a more fitting place to provide parables for the book which was intended... to teach the truth to the peoples of the entire world, from the tropics to the polar regions. (H.M. Tristram, *The Land of Israel: A Journal of Travels*)

There is a famous *midrash* that emphasizes the culture prevailing in *Eretz Yisrael*, rather than its particular geographical qualities:

When Avraham was travelling through Aram Naharayyim and Aram Nachor, he 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 Tzor [i.e., the northern border of the Land of Israel] and saw them engaged in weeding and hoeing at the proper seasons, he exclaimed: "Would that my portion might be in this country!" Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "Unto your seed have I given this land" (*Bereishit* 15:18). (*Bereishit Rabba* 39:8)

It would seem that this *midrash* does not recognize any unique qualities of *Eretz Yisrael*, other than the culture that developed there. It may be argued, however, that it is the unique qualities of *Eretz Yisrael* which led its cultural development in this direction.

Those with a mystical bent have adopted an entirely different approach. Thus, for example, writes Rabbi Moshe Alkabetz:

Just as some countries yield more agricultural produce than others, and some countries produce more silver, gold and precious stones than others, so too all types of perfection flow from this country. Therefore, it is called "the city of justice," because justice grows there, as do other types of perfection. The sanctity of the land is not like that of other lands; it also has a divine element... Those who reside in its pure air will day and night be surrounded by holy things. (Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, *Brit Ha-Levi, Teshuva*, Third Principle, 41)

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi is one of the founding fathers of this approach. He understood that the uniquely miraculous qualities of *Eretz Yisrael* prepare it for the influence of divine revelation:

You will have no difficulty in perceiving that one country may have higher qualifications than others. There are places in which particular plants, metals, or animals are found... Priority belongs, in the first instance, to the people which, as

stated before, constitute the essence and kernel [of the nations]. In the second instance, it would belong to the country, on account of the religious acts connected with it, which I would compare to the cultivation of the vineyard. No other place would share the distinction of the divine influence, just as no other mountain might be able to produce good wine. (Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi, *Kuzari*, II, 10-12)

A direct continuation of Ha-Levi's approach may be found in the famous words of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook:

Eretz Yisrael is not a superficial element, a possession external to [the essence] of the nation, merely a means to the goal of [establishing] a comprehensive union and fortifying its material, or even its spiritual, existence. *Eretz Yisrael* is an essential element connected by way of a living bond to the nation, attached through its inner qualities to its essence. (Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Orot*)

Ha-Levi and Rabbi Kook emphasize two points: 1) the mystical uniqueness of *Eretz Yisrael*; 2) the harmony it enjoys with the inner qualities of the people of Israel.

On the mystical plane, many formulations of the uniqueness of *Eretz Yisrael* have been proposed: Only *Eretz Yisrael* is watched over by God Himself and not by His angels, *Eretz Yisrael* is closely connected to the gates of Heaven, etc. Even a non-observant Jew, socialist pioneer A.D. Gordon, expressed this feeling:

It seems that here (i.e., in *Eretz Yisrael*), the entire essence of the divine profusion that flows from all the worlds into the soul of man, and especially into the soul of the Jew, is altogether dissimilar, entirely different from [that found] in the lands of the Diaspora. In the language of the soul – and only in the language of the soul – I would say that the essence of the infinite, the essence of truth, sanctity, beauty, might, the essence of all the spheres, is acquired here by the soul in a different manner, in a different way, and absorbed in different combinations. (A.D. Gordon, *Mivchar Ketavim*, p. 203)

Prof. Yehuda Elitzur developed an entirely different approach to this issue. Elitzur made an interesting proposal, claiming that the verses in *Devarim* that stress *Eretz Yisrael's* continuous dependence on the will of God in terms of rain are but one example of a more general principle. *Eretz Yisrael* is the land of Divine Providence, the land that God always watches over. From a political perspective, for example, *Eretz Yisrael* neighbors great powers and the fate of her inhabitants constantly depends on the will of the Creator. In *Eretz Yisrael*, the sense of dependence is stronger:

Why were you brought to this land? Because here you are dependent upon Divine providence. This is Scripture's definition, stated in the lofty and poetic style which characterizes it. Had we asked a Jew of the old style for his definition, his answer would have been: This is a land where one can only survive on miracles. (Yehuda Elitzur, *Yisra'el ve-ha-Mikra*, pp. 276-277)

According to Prof. Elitzur's profound words, *Eretz Yisrael* was chosen from among all countries precisely because, from all perspectives, continued existence in that country is at all times dependent upon the grace of God. Climactically, politically, economically, and security-wise – it is the feeling of insecurity and utter dependence that sets the land of Israel apart. Those who live in *Eretz Yisrael* are in greater need of Heaven's mercy than the residents of any other country.

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