



## **Why The Return To Zion? The Jewish Connection To The Land of Israel**

**By Alex Grobman**

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Not long after the establishment of the State of Israel, Abba Eban, Israel's representative to the United Nations, remarked, "The peace on Israel's borders may be no more than the peace of a quiescent volcano; and the crisis of state in its immediate external relationships remain unsolved."<sup>1</sup>

Given the intractable nature of this conflict, many ask why the Jews have been so tenacious in their desire to reconstitute the Jewish state in the land of Israel. What is it about this land that has inspired their love of Zion through centuries of exile?

Culturally, during the 18 centuries of Jewish life in the Diaspora, the connection to the land of Israel played a vital role in the value system of Jewish communities and was a basic determinant in their self-recognition as a group. Without the connection to the land of Israel, the people who practice Judaism would simply be a religious community, without national and ethnic components. Jews were distinct from the Muslim and Christian communities in which they lived because of their religious beliefs and practices and the eternal link to the land of their forefathers. That is why Jews considered themselves — and are seen by others — as a minority living in exile.<sup>2</sup>

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained: "For the Jews and for them alone [the land of Israel] was the one and only Homeland, the only conceivable place where they could find liberation and independence, the land toward which their minds and hearts had been uplifted for a score of centuries and where their roots had clung in spite of all adversity. . . . It was the homeland with which an indestructible bond of national, physical, religious and spiritual character had been preserved, and where the Jews had in essence remained — and were now once more in fact — a major element of the population."<sup>3</sup>

The Jews did not publicly challenge the occupation of their land by the empires of the East and West. They did so in their homes, sanctuaries, books, and prayers. Religious rituals were instituted to remember the destruction of the temple and the subsequent exile. During times of joy and sorrow, Zion is always part of a Jew's thoughts and liturgy. At least three times a day, observant Jews pray for the redemption of Zion and Jerusalem and for her well-being.<sup>4</sup>

When the Muslims invaded Palestine in 634, ending four centuries of conflict between Persia and Rome, they found direct descendants of Jews who had lived in the country since biblical times. Rabbinical leaders there continued to argue about "whether most of Palestine is in the hands of the Gentiles," or "whether the greater part of Palestine is in the hands of Israel."

Such a determination was essential, since according to *halacha*[Jewish law] if Jews ruled the country, then they were obligated to observe religious agricultural practices in one way, and in another if they were not in control.<sup>5</sup>

As Muslim hegemony prevailed, major Arab contributions to history originated in Damascus, Mecca, Cairo, and Baghdad. Little came from Jerusalem, indicating the low regard the area held for its captors and its minimal occupation by 16 nations. Similarly, while the land of Palestine was two percent of the Arab-controlled land-mass, to the Jewish people it was forever the fount of their religion, their homeland.<sup>6</sup>

In testimony before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine in 1947, David Ben-Gurion, later Israel's first prime minister, pointed out that more than 3,000 years before the Mayflower left England for the New World, Jews fled from Egypt. Jews even slightly cognizant of their faith know that every spring Jews commemorate and remember the liberation from slavery and the Exodus from Egypt to the land of Israel. Those who observe the seder (the Passover meal and retelling of the exodus from Egypt), end it with two sentences: "This year we are here; next year we shall be in [Jerusalem] the land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year we shall be free."<sup>7</sup>

Though bound to its religious foundation, a Jewish State also means "Jewish security. Even in countries where he seems secure, the Jew lacks a feeling of security. Why? Because even if he is safe, he has not provided his safety for himself. Somebody else provides for his security. The State of Israel provides such security."<sup>8</sup> There Jews will be "free from fear, dependence, not the objects of pity and sympathy, of philanthropy and justice, at the mercy of others. We believe we are entitled to that as human beings and as a people."<sup>9</sup> To the Arabs who opposed the Jewish return, Ben Gurion, said that the "the closer and more quickly we draw together, the better it will be both for us and for you. The Jewish people and the Arab people need each other in the fashioning of their future as free people in this part of the world."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey S. Eban, "The Future Of Arab-Jewish Relations," Commentary (September 1948), 199.

<sup>2</sup> Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*, New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1981), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1967), 57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 55, 61-67.

<sup>5</sup> Yaacov Herzog, *A People That Dwells Alone* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1975). 33; *Ibid.* 57. While Jewish settlement in recent times began in 1881, in the 3rd and 4th centuries, Palestine was probably the largest and most significant Jewish community in the world. Benjamin of Tudela, Saadia Gaon, Maimonides and Judah Halevi were there from the 12th century and Nachmanides from the early 13th century. Rabbi Estori Ha-Parhi, author of *Kaftor va-Ferah*, demonstrates how, since biblical times, Jews have lived on the land continuously.

<sup>6</sup> Heschel, *Israel: An Echo Eternity*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *The Jewish Case Before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency For Palestine, 1947), 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 75.