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Israel and the Diaspora in Jewish law

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INTRODUCTION

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Judaism's ties to a specific land make it unique among world religions. From the days of Abraham, Judaism has been associated with the Land. It was not even Abraham's native land, but one he entered at God's command. The Land of Israel, which belonged to the people of Israel, was mentioned often in the Bible. Yet most Jews throughout our long history have lived outside the Land, in the Diaspora. This circumstance has raised the tensions that are the subject of this book.

Other religions have ties to holy sites that are places of pilgrimage, but only a few adherents ever chose to settle in them permanently. Christians established a monastery on Mount Sinai and in other locations associated with the Bible or the life of Jesus, but only a handful of monks reside at Sinai. The same is true for the followers of Islam who pilgrimage to shrines associated with Mohammed, but make no effort to settle there.

For us as Jews, God's promise to the patriarchs combined the blessing of the people with the gift of the Land. That promise was reiterated again and again, and the "Promised Land" became the goal of the entire people as it wandered through the desert from Egypt. Our annual cycle of Torah readings has reinforced the promise; it is the dominant and underlying theme.

It was therefore natural for modern Zionism, a nationalist movement akin to many others, to awaken an interest in the Land of Israel. It was very different, however, because it was not a nationalist movement against the "overlord" and oppressor, but one that sought settlement in a distant country almost totally unknown except through biblical imagery. Zionism added the thought that we could be "like all other people" with a land we would call our own and in which we could do as we pleased.

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Our century, with the Holocaust and various oppressions, brought a critical need for a permanent place of Jewish refuge, and the State of Israel has fulfilled that role. This has gained the support of Jews throughout the world. Many oppressed Jews have settled in Israel, but others have rejected it for a new Diaspora existence.

Our association with the Land of Israel, however, has always been balanced by the idea of a people "chosen" for a broader mission in the world. The aspect of particularism that associated Jews and Judaism with the Land is countered by a universalism that seeks a role in the broader world and that represents an equally majestic dream. The Diaspora has been seen in this light—also as part of the Divine plan, which uses us and our life for a broader purpose.

The prophets of Israel initially saw expulsion from the Land as Divine punishment but later understood it as part of God's plan, and therefore normative. God would resettle the people of Israel in our own land in the Messianic Age, but until this Divine intervention occurred we should live out our destiny scattered throughout the world.

Through the ages, economic forces and human inertia kept us in the lands where we had settled. This response began in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (400 B.C.E.). They received permission for Jews to return to Israel and to rebuild the land as well as the Temple, but the vast majority decided to remain in Persia. In that early period the Temple continued to attract Jews to make pilgrimages in the land; but later, when the Temple had been destroyed,

Jews found they could live a complete Jewish life anywhere, even while praying for the restoration of the Temple in the Messianic Age. Jews in small numbers continued on pilgrimages to Israel, but few moved to the Land.

We therefore possess two competing visions of where Jewish life should be lived: the Diaspora and the Land of Israel. Each could be fully justified. Until modern times and the reestablishment of the State of Israel, these thoughts were more theoretical than actual.

Reform Judaism has emphasized the universal aspect within Judaism. We began as a religious movement two generations before Zionism; we sought equality in the lands where we lived at the same time as we wished to influence those lands. We felt that our mission in the world could be best accomplished through living in the lands where we found ourselves; we would move the world toward our Messianic dream. That optimism was best expressed by the American Reform movement at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Reform and Zionism therefore clashed. By the 1930's the universal and particular tensions of Judaism were felt more strongly within the Reform movement, and the particular and the universal came into balance. The Columbus Platform of 1937 gave a place to Zionism within Reform, but without the demand that we personally resettle in the Land of Israel. Zionism has grown stronger within Reform ranks through ARZA, through the placement of the headquarters of the World Union in Jerusalem, and through the establishment of Progressive congregations and several Reform kibbutzim in Israel. All Reform rabbis train in Israel for a year, and a separate group is educated to serve the Reform movement there. Yet the vast majority of Reform Jews, along with our Orthodox and

Conservative counterparts, continue to live outside the Land of Israel with no regrets and with no intention of moving.

We must therefore constantly deal with the realities of our Diaspora existence and the ancient Messianic dream of the Land of Israel, for some restated in modern secular Zionist form. This tension has been an important theme in the *halakhic* literature; this book will deal with it.