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**Israel and the Diaspora in Jewish law**

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**Pittsburgh, 1997**

THE PRIMACY OF THE DIASPORA

**urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-vlib-10210**

## THE PRIMACY OF THE DIASPORA

Walter Jacob

**J**udaism contains many contradictions, but none has been as glaring as the status of Israel through the ages. The entire Jewish world celebrates a cycle of holidays agriculturally and historically connected with the Land of Israel. We orient our synagogues toward Jerusalem. We read the Torah, which moves the people of Israel gradually to the "Promised Land." We pray for the restoration of Israel and the Temple in our synagogue and home liturgies. We have supported Jews who have chosen to live in Israel through the millennia, yet most Jews for the last twenty-five hundred years have lived and continue to live in the Diaspora. This generally was by choice and design, as it is now. What role does Israel play in our Jewish existence? What is the basis for Jewish life outside the Land of Israel? Does the tradition demand *aliyah* and settlement in Israel or is this a matter of indifference? The issue may be viewed from many perspectives, but this essay will limit itself to *halakhah*, that reflects a reality of Jewish life. We shall begin with a brief summary of our biblical past.

The gift of the Land of Israel was a promise God made to the patriarchs (Gen. 12:7; 15:7, 18; 26:3; 28.4, 13; 35:12), and it remained a goal during the long period of wandering in the desert. Through the Exodus from Egypt, this was expressed as movement toward the "Land of milk and honey," a land in which God would be served at appropriate religious centers (Exod. 3:8, 6:8, 20:12; Deut. 7:1-2, 9:1-5, 25:15, 30:20, etc). The Torah clearly outlined the nature of the Land and the life to be established there, along with a centralized priestly ritual. The Land itself would be subject to the Sabbatical and the Jubilee Years. The goal of that good land was mentioned constantly and held before the people so that they

would be able to endure the difficult forty-year sojourn in the desert.

We must note, however, that whereas the Exodus from Egypt continued to be celebrated through the festival of Pesah and became a focus of Jewish thought, nothing akin to that occurred with the entry into the Promised Land (Josh. 1:2-3, 24:13). Joshua simply entered and conquered, but this was never noted on our religious calendar. Furthermore, the book of conquest and settlement, the Book of Joshua, remains among the most neglected books of the Bible. Except for a single *Haftorah* reading, it has never been brought to the attention of the average Jew; it has remained a historical record.

The Land was the center of life in 1, 2 Samuel and in 1, 2 Kings; the prophets saw it as part of the divine covenant. Israel had often failed to keep its portion of the agreement. The historical and prophetic writing emphasized the need for religious conduct for Israel's leaders whether judges or kings. Rulers would be removed from power for social injustices and idolatry. Their subjects would suffer similar punishment (1, 2 Sam.; 1 Kings). The people would be exiled if they did not worship God or carry out the ethical and moral ideals the prophets expressed. Exile from the Land of Israel was seen as a divine punishment for disobedience (Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc).

The prophetic books also took us on the road to an idealized state in which the normal problems of statecraft were shunted aside. The later chapters of Isaiah carried this to its natural conclusion with an idealized future life without the compromises of daily life (Isa. 40:1ff).

As the people went into exile, the prophets spoke of a restoration of the kingdom and a return from foreign lands. The beautiful vision was presented in idyllic form, as the Messianic dream. A perfect descendent of David would eventually rule over a peaceful land in which everyone lived in harmony, in security, and with plenty. This kingdom would be established not by human beings, but by God (Joel 3, 4; Mic. 4; Zech. 14; Mal 3; Isa. 40:1; Jer. 3:14-18; Ezek. 37).

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This dream continues to inspire us; in our *Haftorah* readings we have always balanced it with prophetic denunciations that dealt with the real land and its social problems. By the end of the biblical period, the people of Israel had begun to differentiate between the idealized state and their own day-to-day existence. The ideal state was left to the Messianic Age, and the vast majority of Jews decided to continue their life in Babylonia (Ezek.; Ezra 2:64) or in Egypt<sup>1</sup> rather than return to rebuild Israel.

We do not know how quickly the Diaspora expanded around the eastern Mediterranean, but by the time of the Maccabees,<sup>2</sup> there were a considerable number of communities, and that number increased significantly by the first century of our era.<sup>3</sup> The destruction of Judea during the various wars with Rome led to a vast expansion of the Diaspora throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> The Babylonian community that soon emerged on the scene full grown and able to assume leadership must have been substantial. Within a few generations it assumed intellectual leadership along with what remained in northern Israel. Although scholars and others moved easily back and forth between Babylonia and Israel while compiling

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the Talmud, there was no pressure to resettle Israel, even when this might have been possible. The intellectual dominance of the great academies of Babylonia and, eventually, of their Talmud spoke to the dominance of the Diaspora community over Israel.

## THE STATUS OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Many statements in the Mishnah and the Tosefta make clear the sacredness of the Land of Israel. A series of verses in *Mishnah Kelim* indicated that “[t]here are ten degrees of sacredness. The Land of Israel is holier than any other land” and then moved upward to the “Holy of Holies” in the Temple (1.6ff). *Avodah Zarah* in the Tosefta accompanied such thoughts with a demand for settlement in Israel: “One should preferably live in the Land of Israel, even in a town with a majority of Gentile inhabitants, rather than outside the Land, even in a town in which most inhabitants are Jews....” (4.3ff; *Ket.* 10b). The Talmud rarely discussed this matter.<sup>5</sup> The teachers of the Mishnah, who themselves lived in Israel, encouraged settlement, but only mildly. When faced with the economic problems of farmers, they decided that the various impositions such as tithes, first fruit, and the Sabbatical and the Jubilee Years were obligatory only in the Land of Israel.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they narrowed the boundaries of Israel to a minimum to avoid hardships, discussing the various border lands and declaring most areas exempt.<sup>7</sup> The Talmud continued these discussions.<sup>8</sup> Later, more abstract discussions would dwell on whether the holiness of the Land stemmed from the patriarchs, Joshua’s conquest, or Ezra’s later resettlement.<sup>9</sup> Only a single reference elevated “dwelling in the Land of Israel above all other *mitzvot*” (*Sifrei R’eh*, Deut. 12:29). Otherwise, living in Israel was considered blessed, as was burial there (*Ket.* 111a).

Medieval philosophers and mystics continued the discussion of the special status of the Land and its intrinsic holiness; some saw it as the center of the earth.<sup>10</sup> A Talmudic statement considered prophecy to be limited to the Land (*M.K.* 25a), as did Yehudah Halevi (*Kuzari* 1.12).

The Talmud had already questioned whether the Land of Israel retained its sanctity after the destruction of the Temple; for the Babylonian Talmud, Babylonia was a legitimate center for Jewish life. The *Shekhinah* was seen as moving with the people of Israel wherever they went (*Sifrei B'haalotkha* 84; *Meg* 29a). Whether the *Shekhinah* favored one center of learning over another was discussed; there was general agreement that It was present in the synagogue. Some moved the entire question to the distant future, so Eleazar Hakaffar stated that "*in time* [Italics mine] the schools and synagogues of Babylonia would be planted in Israel" (*Meg* 29a). Other Talmudic statements insisted on the centrality of Israel by claiming that those who lived outside Israel had no God (*Ket.* 110b). The discussion continues through the centuries, often modified to refer only to the period of the Temple but not to the present (as Rashi [Gen. 17:8]) or to refer only to those who left Israel (as Maimonides [*Yad Hil. Melakhim* 5.12]).

The theological position already taken by the prophetic literature of the Bible was echoed in the rabbinic writings. Some scholars saw exile from the Land of Israel as divine punishment for Israel's sins. God would decide when redemption became possible, and God would bring us back; action on the part of the community was unnecessary and not to be encouraged. In other words, the condition of Diaspora was considered normal until the "end of days."

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A variety of Talmudic and Midrashic sources commented in this direction.<sup>11</sup>

### MEDIEVAL REALITY AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Let us now see how the various attitudes toward the Land of Israel affected the Jewish relationship with that land. To what degree was resettlement practiced? What were the efforts over the centuries to make the "holiness" of the Land once more part of Jewish life and to give reality once more to the *mitzvot* that depended on the Land.

Until the days of Islamic domination of the Near East, settlement in Israel was dangerous and so could be discounted. The Byzantine rulers from the time of Helena, the mother of Constantine (ca. 324–337 C.E.), had turned the mountain on which the Temple stood into a refuse dump.<sup>12</sup> The prohibition against Jewish pilgrimages to Jerusalem and, of course, settlement there had been enforced from 135 C.E.) to the Arab Conquest in 638 C.E. During this long period, however, Jews had settled in small numbers in Gaza, Tiberius, and elsewhere in the Land of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Islamic control meant that all these areas were once more open to pilgrimages and settlement. The Omayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1100) rule established an economic zone stretching thousands of miles, which provided stability for trade, travel, and population movement. Even after the fall of the Abbasids, for many centuries it was still relatively easy to travel between Islamic lands. This meant that the Land of Israel was accessible to Jews. Pilgrimages to the Land from the great Islamic Jewish centers and from the smaller

European centers were frequent.<sup>14</sup> Jews were also buried there from time to time, especially in Hebron, the burial site of the patriarchs.<sup>15</sup> *Aliyah* remained infrequent, however, except among Karaites, who propagandized for it and were motivated by Messianism, and for small waves of immigration from Islamic lands. Rabbinic Jews came only in small numbers.<sup>16</sup> In the Gaonic responsa, and those slightly later, were some questions about the *mitzvah* of *aliyah* and the right of a husband to force an unwilling wife to settle in the Land of Israel or to remain there, but the number of such questions is small.<sup>17</sup> This was not a matter of major concern, nor were other questions raised about the Land of Israel except as isolated incidents. The Talmudic statement was misused by husbands who sought to avoid *ketubah* payments by threatening to force their wives to move to Jerusalem; Maimonides therefore tested such husbands through a ban of excommunication and the need for a general reputation of honesty before he permitted it. He thus repudiated the Talmudic law.<sup>18</sup>

The conquest by the Crusaders destroyed all Jewish settlement, but their rule did not last long; then Muslims were in control once more. Some Jews, like Yehudah Halevi, felt a longing for the Land, but few settled there even when harsher conditions elsewhere led to some emigration. The Jews of neighboring countries like Egypt visited as pilgrims or for commerce but did not settle, although a major community there followed the guidance of the Yeshiva of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> Trade, with constant visits of merchants, continued throughout the centuries, but settlement in the Land of Israel remained rare.

The first larger group of which we hear in the Middle Ages comprised three hundred rabbis from medieval France who moved



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to the Land of Israel. The numbers mentioned were probably vastly exaggerated, but a significant number of scholars did settle there.<sup>20</sup> Their motivation may have been a desire to fulfill the commandments dependent on the Land or the Messianic prophecy. Yet the same Tosafists who had moved later commanded their sons to leave Israel and return to France, where they could study Torah more readily.<sup>21</sup> In any case, there was nothing like it earlier or later. Interestingly enough, a Tosafist, R. Haim Cohen, provided a rationale for the Diaspora by stating that the dangers of the journey relieved all Jews from the *mitzvah* of *aliyah*. Furthermore, Jews did not need to go to the Land of Israel because of the present dangers and because we could not execute those *mitzvot* dependent upon the Land that could not be fulfilled until the Temple was restored (*Tosfot* to *Ket* 110b). This statement commented on a Talmudic section that dealt with the right of a husband to force all the members of his household to settle in Jerusalem. Later, R. Shelomoh b. Aderet, while acknowledging the importance of *aliyah*, listed all the reasons for not following this *mitzvah*, as other factors were more important. He listed Torah study, various family reasons, and other serious problems for not making *aliyah*.<sup>22</sup> Other tenth-century Tosafists agreed with R. Cohen.<sup>23</sup>

The first medieval scholar to make resettlement in the Land of Israel primary among all *mitzvot* was Nahmanides (1194–1270). He vigorously denounced Maimonides' failure to include this *mitzvah* among the 613; for him it was more important than all the rest.<sup>24</sup> He stressed this *mitzvah* as well in other writings, most forcefully in a lengthy lecture for Rosh Hashanah. Despite these feelings, Nahmanides himself settled in the Land of Israel only at the end of his life, living his last three years there. A major controversy followed, partially about this issue but more about

Nahmanides' general critique of Maimonides. Nothing practical came from Nahmanides' statement. No rabbinic scholar in the *Ashkenazic* or *Sephardic* world propagandized for settlement in Israel. The statement undoubtedly encouraged those who lived there, but it had no other effect.

When Alfasi (1013–1103) created his major *halakhic* code, he omitted legal material connected with the Temple and the Land of Israel. This was the first successful and influential effort at codification. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), on the other hand, followed a different path and included all those laws, either because he wished to present a complete code or because he sought to express his Messianic longings in this fashion. Scholars continue to debate the reason. Although he spent most of his life in Egypt, Maimonides made no attempt to visit the Land of Israel; after his death he was buried in Tiberias. We should also note that Maimonides warned the Jews of Yemen against following a false Messianic leader who sought to resettle them in the Land of Israel (*Iggeret Yemen*).

In this matter most codes followed the pattern Alfasi set, as they, too, omitted the priestly material and the laws connected with the Land of Israel.<sup>25</sup> Each of them sought to simplify access to Jewish learning and the religious life, as the Talmud proved to be too difficult for the average Jew. The codes provided the means by which every Jew could create a Jewish life. Along with erudite discussions, they omitted the vast aggadic material of the Talmud and laws connected with the Land of Israel of only Messianic interest and of no practical concern to the average Jew. The same pattern was followed by the summary of medieval piety expressed by the *Sefer Hasidim*, contemporary with the Crusades; it did not deal with

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the *mitzvah* of resettling in the Land of Israel and only once mentioned the "land" in connection with *tzedakah* (No. 1041).

The most popular major code, which continues to play a role in contemporary Jewish life, Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*, with Moses Isserles' *Mapah*, did not deal with the Temple or the Land of Israel. Caro and Isserles sought to create a practical work for the daily life of contemporary Jews.

The *Sephardic* community of the Mediterranean basin as well as the *Ashkenazic* community of Central and Eastern Europe followed this pattern illustrated by the responsa literature as well as by biblical and Talmudic commentaries of the late Middle Ages. The responsa of this period occasionally dealt with an individual who is resettled in Israel or with the *minhagim* of the Land of Israel, but the orientation was essentially toward the Diaspora.<sup>26</sup> This three-volume work contains all the relevant material; as one-third of it is from the last two centuries, we can see the limited inquiries made in the preceding thousand years.

We should also remember that when the Jewish community of Spain was forced into exile in 1492, although many settled in Turkey, Italy, and other parts of the Mediterranean, very few returned to the Land of Israel. The economic conditions there were not appealing; religious fervor, however, could have overcome that objection.

Jewish mysticism often stressed Messianism and therefore the Land of Israel. The mystics who settled in Safed attracted followers and brought about a small immigration to Israel; some mystics considered living in the Land the only way to attain a

perfect Jewish life. This concept played a major role in the thought systems of R. Ezra ben Solomon (thirteenth century) and Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291), but not of all mystics. Individuals did not hesitate to move back to the Diaspora for various reasons, and *aliyah* was not part of all systems.<sup>27</sup>

The *halakhists* of Safed made an effort in the sixteenth century to reconstitute the Sanhedrin and to reestablish rabbinic ordination. This was intended to help solve a variety of *halakhic* problems that needed legislation rather than interpretation. It may also have represented an effort to affirm the primacy of the Land of Israel. In any case it aroused much objection, and the effort was speedily abandoned.

#### THE REFORM MOVEMENT

The nineteenth century brought dreams of emancipation accompanied by a reexamination of our relation to the Land of Israel. Jews fought for the rights of citizenship. Scholars emphasized the universalism of Judaism and the “mission of Israel,” so they gave the Diaspora an active and more positive role than they had in the past. They minimized or rejected ties to the Land, in which very few Jews actually lived. They rarely expressed this in a *halakhic* form,<sup>28</sup> but usually in theological or polemic writings and most clearly in liturgical changes. One finds almost no discussion of major issues surrounding Israel in Reform responsa except those published in the last decades in Israel. Some Reform leaders changed their attitude toward Israel within a decade of the Pittsburgh Platform and were among the earliest religious Zionists. The entire movement took a positive stand toward Zionism from 1935 onward. After the establishment of Israel, the headquarters of the

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World Union of Progressive Judaism moved to Israel. Reform Judaism remains Diaspora centered, however, as do Conservative Judaism and major portions of Orthodox Judaism. Those who belong to these three groups remain in the Diaspora and intend to continue their lives there.

Reform Judaism put into words what had been practiced by Jews for a long time. The Reform movement gave a religious voice to what the Jewish people had done and were continuing to do: to love Israel, but, for the vast majority, not as a home.

Secular Zionism from its earliest days has tied itself to the Bible and its ancient promises but never dealt with the *halakhic* implications that were of no interest to it. For this reason there was much rabbinic opposition to early Zionism; the Orthodox community felt that the Messianic era could not be forced. Support for Zionism came only slowly from these circles as the responsa and other literature indicated, and some opposition continues to this day.<sup>29</sup> The very fact that it was possible for an early Zionist Congress to debate whether resettlement should take place in the Land of Israel or in Kenya indicated the fragility of the tie to the Land. The desire for a land, a place of refuge and self-government, was almost stronger than bonds to the ancient Land of Israel. Ultimately, of course, the decision was for Israel.

## CONCLUSION

The Jewish communities of the Diaspora and of Israel are now contending for primacy. Every Israeli political figure has made the demand for *aliyah*, which continues to be resisted by most Diaspora communities. Parallel to these nationalistic and political

demands are religious voices that echo Nahmanides. For them the *mitzvah* of settling in the Land is primary; they feel that the divine commandments can be carried out properly only in the Land of Israel. Orthodox Jews who have resettled in Israel express these sentiments through their commitment. A smaller number of Reform Jews have also made *aliyah* for religious reasons. We now face a situation somewhat akin to that of the Hellenistic world in the first century of our era. A vigorous group within the Land of Israel claims that Jewish life can be lived there only on its terms and that nothing in the Diaspora really matters. Equally strong forces in the Diaspora contest those claims on *halakhic*, ideological, and practical grounds. More than two thousand years have shown through the choices people have made that the Diaspora is more important than the Land of Israel. Until this century love for the Land, a desire to make a pilgrimage, and the hope that an ideal state will be created there did not translate into resettlement. Most Jews continue to live outside the Land of Israel, and large numbers of Israelis regularly emigrate to the West to settle permanently. We may therefore say that the struggle for primacy will continue. The *halakhah* provides ample basis for both sides in this debate. For us in the Diaspora, however, it remains primary.

### Notes

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7. *M. Orlah* 3.9; *Ter* 2.13; *Shev* 6.1; *Dem* 1.3 etc.
8. *Kid* 77a; *Men* 68b; *B.B.* 56a; *B.M.* 89a; *Hag* 3b; *Meg* 10a, f; *Yeb* 82b; *J. Shev* 6.1, etc.
9. *Tanhuma, Re'eh* 8; *Tanhuma, Bamidbar* 17; *J. Shev* 6.1; *Yad Hil.Ter* 1.5; *Bet Hebehirah* 6.16; etc.
10. Yehudah Halevi, Maimonides, Gersonides, Azulai, Nahmanides.
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THE HISTORY OF THE

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