Land grant: Israel and the promises of God

by Yehiel E. Poupko in the May 15, 2007 issue

Neither Jews nor Christians (except for some evangelicals) were theologically prepared for the 20th-century return of the Jewish people to sovereignty in their ancient homeland of Israel. For most Christians, history was not supposed to turn out like this. St. Augustine held that, having rejected Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish people were punished with the experience of exile, dispersion, wandering and homelessness. This was the dominant Christian understanding of the Jewish condition and destiny: Jewish exile witnessed to the truth of Christianity, and Jewish suffering and humiliation witnessed to divine punishment for Jews' rejection of Jesus.

Thus the Jewish return to sovereignty in the biblical homeland seems to threaten the fundamental coherence of historic Christianity. How could those who were exiled for rejecting Jesus now be blessed with sovereignty? After all, the Jewish people still do not accept Jesus as Christ.

Similarly, Judaism had never before considered the kind of return to Israel that occurred with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In traditional Judaism, the promised return to the land of Israel will take place only at the end of days through the agency of the Messiah of the House of David. The Messiah has not arrived, yet the Jewish people as a nation has returned to sovereignty in the land of Israel. What is the religious meaning of this transformational event for Jews?

I will attempt to answer that question in a way that reflects the mainstream Jewish perspective. It is an awesome responsibility for a member of the community of the few to describe for the community of the many any aspect of his faith, especially when the subject is bound up with events unfolding before our eyes. This essay is not an exercise in scholarship but a presentation of belief. In keeping with Jewish tradition and practice, I have sought the counsel of a variety of rabbis and Jewish scholars, so that this account represents mainstream Conservative, Orthodox and Reform thinking (though each movement would express its beliefs in its own

metaphors and symbols).

To understand sacred history one must go back to the beginning of the Torah. At the beginning of creation God brought order and harmony out of chaos. God saw that God's creation was good, and handed this good creation over to Adam and Eve. They were "to till and tend" the garden (Gen. 2:15). They were charged with being the custodians of God's harmonious creation. But they committed the sin of hubris, and because of it they were expelled from the garden.

God entrusted creation to humanity for the next 10 generations, but again humans sinned—committing the sins of violence and corruption (Gen. 6:12-13). God brought a flood and humanity was destroyed.

God then entrusted the order of creation to Noah, who was followed by another 10 generations. Then humanity sinned once again with hubris in the construction of the Tower of Babel. As a consequence humanity was dispersed over the Earth, and God allocated to each of the approximately 70 nations a parcel of land to be its own, where it could develop its language and national culture (Gen. 10).

When God despaired of humanity as the custodian of harmony, justice and righteousness, God entered into the Covenant of Peoplehood with Abraham and his descendants. An essential feature of the covenant is that the children of Abraham and Sarah will be God's chosen people—chosen for a purpose for which it is responsible. To fulfill this role, the children of Abraham and Sarah also needed a plot of land. The land was given not as a reward, but because it is necessary and essential in fulfilling the covenantal task. The land is the means for the sanctification of everyday life, which is the purpose of the covenant.

God chose one people, the children of Abraham and Sarah, who are the nation of Israel, to conduct its national life upon the land. This people would be different from all others in that it would have the task of constructing its life according to the *mitzvot*, the commandments of the Torah, which would be fully revealed later at Mount Sinai. And it would be challenged to bring blessing to the world through its life.

Judaism's purpose is the sanctification of ordinary life, communal and individual. Thus the largest number of *mitzvot* have to do with agriculture, commerce and property. Justice, righteousness and holiness can be found only in life's prosaic activities. The election of Israel and the grant of the land are meant to show the

world what God expects from and can do with fallible human beings.

The Covenant of Peoplehood blossomed into the Covenant of Torah and *mitzvot* made with the Jews as a people in the revelation at Mount Sinai. Taken together, the Covenant of Peoplehood and the Covenant of Torah and *mitzvot* mean that Judaism is an indivisible partnership involving God, Torah, people and land.

According to the Torah (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:18-21), the Covenant of Peoplehood is unconditional and immutable, as is the grant of the land to the children of Abraham and Sarah. Only after the covenant at Sinai, in which Israel pledged to be faithful to the *mitzvot*, does residence in the land become conditional upon fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. The grant of the land remains irrevocable.

The worthiness of a given Jewish community is unrelated to the grant of the land itself as an everlasting inheritance of the children of Abraham and Sarah. In the latter part of the First Temple period, widespread neglect of some of the central *mitzvot* of the Torah occurred, especially in regard to the Lord's exclusive claim on Israel's worship. For that neglect Israel was exiled, but it returned to its homeland about 70 years later and built the Second Temple, expressing Israel's dream and faithfulness. After the exile, Israel continued to develop its national religious culture.

The Second Temple was destroyed by the Roman Empire in the year 70 CE, but that destruction did not mark the end of Jewish civilization in the land of Israel. Quite the contrary, it continued to flourish. Between the year 70 and the conquest by Muslim armies in 638 the rabbis developed a remarkable culture whose sacred literatures united the Jewish people in all the lands of exile. Having lost sovereignty in their home in the land of Israel, the rabbis moved the Jewish people into a new kind of home, into "residence" in the Book. This Jewish culture gave the Jewish people and the world the Mishna, the Talmud, the great Midrashic works and the Siddur, the prayer book.

Through 2,000 years the Jewish people maintained intense spiritual and physical attachments to the land. During these two millennia, the flow of scholars and the faithful to the land of Israel continued unabated. Without the Temple the sacrifice of the Pesach-Paschal lamb could no longer be offered, but that sacrifice was transformed into the Passover Seder. The tradition of the Passover Seder, the telling and retelling of the Exodus in a sacred meal, culminates to this day in the prayer *L'shanah Haba'ah B'yerushalayim*—"Next year in Jerusalem."

The capacity of the land of Israel to unite the Jewish people did not end with the Muslim conquest. In the years after 638, Jewish communities continued to live in Israel. Around the 10th century, in Tiberias on the shores of Yam Kinneret (the Sea of the Galilee), the Masoretes produced an authoritative text of the Hebrew Bible, which ensured that the dispersed Jewish people had one common sacred text. Jewish scholars continued to produce seminal works of law, biblical interpretation, liturgy and mysticism. Centuries later, following the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, Jewish refugees gathered in the 16th century in Tsefat (Safed), in the north of Israel. There Rabbi Joseph Karo produced the authoritative Code of Jewish Law, Shulkhan Arukh.

From Israel the Code of Jewish Law made its way to Krakow in Poland, where Rabbi Moses Isserles adapted it for the Jews of Europe. His adaptation bound together this wandering people by means of one book of practice. From Tsefat also came the Sabbath song *L'kha Dodi*, "Come My Beloved," which celebrates the love of God and Israel for each other as they meet on Shabbat and together long for their return to Jerusalem. Jews the world over soon sang it every Friday evening, and they do so to this day.

The fruit of the land of Israel united the landless people of Israel. Upon this abiding physical and religious connection was built Zionism—a yearning for a return to home that reached back two millennia. The history of the modern Zionist movement, beginning in the 19th century, is well known. Its rise and ultimate success—the establishment of the state of Israel—contains a remarkable irony: What had been nurtured and sustained by religious faith became realized in a secular national liberation movement.

What then is the Jewish religious understanding of the return to sovereignty in our ancient homeland? The faithful Jew believes that God is the God of history. As scripture says, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 20:2). In effect, God said to Israel, "You know that I am the Lord your God, because I took you out of the land of Egypt."

The return to sovereignty in the homeland demonstrates to the Jewish people that God remains faithful to the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. We believe that God has acted in history during our lifetime, enabling our return to the land and to sovereignty.

But let me state unequivocally: the belief in this miracle does not endow the state of Israel itself or any government of Israel with divine approval or divine right. The state and the government are the creation of the resolve and the intellect of the Jewish people. Israel's governments are the human Jewish attempt to translate this remarkable event into daily reality. The Lord God of Israel is surely not responsible for the daily workings of the Israeli government or for those of any other government.

The return to the land is a necessary but not sufficient condition for Jews to fulfill the covenant. Political Zionism provides the Jewish people only with the opportunity to try to live out its covenantal destiny. Zionism does not call for agreeing with everything that Israel does or is, nor does it mean that Israel itself constitutes a messianic or eschatological phenomenon. Zionism is the Jewish national liberation movement.

At Sinai God commanded Israel to dwell in the land of Israel so that it could assume full control of its life and its destiny, as the means to establish the order of justice, righteousness and holiness. When the Jewish people was exiled from its homeland, it was powerless and stateless for two millennia, and unable to be fully responsible for its own welfare. As the Reform movement affirmed in 1997, the restoration of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland represents a historic triumph that provides it with a physical refuge; the possibility of religious, spiritual and cultural renewal on its own soil; and the realization of God's promise to Abraham.

Jewish powerlessness culminated in the Holocaust. Even as we mourned the loss of one third of our people, we witnessed the miraculous rebirth of Medinat Yisrael—the state of Israel, the Jewish people's supreme creation in our age. Israel unites Jews the world over and is the latest expression of our understanding and existence as a people and as a nation.

It is important to stress that our return to our homeland does not preclude the possibility of others living on this very same land, under a variety of different arrangements and fair compromises. Not everything promised to the Jewish people by the Covenant of Peoplehood must we possess at a given moment in history. Complete covenantal fulfillment surely awaits a time known only to God.

We Jews, the ancient rabbis tell us, are believers, the children of millennia of believers. And when we are in the presence of extraordinary events—such as those

celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah, marking a time when the few prevailed against the many and the mighty—we believe that we are witness to God's manifest beneficence and faithfulness. We believe that by a miraculous act we have been blessed to regain political sovereignty in our ancient homeland. We stand in a state of thanksgiving and abiding awe of this great event. We are overwhelmed by the fact that it followed by just a few years the destruction of 6 million European Jews, thus providing a refuge for the survivors and for the 800,000 Jews driven soon thereafter from Arab lands.

To believe that one has been the beneficiary of God's acting in history is to be humbled. It calls us to live in a way that makes one worthy of such a gift, in a way that makes one worthy of God's abiding love and compassion for us.

What have been the Christian responses to the rise of Zionism and to the establishment of the state of Israel? For some evangelicals, the answer comes before the question. The land is promised to the Jews—end of inquiry. For these Christians, the premillennial dispensationalists, the return is merely a necessary precondition for an imminent eschatological event—the return of Jesus. For many evangelicals, Israel figures prominently in their imagination.

Mainline Protestant churches as well as the Catholic Church see the state of Israel today as a secular political phenomenon. Ironically, the Protestant and the Catholic churches initially responded theologically to Zionism and to the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. Two examples will suffice. When Theodore Herzl, the father of political Zionism, approached the Vatican to seek support for his cause in the early 20th century, Pope Pius X responded:

We, and I as head of the Catholic Church, cannot do this. There are two possibilities, either the Jews will retain their ancient faith . . . in that case they are denying the divinity of Jesus and we cannot help them, or else they will go there without any religion, and then we can be even less favorable to them. The Jewish religion was the foundation of our own, but it was superseded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot concede it any further validity [Sergio Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism*: *Conflict in the Holy Land*, *1895-1925*].

The Christian Century provides the second example. Over several decades the magazine opposed Zionism with a variety of arguments. The theological basis of its opposition was stated in an editorial of May 3, 1933:

> [Jesus] was crucified because he had a program for Israel which ran counter to the cherished nationalism of Israel's leaders—political and priestly. He opposed their nationalism with the universalism of God's love and God's kingdom. . . . In the eyes of the Jewish rulers, he was a seditious person, a menace to their fantastic nationalism and to their vested rights and prestige. . . . It was nationalism that crucified Jesus.

As Herzel Fishman noted (in *American Protestantism and a Jewish State*), the Century was drawing a distinction between Jews as Jews and Jews as nationalists in the time of Jesus. By implicitly comparing modern Jewish nationalists to first-century Jewish nationalists, the Century took upon itself to exonerate Jews as Jews from the crime of the crucifixion of Jesus even as it opposed modern Jewish nationalists, the Zionists.

Since that time the Christian understanding of Judaism and the Jewish people has been shaken to its very core by the Holocaust. The Holocaust precipitated fundamental changes in Catholic and Protestant theology about Judaism and the Jewish people. These changes are set forth in the encyclical *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent Roman Catholic documents, as well as in a variety of documents by Protestant denominations. However, these important documents fail to acknowledge, let alone come to terms with, the place of the land and the return to sovereignty in Jewish self-understanding. The ease with which some Christian writers ignore these advances when treating the state of Israel shows that the changed understandings have yet to take deep root.

Many contemporary Christian writers make use of and perpetuate the 2,000-year-old *adversus Judaeos* tradition, the teaching of contempt for Judaism and the Jewish people. This legacy of replacement, supersessionism and defamation constitutes a theological challenge for Christians as they approach the state of Israel. Classically, the church (including Reformation theologians) tended to apply the biblical oracles of judgment and doom to the Jews—the stiff-necked, unbelieving "carnal Israel" or "old Israel"—who blindly crucified their own savior. At the same time, the church applied the oracles of promise and restoration to itself, the "new Israel," the beneficiary of divine love and grace, the "body of Christ" which awaits its promised glorification. The possibility that the prophecies of restoration might be fulfilled by God in his relation to that very "old Israel"—the Jewish people—was inconceivable. The default position that their own scripture and tradition suggests to Christians is

just too ingrained and too available. Thus they transfer the “teaching of contempt” from Judaism and the Jewish people to Zionism and the state of Israel.

Jews who seek a cooperative relationship with Christians feel trapped between two of the more prevalent Christian understandings of Israel. The first view, that of premillennial dispensationalists, is that the Jewish people’s return to Israel is a portent of the second coming of Jesus. The second view is that Jews lost all rights to the land in the year 30 CE, because the coming of Jesus of Nazareth made Christianity the true Israel. The Christian church alone inherits the promises that God made in the Old Covenant. The carnal people of Israel have lost all rights and connections to the land. In this view, Jews’ return to the land portends nothing; it is not the fulfillment of any prophecy, nor is it based on any continuing biblical claim of right. In both of these views the Jewish people lose out.

What then of the relationship between the ancient commonwealth of Israel and the present-day state of Israel? In the Torah, Yisrael is the new name given to Yaakov-Jacob. Jacob’s 12 sons are called Bnei Yisrael—literally, the children of a man named Israel. In the beginning of the book of Exodus, the term *Bnei Yisrael*, meaning the children of Israel, comes to signify not just the 12 sons of Jacob but the Jewish people, the Jewish nation. This name Yisrael is the primary name of the Jewish people in biblical times. This name is bequeathed to the land itself, Eretz Yisrael, the land of the people named Yisrael-Israel. Throughout history, the Jewish people have been known to themselves and to others as Yisrael-Israel.

The Christian may ask: In what way is this name of a modern, Western-style democracy related to the name of the nation that stood at the foot of Sinai and that bequeathed its name to the land promised by God?

It is at this moment that Christians ought to seek an answer from themselves before seeking an answer from the Jewish people. The word *Israel* has a well-developed record in Christian thought and experience. It was Christianity that proclaimed itself to be the “new Israel” and saw the history of Israel continuing in its life. Now comes this people of the Sinai covenant, who remained faithful to that name, Israel, and this people Israel returns to the land of Israel and establishes the state of Israel. While the Jewish people can explain to the Christian the Jewish meaning of this continuity, the Christian must explain to himself or herself the meaning of the continuity of this people Israel in the face of the belief in the coming of Christ.

For the Jewish people, the return of the people Israel to the land of Israel to establish the state of Israel is a demonstration of the continuity of faith, the continuity of peoplehood and the continuity of history. God’s restoration of the Jewish people to sovereignty in the ancient homeland should be a source of inspiration and instruction not only for Jews but for all those who believe in the God who first revealed himself to Abraham.

The restoration of Israel to the homeland is a sign that God is faithful to God’s promises, no matter how ancient and seemingly antiquated they are. The continuity of the Jewish people through 2,000 years of exile, diaspora, homelessness and suffering is a sign that God watches over Israel. The renewal of the Jewish people in their homeland is a sign that God remains faithful to the covenant. These signs ought to be sources of inspiration to those who believe that they have, in a later revelation, been brought into a covenant with the God of Abraham.