

## 11. THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

*Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, has been at the centre of the dreams and aspirations of the Jewish people since biblical times. The Lord said to Abraham: “Go forth from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). And it was there that Abraham wandered, digging wells, tending his flocks and behaving with justice towards all. It is also the land that God promised to Abraham’s descendants, who returned there after a long period of exile and slavery. The Torah refers to the Land of Israel as the Land of Canaan, specifically the territory west of the Jordan River. In contrast, the area east of the Jordan River is usually referred to in the Torah as the land of Gilead.

The land of Canaan is the object of the promise made by the Lord to the patriarchs: “I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:8). In other passages of the Torah, the land of Israel is referred to as “the land” without further attribution, to be understood as a special land.

In the prophetic books, in addition to the land of Canaan, we often find the term “Land of Israel”, which is to become prevalent in conjunction with the term ‘Land’ adopted by the sages of the rabbinic tradition, as opposed to the other lands referred to as *Huṣ La-Haaretz* (outside the land) or *Eretz Ha’ammim* (land of the peoples). Sometimes the Divine Voice calls it “My Land”.

Another traditional term for Israel is *Eretz Hemdah* (land of desire), indicating that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob longed for this land, to the extent that Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah as a burial place for his wife Sarah, the Lord prevented Isaac from leaving Israel, and Jacob asked not to be buried in Egypt but in the Land of Israel.

Rarely does the Bible use the term “Holy Land.” Nonetheless, the Land is seen as a gift of God to Israel. God watches over this land and what happens in it in a special way (Deut 11:12). In fact, the Land belongs exclusively to the Lord, and its enjoyment is subject to obedience to His laws. The gift given to Israel is not gratuitous: three good gifts were bestowed on Israel by God and all three were given after suffering. The three are Torah, the Land of Israel and the life to come. (*Berakhot 5a*).

The centrality of *Eretz Yisrael* has traditionally been the most important element of Jewish worship and consciousness. When praying, Jews turn towards Land of Israel, and in particular towards Jerusalem and toward the site of the ancient Temple. This connection is cultivated through the observance of religious festivals, almost all of which are linked to the agricultural seasons of the Land of Israel, and through the study of the laws governing the sacred use of the land.

This strong spiritual and physical bond forms part of an ideal collective identity. The hope of returning to the Land is the theme of daily prayers, along with an immense

liturgical and mystical literature, as well as various precepts not exclusively related to agricultural life. The application of criminal law, for example, cannot be practised outside Israel, and even in Israel some precepts require a number of preconditions, such as the sovereignty of the entire Jewish people in their own land.

The relationship between land, people and Torah has played a crucial role in all Jewish communities throughout history, and the longing for the lost homeland has driven Jews on the path of Return. In the days when the first waves of immigration arrived in Palestine as a result of political Zionism, Jewish communities already existed in the ancient holy cities of Jerusalem, Tiberias, Safed and Chevron.

The ancient *Yishuv*, i.e. the community that existed before the more recent influxes, was extremely poor. It was an orthodox community that lived off the charity of Jewish communities in the Diaspora. It testifies to the continuity of the Jewish presence in Palestine and is an expression of religious zeal, of the hope of the Return of the Jewish people to Israel, the waves of messianic enthusiasm that saw their aspirations transformed into a political reality with the Jewish national movement called Zionism.

Zionism is the movement for the political self-determination of the Jewish people, which led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Criticising the Israeli government for a decision it has taken does not amount to being anti-Zionist, but refusing to recognise the right of the Jewish people to their own nationhood certainly does.

Before the birth of the State of Israel, there were Zionist Jews and anti-Zionist Jews; there was a legitimate choice. To be anti-Zionist today is to support the destruction of a state, albeit not a perfect one, but a democratic one, with nine million citizens.

Church authorities were largely against Zionism and opposed the creation of the State of Israel, initially for religious reasons linked to the non-recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. Since 1994, however, regular diplomatic relations have been established between Israel and the Holy See, with the opening of a nunciature in Israel and an Israeli embassy in Rome.

### Bibliography

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