

Chapter 7

ISRAEL:
THE DAWN OF REDEMPTION

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel! . . .
For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
“Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
to the LORD our God.”

For thus says the LORD:
“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
‘The LORD has saved his people,
the remnant of Israel.’
Behold, I will bring them from the north country,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
the woman with child and her who is in travail, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;

for I am a father to Israel.
and Ephraim is my first-born.”
Thus says the LORD:
“Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for your work shall be rewarded,
says the LORD,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.
There is hope for your future,
says the LORD,
and your children shall come back to their own country.
(Jeremiah 31:3-4, 6-9, 16-17)

Jewish Bonds with the Land

The Jewish attachment to Israel is a profound one, dating back almost four thousand years to the time when God told Abraham to leave the comfort and security of his homeland, Ur Kasdim, and to go “to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Abraham had such great faith and trust in God that he left his home and community, reassured by God’s promise that “. . . I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12:2-3). Israel is known by a number of different names. The Bible alternately refers to it as Canaan, Eretz Yisrael, Zion, or simply as *ha-aretz*, meaning “the land,” as a sign of its belovedness and significance. It is “the Holy Land.”

As part of the divine covenant with Abraham, God promised that he and his descendants would inherit the land of Israel as an eternal possession. “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I give this land . . .’” (Gen. 15:18). The rabbis point out that the term *natati*, or “I give,” is in the past tense, implying that God had already given the land to the Jews at some earlier time. Yet, this is the first record of such a promise. They, therefore, suggest

that God had set aside this land for his people, Israel, already at the time that he created the world.¹

The Torah elaborates on this covenantal agreement between God and Abraham. "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8). The rabbis note that the Torah's stress on the everlasting nature of the covenant emphasizes the eternal and unconditional nature of the Divine-Abrahamic promise. God made a twofold promise to Abraham—that his descendants would become a great nation and that they would inherit the land of Israel as an *everlasting* possession. He renewed this promise with Abraham's grandson, Jacob, the last of the patriarchs. "The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and . . . to your descendants" (Gen. 35:12). And while God established a covenant with Abraham's son Ishmael, too (Ishmael is regarded as the father of the Arab people), this included only the promise of nationhood, not of land.

Israel, however, was not only a divine promise, it was also a fulfilled reality. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—the foreparents of the Jewish faith and people—all lived, died, and were buried in Israel (except Jacob, who died in Egypt but was buried in Israel, see Gen. 47:30). From that time on there has always been a Jewish presence in the Holy Land. Jewish bonds with the land of Israel are, therefore, rooted in the fact that the very founders of the faith lived and died there. These bonds are also rooted in the fact that this particular land constitutes an essential part of the convenantal promise in the present, as well as in the future messianic era. Eretz Yisrael, in other words, is at the core of Jewish identity and peoplehood; the land shapes the Jews' very character as a community covenanted with God. The Jewish love for Israel,

noted Heschel, "was due to an imperative not to an instinct, not to a sentiment. There is a covenant, an engagement of the people to the land. We live by covenants. We could not betray our pledge or discard the promise. . . . Intimate attachment to the land . . . is part of our integrity, an existential fact. Unique, *sui generis* it lives in our hopes, it abides in our hearts. . . . To abandon the land would make a mockery of all our longings, prayers, and commitments. To abandon the land would be to repudiate the Bible."²

The history of the Holy Land is a familiar one. After leaving Egypt and wandering in the desert for forty years, the Israelites conquered Canaan and divided the land among the twelve tribes, two and a half of which settled on the East Bank of the Jordan River. Under King David (circa 1000 B.C.E.) the city of Jerusalem became the capital of Israel. The kingdom split after the death of Solomon, with the Northern Kingdom falling in 722 B.C.E. and Judea in the south being conquered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.

That first exile from Eretz Yisrael was undoubtedly a most traumatic Jewish experience, one that left the Jews with feelings of sorrow and depression, loneliness and estrangement. They felt abandoned by God. "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. . . . How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1, 4). The Jewish exiles, yearning to return to their homeland, vowed always to remember it. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!" (Ps. 137:5-6). That oath, made some twenty-five hundred years ago, is as compelling today as it was then. Indeed, the profound Jewish attachment to the Holy Land and pledge to return was reaffirmed in each generation. The Jewish people never renounced their right and title to that land, nor did Israel ever cease being an intimate part of their consciousness.

Some forty-seven years after the Babylonian exile, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylonia and allowed the Jews to