

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Israel: God's Holy Land



“If you will it, it is no dream.”

So said Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, in the 19th century. His words became the manifesto of the many Jews living in the Diaspora (outside of Israel) who looked longingly toward their ancient homeland and wondered if the land of Israel would ever be home to the Jewish people once again.

While Herzl didn't live to see it, this year we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the miraculous day, May 14, 1948, when Israel declared her independence to the world. Jewish sovereignty in Israel was no longer just a dream. It had been willed into existence through the blood and tears of the Jews.

As we celebrate that momentous day, we must never forget that it is only with God, and through God and His promise, that Israel came into being and continues to exist. At the same time, we also must remember the struggles and sacrifices made by the people of Israel.

During the 1973 *Yom Kippur* War, a soldier said to Prime Minister Golda Meir: “My father was killed in the War (of Independence) in 1948, and we won. My uncle was killed in the War of 1956, and we won. My brother lost an arm in the '67 war, and we won. Last week, I lost my best friend. . . and we're going to win. But is all our sacrifice worthwhile, Golda?”

Golda Meir answered: “I weep for your loss, just as I grieve for all our dead. I lie awake at night thinking of them. And, I must tell you in all honesty, were our sacrifices for ourselves alone, then perhaps you would be right; I'm not at all sure they would be worthwhile. But if our sacrifices are for the sake of the whole Jewish people, then I believe with all my heart that any price is worthwhile.”

These past 70 years are the fulfillment of the hopes of the past and the promise of future generations.

An ancient Jewish story speaks about a *Torah* scholar named Honi who once saw a

man planting a carob tree. “Don't you know that a carob tree takes 70 years to bear fruit? You won't see the fruit in your lifetime!” said Honi. The man answered, “My father and grandfather planted before me, and today I enjoy their fruit. I plant for my children.”

As the story in the *Talmud* goes on, Honi fell asleep for 70 years. When he awoke, he saw a young man harvesting fruit from the tree. “Did you plant that tree?” asked a bewildered Honi. “No, my grandfather did, 70 years ago” the man answered. Then Honi looked over where he had left his donkey before he fell asleep, and saw a herd of donkeys.

The message is clear. While we might not see the results of our hard labor right away, we must have faith. The psalmist wrote: “*Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.*” Even if it's not in our own lifetime, with God's help, our labor does produce fruit.

Israelis have spent much time weeping, sowing the seeds of a new country. Some of those sacrifices have come in the form of hard work in the hot sun; others have come in the form of the ultimate sacrifice – losing a loved one or one's own life. But we have borne much fruit. Today Israel is a beautiful country with a strong military, a rich culture, and a bright future. As President John F. Kennedy once said, “Israel was not created in order to disappear – Israel will endure and flourish.”

As we begin a new year of study together and commemorate this important milestone in 2018, we will learn about God's Holy Land. As we rejoice in all that Israel is and has become in the past 70 years, we must also remember and honor those who made it possible and rededicate ourselves to working on behalf of generations to come.

Rabbi Eckstein

*Those who go out
weeping,
carrying seed
to sow,
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— Psalm 126:6



Our Spiritual Homeland

It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

— Deuteronomy 11:12

In Deuteronomy 3:25, we find Moses desperately pleading with God to “*Let me go over and see the good land.*” Moses wanted nothing more than to enter the land of Israel. Why was it so deeply important for him to go into the land? Moses knew that this land was unlike any other. This land was holy.

Many people call Israel the Holy Land because of the biblical events that took place there thousands of years ago. Both the *Torah* and the Christian Bible center on the land of Israel. However, Israel was holy long before Jesus walked through the hills of Galilee, before Joshua and the Israelites marched around the towering walls of Jericho, and before Abraham heeded God’s call to leave his homeland and go to “*the land I will show you*” (Genesis 12:1).

In Judaism, the word “holy” means something or someone that is designated for a special purpose. The land of Israel was set aside by God at creation to be His own special land. We read in Deuteronomy 32:8-9: “*When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance.*”

Yet, there is more to Israel than the fact that it was given to God’s people and designated as God’s holy land where the Holy Temple would stand. There are certain qualities in the land that make it different from any other. God is more directly involved with this land. There is only one place in the world about which it is written: “*It is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end*” (Deuteronomy 11:12)

In addition, many commandments listed in the *Torah* are either connected to the land of Israel or dependent upon it. For example, the laws about the sabbath year (*shmita* in Hebrew, Leviticus 25), bringing offerings (Leviticus 23:10; Numbers 15), and tithing (Deuteronomy 14:22-29) are tied to God’s holy land — “*the land I am going to give you.*” This implies that God’s Word can only be followed completely when in the Holy Land. It is a land that does not follow the laws of nature as much as the laws of God.

The *Talmud* also teaches that the very air of Israel makes one wise. There is something markedly different in the spiritual realm when it comes to Israel. It is the most suitable environment in the world for connecting to God in the deepest way possible.

Even today, when people visit Israel — Christian and Jews — they cannot help but feel the holiness imbued

in this place. I remember the first time I took a group of Christians to the Holy Land. I was a 26-year-old newly ordained Orthodox rabbi. As an observant Jew, it is my practice to pray each morning, and on that first morning after we had arrived in Jerusalem, I went out onto my hotel balcony and recited my morning prayers. I was deeply moved to be back in Jerusalem, returning to my spiritual home, Israel. I wept tears of joy and thanksgiving for the incredible privilege of being in God’s Holy Land.

So imagine my surprise, when I returned to the hotel later that night to find my roommate — a 75-year-old African-American Baptist preacher — kneeling in prayer, arms outstretched, tears flowing down his cheeks, thanking God for allowing him to visit the Holy Land. “Lord,” he prayed, “thank you. I am luckier than Moses.” He knew that Moses, that great hero of the Bible, only got to see the Promised Land. He, however, had been allowed to enter it and walk on its soil.

In that very moment, our tears of joy were commingled. We shared a love and spiritual bond with the very land that God has called His own. It became clear to me that only Israel — the Holy Land — could bridge the 2,000-year divide between Christians and Jews. On that night, God sowed the seed that would become the *International Fellowship of Christians and Jews*.

apply it...

- 1. LEARN ABOUT ISRAEL.** Educate yourself about God’s people and His special connection to the land of Israel with our free downloadable Keys to I.S.R.A.E.L. curriculum. Visit ifcj.org/KEYSTOISRAEL. (Psalm 32:8; John 16:13)
- 2. BLESS ISRAEL.** In Genesis 12:3 God tells us: “*I will bless those who bless you.*” Those who bless Israel are blessed by God. Consider being a blessing to Israel by contributing your prayers, abilities, or resources. (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8)
- 3. SPEAK UP FOR ISRAEL.** Counter the lies and misconceptions about Israel by spreading the truth about what you have learned about Israel and her history. (Isaiah 62:1; Ephesians 4:25)
- 4. PRAY FOR ISRAEL.** We can never underestimate the power of prayer. Make prayer for Israel part of your daily routine. (Psalm 122:6; James 5:16)
- 5. RECOGNIZE GOD’S MIRACLES.** Whether in your own life or in world events, including events unfolding in Israel, recognize God’s hand and His providence. (Psalm 118:23; Hebrews 2:4)



An Eternal Heritage

The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

— Genesis 12:7

As we celebrate 70 years of the modern State of Israel, we must also recognize its greater context — the fact that while our nation is relatively young, it is also very, very old.

The first time the Bible references the Promised Land is in Genesis 12:1 when God tells Abraham (then still known as Abram) to *“Go from your country . . . to the land I will show you.”* That land is none other than Israel! When Abraham arrived in the land then known as Canaan, God promised him *“To your offspring I will give this land.”* He reaffirmed this promise in Genesis 13:15, when He told Abraham, *“All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.”*

Interestingly, when God entered into a covenant with Abraham, He said, *“To your descendants I give this land”* (Genesis 15:18). In Hebrew, the word used in Scriptures for “give” is *nata*, meaning “I have given,” which is in past tense. God had already given this land to Abraham’s descendants, and indeed Jewish tradition teaches that Israel was given to God’s people from the beginning of time. In other words, Jewish rights to the land were always part of the very fabric of Creation.

But who are Abraham’s descendants? After all, Ishmael was also Abraham’s son. Yet in Genesis 26:3, God confirmed that Isaac was the one through whom He would keep His covenant. God told Isaac, *“For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham.”*

A generation later, when Jacob, Isaac’s son, had his famous dream about angels ascending and descending a ladder spanning heaven and earth, God told him, *“I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying”* (Genesis 28:13). That land was the Holy Land. Later on, Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28), and his descendants became appropriately known as “the children of Israel.”

When the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, God commanded Moses to tell the nation that He would take them out of Egypt, and that *“I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession”* (Exodus 6:8).

Ultimately, Joshua led the children of Israel into the Promised Land and helped them to conquer and settle the land. King David established Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and his son Solomon built the first Holy Temple there. As time went on, Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, known as Israel, eventually was

conquered, and the people exiled from the land around 700 BCE. The Southern Kingdom, known as Judah, was mostly comprised of land belonging to the tribe of Judah. When Judah was conquered and its people exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE, they were called Jews, a people from Judah.

The Jewish Bible leads us through the return of the Jews to Israel. Yet, the Bible also warned that the nation would be exiled once again (Isaiah 11:11; 66:19). In the year 70 CE, the Second Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were thrown out of their land by the Romans, entering a long, painful, 2,000-year exile, during which the yearning to return to the Jewish homeland in Israel never waned.

Although dispersed to the four corners of the earth, we as a people never forgot what the psalmist wrote, during the first exile: *“If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy”* (Psalm 137:5-6).

To fulfill their vow never to forget the Holy Land during their exile, the Jews introduced the theme of Israel into virtually every aspect of daily life. To this day, Jews everywhere face Israel when reciting their daily prayers. A prayer for the return to Zion is part of the standard Jewish blessing over meals. The Passover *seder* meal, as well as High Holy Days services, conclude with the fervent hope and promise of “next year in Jerusalem!”

God’s promise to Abraham created an unbreakable bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. The fulfillment of God’s promises came in the miracle of the Jewish return to their land after nearly two millennia of dispersion. Never during the long intervening centuries did the Jews waver in their passionate yearning to return home to the land God had given them. Never did our love for Israel wane.

Our celebration of Israel expresses more than the joy of a fledgling nation that beat the odds and serves as a beacon of light. It is the celebration of God’s word coming to fruition, the Bible coming full circle, and our world entering a new phase for all humanity, when all prophecies regarding this wondrous time and land will be fulfilled.

Israel is at the core of Jewish identity and peoplehood; the land shapes the Jews’ self-image and character as a community covenanted with God. Indeed, to deny the link between the Jews and the land of Israel is to deny the Bible itself. To question the right of the Jewish people to live in Israel is to distort God’s Word.



A Modern Miracle

*the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.*

— Psalm 118:23

Just 73 years ago, the Jewish people stood in the ashes of the Holocaust. Over six million Jews had been murdered — two million of them children — just for the “crime” of being Jews. It was the worst devastation that the Jewish people had suffered in their nearly two thousand years of exile, persecution, expulsion, humiliation, and assimilation. More than one-third of the world’s Jewish population was murdered during the Holocaust. Like the prophet Ezekiel, we looked down in the valley of death, *Sheol*, weary and weak, and asked, “*Can these bones live?*” (Ezekiel 37:3).

And behold a miracle! God breathed life into those dry bones and they came together, bone to bone, sinew to sinew. They took on flesh and spirit, and the nation lived again! As God said through the prophet, “. . . *these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.... My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel’*” (Ezekiel 37:11-12).

Just years after the Holocaust, the modern nation of Israel was born. On November 29, 1947, in nothing less than a miracle, the United Nations voted to support the creation of the modern State of Israel. The sudden re-emergence of the nation of Israel echoed the words from Isaiah 66:8: “*Who has ever heard of such things? Who has ever seen things like this? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children.*” Overnight, the nation came to life once again!

Against all odds, the Jews, the descendants of the children of Israel — survivors of Nazi death camps such as Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka — returned to their homeland. No other people in history have returned to their land after being exiled, but the Jewish people did it twice. We endured those first years after declaring independence when we were outnumbered and outgunned. We didn’t give up when challenged in war after war, terror, and bloodshed. Despite being surrounded on all sides by enemies intent on our destruction, the nation of Israel not only survived, but thrived.

The land itself, which had been barren for thousands of years, began to give forth its fruit once again as prophesied: “*The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.*” (Isaiah 51:3). Hebrew, a language all but forgotten, was resurrected and spoken by the average Jew in the

street once again.

We witnessed the miracle of *aliyah*, immigration to Israel, a miracle that many of you support through *The Fellowship*, with Jews pouring into the country from all four corners of the earth. While there had always been a persistent, continuous Jewish presence in the land, never before had so many and such a diverse group of Jews come home. “*Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests?*” (Isaiah 60:8) asked the prophet. The miracle of flight joined forces with the miracle of return as airplanes rescued Jews from countries such as Yemen, Ethiopia, Russia, and India. The lost tribes of Israel were finding their way home, and today, they continue to come home.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote: “*In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean*” (Isaiah 11:11). Prophecy upon prophecy, miracle upon miracle — the words of the Bible have come to life in the Jewish state.

Today, Israel is a light unto the nations (Isaiah 42:6) as the only democracy in the Middle East. Israel is on the cutting edge of technology and medical breakthroughs, giving the world ways to make life better, safer, and healthier. Throngs of people visit Israel each year for the inspiration and connection to God that the Holy Land has to offer.

As we give gratitude to God for the miracle of modern day Israel, we recognize that God is involved in the works of the world. We see that the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4), that anything is possible with Him (Genesis 18:14), and that nothing — armies, terrorists, anti-Semitism — will stand in the way of His plan and purposes (Psalm 33:10).

As my Christian friend and supporter of Israel and *The Fellowship*, Pat Robertson, said in a 2004 speech, “Evangelical Christians support Israel because we believe that the words of Moses and the ancient prophets of Israel were inspired by God. We believe that the emergence of a Jewish state in the land promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was ordained by God. We believe that God has a plan for this nation which He intends to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.”

May this continue to be so in generations to come.