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CHAPTER 1

The Nation and the Land

THE HEBREW WORD for Israel, “*Yisrael*,” means two things:

- The Nation of Israel, known as Jews. Jacob received this name from the angel he battled: “Your name will no longer be Jacob but *Yisrael*, because you fought [*sarisa*] with angels and men and won.”¹ Jacob’s descendants adopted this name and became the Nation of Israel.
- The Land of Israel, whose borders very roughly

1 Genesis 32:29.

correspond with the modern State of Israel.² Although this title is uncommon in the Written Torah (which usually refers to “the land of Cana’an,” “the promised land,” and so on), this is the standard name in all rabbinic sources.

JEWISH HISTORY

The history of the Jewish people is the evolving relationship between these two meanings of “Israel.” It’s clear even from biblical times that the Torah’s narrative heads in one direction: the Jewish nation reaching, inheriting, and living in the Land of Israel.

For example:

- God’s first recorded words to our forefather Abraham were: “Go to the land that I will show you.”³
- God repeatedly promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would be the forefathers of a people who would be as numerous as the stars and grains of sand and that those children would inherit the land of Cana’an. Sometimes He focused on the Land more than the nation.⁴

2 To learn more about the borders of the Land of Israel, I recommend reading Rabbi Ariel Buckwald’s wonderful book (in Hebrew), *Ani Hashem Shochein Besochah*.

3 Genesis 12:1.

4 For example, the primary message of the *bris bein habesarim* (a complex covenant between God and Abraham, see Genesis 15) was that after

- Throughout the Books of Genesis and Exodus, the Torah recounts how Jacob's offspring multiplied in Egypt to become a nation of slaves, followed by the dramatic events of the Exodus, which are repeated throughout the Torah.

Why did the Jews leave Egypt? The Torah answers: "He took us out of there [Egypt] to bring us to the land that He swore to our fathers [to give us]."⁵

- Many of the Torah's instructions involve life in Israel: agriculture, society, government, and the Temple service. All the rest were meant to be experienced in Israel — we do them in exile as practice for when we return.⁶

The root of all our nation's sufferings — two exiles, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, pogroms everywhere, and our recent tragedies — is our distance from the Land of Israel and its spiritual values.

Another large chunk of the Torah is devoted to telling that story. When Moses's failed spies sowed fear of the Canaanites among the Jewish people, the Jewish people spent the night of 9 Av crying because they wanted to return to Egypt. God's

four generations of exile, Abraham's descendants would inherit Israel.

5 Deuteronomy 6:23. If God had only wanted to free us from slavery and give us the Torah, we could have returned to Egypt after we had received the Torah at Mount Sinai. The reason why we left permanently was to go to Israel (see Ramban, Exodus 3:8).

6 Rashi, Deuteronomy 11:18; Ramban, Leviticus 18:25.

immediate response was to keep them for forty years in the desert until a new generation was born, and the long-term repercussions were millennia of painful exile and torment. On that day, many years later, both Temples were destroyed.

In King David's words:

They [the Jewish people] were disgusted with the cherished land — they didn't believe His word. He lifted His hand against them, for them to fall in the desert and for their descendants to fall among the nations and be scattered among the lands.⁷

(We'll learn more about the spies and exile in chapter 7.)

ISRAEL TODAY


These observations have nothing to do with religious Jews' various opinions about modern political Zionism. A person might believe the State of Israel is the harbinger of the Messiah, the worst desecration of God's Name in history, or anything in between, but the undisputable fact remains: there is no story of the **Nation** of Israel that's disconnected from the **Land** of Israel.

Sadly, the horrific stories and images coming recently out of Israel don't accurately portray the land in which its people are suffering and dying. They only show depraved

⁷ Psalms 106:24–27.

violence of *people*. Even the tales of courage and hope are about *people*. But pogroms happen everywhere.

To find meaning in all the madness, we must appreciate the Land of Israel, which is the destination of its people: the land's spiritual values, its beauty, and its messages of Jewish wellness. Beneath the suffering of its children, the Land of Israel calls for us to cherish it.



A CANYON IN THE SOUTHERN
GOLAN HEIGHTS. RIGHT
BEYOND THE HORIZON, CLIFFS
DROP TO LAKE KINNERET.

CHAPTER 2

The Jewish Body

WE MIGHT BE so used to identifying the Nation of Israel with the Land of Israel that we never stop to wonder why they always go together.

What would Judaism be missing if we had received the Torah on some random mountain — say, in the Sinai desert — and then returned to civilization (anywhere!) to live as good Jews?

We've been scattered everywhere for more than half of the 3336 years since we received the Torah, and we are still going strong. Why couldn't that always have been the plan?

Look at other religions: the various denominations of Christianity and Islam each have their holy cities and sites, but there is no geographical place called “Christian” or “Islam.” All countries are free (or forced) to join (or not join) the ranks of any faith.

This makes lots of sense. Why *should* spiritual beliefs be confined to borders of dirt and water? Isn’t God bigger than that?

Over many years, I’ve studied and thought a lot about this key question. I’ve learned that there is a simple answer to it.

ONE JEWISH PERSON

The Jewish nation isn’t a group of many individuals who share a common history, philosophy, or set of morals. We’re not even a nation in the regular sense of the term.

Rather, as God told Moses to tell Pharaoh in His first message to the Egyptian king:

“My firstborn son is Israel.”¹

God called us “son” in the singular.

The Jewish nation is a living human form that reaches farther and higher than any individual person can ever hope to reach with his own limited mind and abilities.

1 Exodus 4:22.

We know and emulate God by learning and living according to His Torah — all of us together.

Israel's unity is a common theme in Jewish sources and liturgy:

“Israel camped there, next to the mountain [Mount Sinai], as one person, with one heart.”²

“You are One, Your Name [as revealed in the Torah] is One, and who is like Your nation Israel, one nation in the land?”³

SOUL AND BODY

How exactly is Israel a single human life?

It's easy to see how a unified nation possesses a common soul: nations and souls are intellectual concepts that exist beyond the material world. To glimpse the oneness of the Nation of Israel, just look at the love and support still pouring out from Jews everywhere for the victims of the October 7 massacre and its aftermath.

In the days after October 7, flights between the US and Israel were packed: not with Jews fleeing the war zone but with Jews going there to help.

But where is the body of Israel? It's great to have a common

2 Rashi, Exodus 19:2.

3 Shabbos Minchah (afternoon prayer).