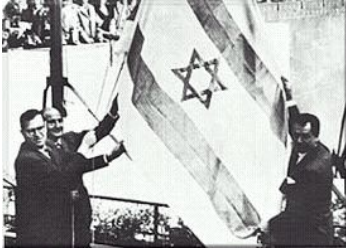


*Devarim* August 13, 2016

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל

*These are the words which Moses spoke to all of Israel*



The reading of Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah, begins this week. Poised to finally enter the Promised Land, Moses recaps for the Israelites the events that took place during their forty years of wandering. The agreement to their biblical ancestors to enter and prosper in Canaan, the Promised Land, had been delayed by enslavement, years of wandering and unfortunate consequences due to their misbehavior.

So why this repetition of an earlier narrative and a restating of all the laws expressed in Exodus chapters 19 - 23? The sages teach us that this is a reminder of the essence of G-d's covenant with the people of Israel - that without a brit (contractual agreement with the Divine), there can be no entry into the Promised Land. Contemporary biblical scholars assert that this final book of the Torah was a later addition, not at all Mosaic in origin, likely written in the 7th Century BCE. Either way, the canonization of this narrative in our sacred text, 2000 years later continues to be read. Communities the world over hear the story of how the Israelite people came to *Eretz Yisrael*. They have explored what this means for our relationship to one another and to G-d and this retelling has shaped and solidified the relationship of Jews with Israel. The aspiration to return to and maintain the "Promised Land" is inextricable from Jewish identity because of this historical, religious, and literary context.

Jews today know well the ancient promise of Israel to our ancestors, the years of exile, and how the Israelites journeyed to re-enter the land following the Exodus from Egypt. Yet few understand the context surrounding the establishment of Modern Israel. Should not this more recent realization of an ancient promise be equally familiar? Students young and old may know from their studies that the State of Israel was established in May 1948. They might have learned that six months after the United Nations General Assembly recommended the adoption and implementation of a Partition Plan for Mandatory Palestine (which called for the creation of an Arab state and a Jewish state with an economic union) the State of Israel was founded. But, beyond that, what is common knowledge concerning the the establishment of Modern Israel? And what details should be included?

The narrative of how the modern state came to be could begin with telling about the small groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims who lived side-by-side (in what was then Palestine) for many centuries under Ottoman Turkish rule. Then, in the latter decades of the 19th century, more and more Jews immigrated to this area. Along with socio-political tensions and shifting economic tides in the places they lived, Jews in Eastern Europe had endured decades of expulsions, restrictions, and pogroms that created untold suffering and repeated loss of jobs, homes, and loved ones. For families who immigrated to Palestine, the impetus was not necessarily a spiritual longing or desire to revive the ancient promise of return to their homeland. Rather, the overarching goal for these Jewish communities was survival, and some fled to Palestine in desperation. The majority left for the USA.

In 19th century Western Europe, a tiny minority of Jews rekindled a national and political vision: Zionism as a national movement for Jewish liberation from oppression. Leaders and scholars in Jewish communities sought a return to *Eretz Yisrael* to establish a place where they lived not as “guests” living under the rule or whim of others, but actors, in control of Jewish destiny and free of violence and force. And, with the formation of the World Zionist Organization in 1897 and confirmation from the international community in the League of Nations in 1922 and again the UN in 1947, thousands of Jews from all over the world made Palestine their new home.

Students today know the names Moses and Aaron, Abraham and Sarah, along with other details of Jewish history from 2500 years ago. Yet few have ever heard of Arthur Balfour, Britain’s Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who in 1917 wrote the following in a letter to Lord Rothschild, one of the leaders of British Jewry:

*I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty’s Government, the following declaration of sympathy which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet: His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*

(November 2, 1917)

There is the story of the Jewish people in their land, exiled twice and then returning in small numbers in the 1880s to form the backbone of modern Zionist immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*. And, so too is there a modern story that includes seeking, building, and maintaining the State of Israel.

Israel is part of Jewish history; the Jews’ quest to determine their own future, an inalienable political right. All of Jewish history includes coping with the reality of being a minority, adapting, and surviving for the next generation.

### **Discussion Questions:**

Why do you think little is taught and understood about the details of the establishment of the State of Israel? Do you think perhaps that in teaching our children we have focused too much on how others have treated us, rather than on what we did for ourselves?

How do you think it may help the next chapter in the State of Israel and Jewish people for youth and adults to know details and context surrounding the establishment and preservation of the State of Israel?

### **Additional References:**

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