

Nitzavim September 16, 2017

אִם-יִהְיֶה נִדְחֶיךָ, בְּקִצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם--מִשָּׁם, יִקְבְּצֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וּמִשָּׁם, יִקְחֶךָ.
וַיְבִיאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יָרְשׁוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ--וַיְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

Deuteronomy 30:4 *Even if your outcasts are at the end of the world, from there Adonai your G-d will gather you, from there God will fetch you. And Adonai your G-d will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed and you shall possess it...*



The opening of Deuteronomy, chapter 30 can be read as a prediction of what G-d will do for the Israelites in the future or as a conditional reward for proper conduct. The assurance of a return to the Land parallels the promise made in Genesis 28:15 when Jacob fled his home. Within a dream involving Divine intervention, Jacob hears, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Shortly after this episode, Jacob is renamed Israel.

There are at least two ways of reading this promise, repeated year after year in the annual cycle of Torah and Haftarah readings. Israelites in exile will return to the land of Israel as a result of human effort or as part of a Divine plan. Whichever one believes, the message is clear. Jews scattered the world over are destined to return to Eretz Yisrael. This belief has sustained Jewish communities and individuals who could have lost hope in the face of untold suffering. Over two-thousand years of scriptural and liturgical assurances served as a lifeline; their hope in this promise keeping them alive. Whether the establishment of the State of Israel signaled the fruition of this biblical promise or not, the many *aliyot* (moving up to the Land) marked a kind of “rescue,” a return for numerous threatened Jewish communities scattered throughout the world.

The first modern *Aliyah* took place before the emergence of political Zionism. In the late 1800s, communities from Russia and Yemen relocated in several towns along the western coast of the Land of Israel. The second wave of immigrants to make *aliyah* were primarily Russian Jews fleeing anti-Semitic pogroms. These new immigrants revitalized Hebrew as a modern language and initiated the first *kibbutzim*. The third *Aliyah* coincided with the beginning of the British Mandate following WWI. From 1919 to 1923, many Russian communities along with some Poles and Romanians took leave of their countries of origin. They sought to escape the hardships Jews faced in Eastern Europe, again partially motivated by an increase in anti-Semitic

sentiment. The British Mandate allowed for the establishment of new communities to strengthen Jewish presence in Palestine through infrastructure expansion, which included agriculture, communal living (*kibbutzim*), and institutions. Polish Jews along with a small Hungarian contingent comprised the fourth *Aliyah*. These individuals and families added to the economic growth of pre-state Israel by establishing small industries and businesses.

Following the rise of the Nazi Germany and other nationalistic states, Western and Central European Jews joined Eastern European Jews escaping severe restrictions and escalating anti-Semitism. These individuals drove the fifth *Aliyah*, moving to Palestine during a short period from 1932-1938 and making up the largest number of immigrants thus far: almost 200,000. Many of these individuals were university-educated, some prominent personalities, and many had lived with prosperity and respect in Europe. Lawyers, doctors, educators, pharmacists, trained musicians, and artists came to Palestine and helped build settlements, villages, and urban areas, along with cultural and educational institutions.

When the British imposed stringent restrictions on Jewish immigration as a result of the 1939 White Paper, written in response to the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt, illegal immigration ensued. From 1939-1945 whoever could successfully escape the Nazi regime in Europe did so, arriving as refugees and counted as the sixth *Aliyah*, known as '*Aliyah Bet*' or '*Aliyah Bilti-Legal*' ("unlawful immigration"). The final *Aliyah* to be enumerated was the seventh which took place from 1946-1948 when survivors of the Holocaust made their way to Palestine (many illegally).

Though the "numbering" of the *aliyot* ceased, immigration from all the corners of the globe continued. In 1948, communities of Jews residing in Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, escaping persecution, left their homes and property to make their way to Israel. This continued through the early 1970s, leaving virtually no remaining Jews living in the Middle East outside of Israel, with the exception of remnants in Morocco, Iran, Turkey, and several other scattered places throughout the region.

"Operation Moses" and "Operation Solomon" were the two endeavors that brought Ethiopian Jews ("Beta Israel") to Israel in 1984 and 1991 respectively. The "Beta Israel" communities had already begun to immigrate in small numbers, but with the dangers posed by crossing on foot through the Sudan, rescue efforts became a necessity. Altogether, in these two covert actions, orchestrated by Israeli and American volunteers, over 20,000 Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel.

One of the largest and most recent mass immigrations of Jews occurred from Soviet Russia, beginning before the end of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and continuing into the mid-1990s. It is estimated that in a fifteen-year span, over 1.5 million Russians with Jewish ancestry moved to Israel.

Jews from South America have also made *aliyah* in spurts over the years. Most have come from Argentina, but there are also communities coming from Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Chile, numbering approximately 60,000 in the last three decades.

Since the establishment of the State in 1948, immigration to Israel has been very unique. In 1950 the Knesset enacted the "Law of Return." This Law states: "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*." In 1952 additional entitlements were added. The Nationality Law ensures that new citizens could participate in politics and travel in and out of the country with Israeli passports. And, another layer was added to the Law when in 1970 individuals with a Jewish grandparent could become automatic citizens of Israel along with their spouses.

As the Law of Return evolved, it is clear that the biblical and Zionist promise was fulfilled: the return of millions Jews scattered throughout the world to Israel, a Jewish homeland. The last six decades of ongoing immigration have not been without complications and hurdles. However, for these millions of Jews and those that support them, Israel has meant physical safety and spiritual freedom.

Discussion Questions:

Is the concept of returning to Israel as a Jewish homeland a fulfillment of an ancient promise? Is the existence of Israel for the survival of the Jewish people an ongoing necessity?

Does it make a difference whether Jews ascribe to either or both of these beliefs? If so, what are those differences?

Additional Resources:

Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *A Jew in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 1995, page 716.

The Jewish Agency on [Aliyah](#)

[Palyam and Aliyah Bet](#) - (A collection of photos, first-hand accounts and more about illegal immigration, the struggle for Israel's independence and the origins of Israel's navy).

[Ministry of Aliya and Absorption](http://www.moia.gov.il/English/Pages/default.aspx) - <http://www.moia.gov.il/English/Pages/default.aspx>

Today in Israeli History - [Law of return](#)

[Who is a Jew amendment](#)

Spielberg Video Archive "[immigration](#)" - 83 videos on YouTube related to immigration

Dov Tibbon, "[Immigration to Israel, 1949-1952](#)," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1951, pp. 397-404.