

Why Israel?

Source #1: Extracts from 'the Kuzari'

The King: If this be so, you fall short of the duty laid down in your law, by not seeking to reach that place, and making it your abode in life and death...Your bowing and kneeling in the direction of it is either mere appearance or thoughtless worship. Yet your first forefathers chose it as an abode in preference to their birth-places, and lived there as strangers rather than as citizens in their own country. This they did even at a time when the Shekhinah was yet visible, but the country was full of unchasteness, impurity, and idolatry. Your fathers, however, had no other desire than to remain in it. Neither did they leave it in times of dearth and famine except by God's permission. Finally they directed their bones to be buried there.

The Rabbi: This is a severe reproach, O king of the Khazars. It is the sin which prevented the divine promise with regard to the second Temple...from being fulfilled. Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first, if they had all willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, while the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylonia, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs..."

At the end of the book, the Rabbi "draws personal conclusions" and announces that he is leaving for Israel.

The King: Through pure intention and strong desire we may approach to God in every place! Why do you expose yourself to the dangers of land and sea and to risks incurred by contact with other people?

The Rabbi: I seek freedom – from the service of those numerous people only whose favor I shall never obtain even if I work for it all my life and which would not profit me even if I could obtain it: I mean the service of men and the courting of their favor. But I seek the service of One whose favor is obtained with the smallest effort and profits in this world and the next: this is the favor of God. His service is freedom, and humility before Him is true honor..."

According to legend, Yehuda Halevi did indeed make aliyah in 1141 (or was it only a pilgrimage?), and was killed by an Arab bandit shortly after his arrival.

Source #2: Emil L. Fackenheim – Israel as Jewish power

"If absolute power is the prerogative of the Divine, then the gods of Auschwitz were Adolf Eichmann who did the procuring, Rudolf Hess who did the administering, and Dr. Josef Mengele who did the selecting. There are times in history when spirit is broken and impotent, and all that counts is power. But what is power? Money is power. So is influence. So is prudence. So is genius. Jews in their centuries of statelessness have used all these attributes, and sometimes one has helped, sometimes another. But during the Nazi regime, none of them counted. The plain truth is that during the twelve years of the Third Reich, that were like unto a thousand to its Jewish victims, only one form of power counted, and that the Jewish people lacked. In the first period of the twelve years – persecution, expulsion – Jewish victims needed havens, but those only states could provide. In the second period – mass torture and murder – only a state that considered Jewish lives to be a top priority could have mustered planes, bombs, armies, and the other implements of state power that could have made a large difference.

"It was therefore an act of world-historical significance when, on 14 May 1948, David Ben-Gurion, on behalf of an ad hoc government of the Jews of Palestine, proclaimed the first Jewish state in 1878 years..."

From: "The Jewish Return into History: Philosophical Fragments on the State of Israel," in Elliot Dorff and Louis Newman (eds.), *Contemporary Jewish Theology - A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 226.

Source #3: Ahad Ha'Am – Israel as cultural center

"What has already been accomplished in Palestine [as of 1912] entitles one to say with confidence that that country will be 'a national spiritual center of Judaism,' to which all Jews will turn with affection, and which will bind all Jews together; a center of study and learning, of language and literature, of bodily work and spiritual purification; a true miniature of the people of Israel as it ought to be... so that every Hebrew in the Diaspora will think it a privilege to behold just once 'the center of Judaism' and when he returns home will say to his friends: If you wish to see the genuine type of Jew, whether it be a Rabbi or a scholar or a writer, a farmer or an artist or a businessman – then go to Palestine and you will see it." From: "Summa Summarum" in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic: Basic Writings of Ahad Ha'Am*, (New York: Schocken, 1962).

Source #4: Cynthia Ozick – Israel for Israelis

Sovereignty, if it is to mean anything at all, must be answerable to the will of voters, not to meditations of diaspora intellectuals, no matter how impassioned, well-intended or “committed” they may be. Opinion from abroad remains exactly that—opinion from abroad, a surrounding buzz, sometimes importuning, sometimes demanding, but always irrelevant to the voting citizens who are subject to the risks of any irrevocable national decision. Sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions about the future, based partly on the mandate of the ballot box and partly on the independent thinking of those they have elected... If I don't live in Israel and have no vote, why should any Israeli care what I think? And this stricture applies... also to the relentless pressures of the heads of significant diaspora institutions.

Cynthia Ozick 1999 Azure

Source #5: S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky) – Israel as roots

"The Bible was, of course, in the hiker's knapsack; he would walk and read it and walk and point, read a name and show a place, read a name and point to an animal or a bird, read a name and excavate an archaeological site, read verbs and point at tracks in the sand and at scratches on the rock, read the name of a hero and behold a living vision - here is Gideon, here is Samson, and of course David son of Jesse - they were all here. We are in ancient garb, we are the bearers of an ancient glory, not like the Spaniards in America, conquering a foreign land, but like sons who find their forefathers everywhere. Scramble in the dirt and you'll find remains of Jews, shout in the mountains and a magnificent Jewish echo will answer...

"The satisfaction of clearing away some earth and here is an inscription floating towards us, exactly confirming scripture, the enthusiasm that bursts forth when the hovering bird was really the vulture descending on the carcasses like the one from the Covenant of the Pieces (Genesis 15:11), and this pit in the rock is the actual winepress or olive-press of our farmer forefathers... in a heart singing with true joy, and with the certainty that ours is the land, and we are its true children."

From: *Against Joshua*. An address at the conference of the Humanistic Judaism Movement, Jerusalem, 1992.

Source #6: Shlomo Aviner – The state of Israel as the beginning of the redemption

"These are in fact times of Redemption, without a shadow of a doubt. This period did not start now, but rather 120 years ago, in 1881, with what is known as the First Aliyah of Jews to the Land of Israel..."

"Regarding the Period of Redemption: The concepts of Days of Moshiach, Redemption, the Beginning of the Flowering of our Redemption, the Atchalta DeGeula, the Footsteps of Moshiach - all these close-to-synonyms refer to the period in which the Kingdom returns to Israel. When did this period begin? On the 5th of Iyar, 5708, May 14, 1948, when the modern State of Israel declared its independence. Of course, this is not the ideal Kingdom for which we had prayed and are praying; it is not the Kingdom of the Moshiach. But it's a start. The distance between this and British or Turkish rule is like that between east and west, between heaven and earth.

"Our government is a preparation for the Kingdom of Israel, and the Torah Kingdom of Israel is a preparation for the Kingdom of the Moshiach. Similarly, our public national being also required prior preparation - namely, Shivat Tzion, the Return to Zion in the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s. Our present situation could not have come about without a minimum number of Jews, according to our sources (see, for instance, Rabbi Kook's Olat R'Iyah, p. 388), which is 600,000 - the number of Jews who entered Israel with Joshua Bin Nun after traversing the wilderness for 40 years. This was in fact the approximate number of Jews in the Holy Land when they established the present-day State of Israel."

From: Special Times, Special Challenges,
<http://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/Shiur.asp?ID=684>

Source #7: Abraham Joshua Heschel – Israel as evidence of divine providence

"God has led us through hell and said: Return ye to the Holy Land, children of men. So we followed His lead, and behold, 'the Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light' (Exodus, 13.21).

"It is dangerous to regard political affairs as religious events; yet since the time of Abraham we were taught that political affairs are to be understood within the orbit of God's concern. We must not expect the history of politics to read like a history of theology. Instances of God's care in history come about in seeming disarray, in scattered fashion – we must seek to comprehend the unity of the seemingly disconnected chords. To the eyes of the heart, it is clear that returning to the land is an event in accord with the hidden Presence in Jewish history. It is a verification of a biblical promise. It has saved so many lives, it has called forth so much dedication and sacrifice, it has revived hope. Returning to the land is an event in which the past endures, in which the future is foreshadowed...

"Infinitely greater than the sacrifice of Isaac was the martyrdom of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Treblinka, and others. The State of Israel was built on that martyrdom; its people are, to use a phrase of the prophet Zechariah (3:2), 'a brand plucked from the fire.'

"The rescue of a people from physical oppression and even destruction from the corroding influence of assimilation ... the reclamation of the land from the aridity and barrenness to which most of its soil had been condemned by the spoliation and neglect of man and nature, is an act of sanctification."

From: Mount Sinai and Mount Moriah, in *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 136-138.

Source #8: Melanie Philips – Israel as inherent

Zionism is no more nor less than the self-determination of the Jewish people -- as *a* people, and not just as adherents of the Jewish religion. Jews are in fact the *only* people – *asa* people -- for whom Israel (ancient Judea and Samaria) was ever their national homeland. Those who deny Zionism thus deny Jewish peoplehood and the fundamental right of Jews to live as a people in their own ancestral homeland, Israel.

Unique in the world, Jews are both a people and adherents of a religion. Intrinsic to and inseparable from the religion of Judaism is the land of Israel; more specifically, the centrality of and longing for Jerusalem and its Temple. Deny that centrality and you rip the heart and soul out of Judaism. Those who deny the right of the Jews to Israel and Jerusalem deny the right of the Jews to their own religion.

Melanie Phillips, Daily Mail 2012

Source #9: Martin Buber: Israel as the opportunity to live Jewish values and demonstrate God's will

"We have learned ... that in a life of dispersion not determined by ourselves, we cannot realize Judaism. We can pray here in the Diaspora, but not act; bear witness to God with patience, but not with creativity; praise the jubilee year, but not usher it in...

"The new humanity needs us. However it needs us not dispersed and working at cross-purposes, but together and united; not befouled by pretences and rumors, but purified and ready; not to acknowledge God with our words while betraying God with our lives, but, to serve God faithfully through the establishment of a human community according to His will. Our contribution to the new humanity consists not in explaining and asserting that there is a God, but in showing how God lives in us – how through a true human life, we realize both ourselves and God within us."

From: "A Debate on Zionism and Messianism," in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds), *The Jew in the Modern World – A Documentary History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p 452.

Source #10: R. Jane Marder – Israel as Jewish Public Space

“Some of what I love is the reality of Israel: the automatic teller machine that spits out a receipt wishing me a happy Sukkot; the taxi drivers with *tehilim* (psalms) taped to the dashboard; street signs in Hebrew, named for sages and poets and great figures in our history; concerts that begin with the crowd singing “Hatikvah”; public lectures, literature, films, plays, and even rock music that wrestle with Jewish themes; the siren that announces Shabbat on Friday afternoons in Jerusalem; the buses that stop running, the quiet that falls over the city, and the streets full of people carrying flowers home or walking to synagogue. Israel is the only place in the world that offers me public Jewish space—an external environment that reflects my inner identity. I belong there, in a way that I belong nowhere else.”

A Dream of Zion: American Jews Reflect on Why Israel Matters to Them (2007)

Source #11: Midrash – Israel as the opportunity to perform mitzvot

“It happened that Rabbi Judah ben Baterah and Rabbi Matyah ben Charash and Rabbi Haninah ben Achi and Rabbi Joshua ben Yonatan were going abroad... When they remembered the land of Israel, they lifted up their eyes and their tears flowed, and they tore their clothes, and read this verse: ‘...When you have occupied [the land] and settled in it, take care to observe all the laws and rules that I have set before you this day.’ [Deuteronomy 11:31-32]. And they returned home, and said: ‘Dwelling in the land of Israel outweighs all of the commandments in the Torah.’”

Sifrei, Deuteronomy 80.

Source #12: Yeshayahu Leibowitz – Israel as a nation state; important for practical, national reasons but of no religious/historical significance.

"Zionism has no connection to Judaism in its essential, religious sense of the obligation to observe Torah and Mitzvoth; this is an absolute obligation imposed upon us regardless of particular historical circumstances or existential conditions. Zionism has no bearing on it whatsoever since this task is binding on us in our land as in exile, in freedom as in bondage, and the effort to fulfill it continues and will continue so long as there are Jews who recognize it. Zionism as an aspiration to political-national independence is a legitimate Jewish aspiration, and the state is dear to us as its fulfillment.

But it must not be given a religious aura. Only what is done for the sake of Heaven has religious significance. The category of holiness is inapplicable to the state. I deny that the establishment of the state of Israel and its very existence signal a beginning of the realization of the values of Judaism. Sovereignty is essential to the state, along with an executive apparatus and the power and authority of coercion. The state fulfills an essential need of the individual and the national community, but it does not thereby acquire intrinsic value..."

From: "The Religious and Moral Significance of the Redemption of Israel," in Eliezer Goldman (ed.), *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 117-118.

Source #13 : Linda Grant – All of it

Samir had told me a little story as we walked through the streets of Jerusalem, about how, in his twenties, he had read a novel by Aharon Appelfeld, back in the days when the Palestinian national movement was reading Israeli writing as police readers... to take precious quotes as weapons in its struggle.

The novel was about two boys running through Nazi Europe, escaping for their lives, and at the end of the novel they escape, they board a boat for Palestine. 'And I was relieved. And then I thought, how can you be relieved? They're coming to steal your country!'

This little anecdote, about literature, about its subversive power of empathy, about how listening to the story of the other has its own power, is what remains.

The Zionists made something, they made a country and a story. Everything exists for better or worse, but everything exists, the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote. It exists, that Israel, it cannot be undone.

The village of Bassa no longer exists, it can no more be resurrected than the Jewish life of Lomza. Still, the story of both these places continues, stubbornly persisting, winding through the decades.

We drove back to Tel Aviv. Everything looked different...all looked more real than they had ever done before, more complicated, more interesting, more human. More frail and more tough, more of everything they were already, and even less capable of being the receptacles for slogans.

I saw my parents there, walking arm in arm, along the beach-front lights. I saw Samir's grandparents alighting from the bus that brought them south from Bassa. I saw Jaffa, I saw Jonah washed up on its shore from the whale's belly. I saw us all.

The People on the Streets, Linda Grant 2006