

## LESSON 1 THE CONNECTION?

**I. What is the aim of this lesson?** To explain the importance and centrality of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people according to the Torah.

**II. Why is this lesson important?** The study of the importance of the Land of Israel usually revolves around the writings of the Zionist thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This leads to the false impression that Israel only assumed a central role in Jewish history since the inception of the Zionist movement and the emergence of the State of Israel. This lesson aims to correct that false impression by showing that the Land of Israel played a vital role in shaping our identity as a people from the very moment that we began to describe ourselves as a people. Furthermore, much of the subsequent 2000 years of Jewish history is the story of the Jews living in, or relating to, the Land. Thus, it is appropriate to begin a course that focuses on some key aspects in the relationship between the People and the Land by trying to understand the underlying concepts behind this relationship.

### **III. Texts, Questions and Central Ideas of the Lesson:**

#### **Text 1 – Genesis 12:1-3 – The Divine Call and the Promises**

**What is the divine call to Abraham (or, more accurately, Abram. His name was changed later. See Gen. 17:5)? What can we learn about the importance of the land from the context in which the Divine call is made?**

This is the *first* call to Abraham, the *first* Patriarch of the Jewish People (I use the term “Jewish” people loosely. We cannot accurately speak of “Jews” for another 1200 years or so.) and in it he is asked to uproot himself from his family and his homeland and to move to a new undisclosed land. Thus, we already see that the land played a central role from the very beginning of Jewish history (I also use the term “history” loosely in that it assumes that the biblical record is history. The truth is that many historians regard it as myth. It may be more accurate to refer to it as the “memory of our history”).

#### **Why does the land assume such central importance?**

As this text makes clear, God promises to make Abraham a “great” and “blessed” (see the number of times that the root “bless” appears in the span of 2 verses) “nation” through which the entire world will

be blessed. Since these promises relate to the growth and success of a future “nation” it was essential that Abraham go to a land where his “national” destiny can be fulfilled.

God, however, does not stop there.

### **Text 2 – Genesis 12:7 – The Promised Land**

#### **What does God add in this text? What is its importance?**

After Abraham enters the land God promises that he will inherit it. In other words, it becomes the “Promised Land”. This was essential because Abraham’s offspring cannot genuinely become a “great nation” and enjoy the national blessing in a land that is under foreign sovereignty. The land must belong to him and his descendants so that they can establish themselves as a sovereign nation in it. Indeed, this twofold promise – nationhood and inheritance of the land – are the central motifs of the Book of Genesis. (See, for example, Gen. 14:14-17, 15:1-21, 17:3-8, 26:3-4, 28:13-14, 35:10-12, 48:3-4) In the following lessons we will discuss some of the problems that stemmed from this promise.

This of course raises the most obvious question: **Why was God so eager to bless Abraham by giving him a land and by making him into a great nation? Did God bless him for the sake of blessing him or did God have some ulterior motive?** This of course gets into the whole question of chosenness which is beyond the scope of this lesson. We will only focus on it insofar as it provides us a critical insight into the significance of the Land.

### **Text 3 – Genesis 12: 4-9 – Abraham’s Response to the Divine Call**

#### **What does this text tell us about the character of Abraham? How might that help explain why God was so eager to bless him with nationhood and land?**

The text tells us that Abraham goes “as the Lord commanded him”. He didn’t tarry or complain despite the incredible sacrifice being asked of him (let’s try to imagine how we might have responded to a similar call), despite not having previously encountered this God and despite not knowing where he was going (“to the land that I will show you”). Furthermore, once he arrives in this land he builds altars “to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.” In other words, Abraham exhibited complete faith in God, the willingness to make enormous sacrifices in obeying God’s command and continued loyalty and dedication to Him. (I am referring to God in the masculine in accordance with Jewish tradition. A discussion of the issues involved in this matter is beyond the scope of this lesson).

Thus, we may begin to understand why God was so eager to bless Abraham. God promised him a land in which he would become “a great nation” because God wanted the unique qualities and characteristics that Abraham exhibited to become the legacy of an entire nation. That this is the case is spelled out even more clearly in the following text.

#### **Text 4 – Genesis 18:18-19 – God’s Announcement about Sodom and Gomorrah**

#### **What does this text tell us about the character of Abraham? How might that help explain why God was so eager to bless him with land and nationhood?**

In this text God explains why He decided to reveal to Abraham his intentions regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. God argued (to Himself?) that since He had promised that Abraham would become a “great and populous nation” (echoing the promise of “a great nation” in 12:2) and that “all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him” (echoing the promise at the end of 12:3) and that the reason for these promises was “that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right”. Since that is why God singled out Abraham in the first place, it makes no sense for God to withhold information regarding the planned destruction of cities whose inhabitants abysmally failed to “keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right”.

In other words, God explains here in no uncertain terms that the above blessings were bestowed upon Abraham not merely as a *gift* but as an *instrument* to allow him, as the founder and spiritual leader of a sovereign nation, to “instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right”. Thus, the promises of nationhood and land are a means to an end and not an end, in and of themselves. More than the “Promised Land” implies God’s obligation to the people it implies the people’s obligation to God.

There can be no greater confirmation of God’s assessment of the character of Abraham as a man of justice and righteousness than Abraham’s reaction immediately after being told of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In his attempt to spare the cities from destruction, Abraham argues with God incessantly in the name of justice and righteousness “will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty... what if there should fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it... shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

While other examples of Abraham’s exemplary character may be brought (his remarkable behavior in response to God’s trial in the Binding of Isaac as described in Gen. 22 comes to mind above all else) the fundamental point is already clear. God knew that Abraham could not teach the whole world about the

ways of God single-handedly; the task required the creation of a society, a nation. But national goals cannot be fulfilled without the existence of a national homeland. Thus, after God promised to make Abraham “a great nation”, He promised him “I will assign this land to your offspring”.

### **Why does this idea seem foreign to many Jews in the Diaspora?**

Many Jews in the Diaspora today view Judaism primarily as a religion. As long as it is viewed as such, location is inconsequential. Just as the Moslems and Christians, wherever they are, are linked by their common beliefs, heritage and rituals, so are the Jews. However, this does not appear to be the biblical view. The Jews are, first and foremost a people, a nation whose identity was formed because of, and inspired by, the values of their forefather Abraham. And the Jews are a nation that is assigned the task of following his legacy. For this collective task the land is essential.

This principle seems to be further illustrated in the following text.

### **Text 5 – Deuteronomy 4:5 – The Connection between the Laws and the Land**

#### **What does this text teach about the proper location for the fulfillment of the commandments?**

According to this text the laws are meant to be fulfilled “in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.” Now what does this mean? After all, Jews throughout the centuries have been adhering to the laws of the Torah in countries throughout the world. Are Shabbat and Kashrut, for example, less meaningful if they are observed outside the Land?

While it is true that laws such as Shabbat and Kashrut are not dependent on the Land, the fact is that there are a whole host of laws that can only be fulfilled in the Land, known as *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba'aretz*. Included in this list are the *mitzvot* of *sehmifah*- leaving the land fallow every 7<sup>th</sup> year (see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-4), the *yovel* – the Jubilee in which all tenured lands revert to their original owners, *pe'ah*, *shikhechah*, *leket*, *olelot* and *peret* - which require leaving some produce from the harvest of the fields and the vineyards of the Land for the poor and the stranger (see Leviticus 19:9-10; Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21), the offering of *bikkurim* – the bringing of the choice first fruits of the Land to the sanctuary and of the first of the dough from the five grains indigenous to the Land to the priest (see Exodus 23:19; Exodus 34:26; Leviticus 23:10-14; Numbers 15:18-21; Deuteronomy 26:2-11) and the giving of *terumah* and *ma'aser* – gifts and tithes from the produce of the Land of which some are given to the Levites and the poor while others are eaten by the farmer himself at the sanctuary (see Numbers 15:17-21; Deuteronomy 14:22-29; Deuteronomy 26:12-15.) Indeed, many of these laws are observed in the Land of Israel to this very day.

Nevertheless, while it may be possible to restrict the reading of our verse to the *mitzvot hateluyot ba-aretz* – those particular laws that apply only in the Land, it seems from the larger context (Deuteronomy chapters 4-11) that the Torah is referring to the “laws and rules” *as a whole*. Thus, we return to our original question. What is the logic behind the Torah’s claim here that *all* the laws should ideally be performed in the Land?

If we examine the laws as a whole we will discover something fascinating; they govern the lives not just of individuals but of a sovereign nation. Interspersed with the more well known laws governing the cycle of the year, the rhythms of life and ethical conduct, are laws that deal with the appointment of judges (Deuteronomy 16:18), kings (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), and Jewish courts (Deuteronomy 17:8-13; 21:1-9; 25:1-3) as well as laws that deal with the army and warfare (Deuteronomy 20:1-10; 21:10-14; 24:5-6), and the conquest and the division of the Land (Numbers 34-35; Deuteronomy 18:1-2, 19:1-10 and 20:11-20). The fact that these are among the laws in the Torah is a strong indication that Judaism is not merely the adherence to a particular faith and religion but is also the belonging to a particular people which is sovereign in its land. And if this is correct then it should not be surprising that the Torah would declare that ideally *all* the laws and norms are meant to be fulfilled by the people “in the land which you are about to invade and occupy”. Thus, while many laws can, in theory, be fulfilled outside the Land (i.e. *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*) they are best fulfilled by the People in the Land.

According to this interpretation, the laws of the Torah then reflect the principle that we discussed above. When Abraham was no longer around to guide them, his descendants - the People of Israel - were given a vast array of laws, outlined in the Torah, to help them fulfill their goal as a sovereign nation in their Land.

#### **IV. Suggested Lesson Plan**

##### **Step 1**

It may be helpful to begin by asking the students to talk or to write about their homes and to try to explain what their home means to them and why. Then ask them to explain some of the considerations in their parent’s decision to live where they do. If they were given the choice would they want to live elsewhere? Why? Would any of them choose to live in another country? Why or why not?

These questions help set the stage for the texts of this lesson. Once this discussion has taken place the students should be better prepared to proceed with the text study and to grapple with its meaning and significance.

## Step 2

Study and analyze texts 1-4 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. If there is insufficient time then text 4 can be summarized orally. If you have more time, study sections of Genesis 22 regarding the *Akeidah* – the Binding of Isaac - that serve as further illustrations of Abraham’s unique character.

## Step 3

Study and analyze text 5 which deals with the connection between the laws and the Land. If the laws as a whole are meant to be fulfilled by the People in the Land then this proves the central theme of this lesson.

## Step 4

It may be helpful to conclude the lesson with a brief discussion revolving around some of the following questions: How do you feel about this idea? Does it change the way you feel about Judaism? Does it change the way you feel about Israel?

### **VI. Questions for Further Study**

1. Read Genesis 2:5-7 in the Hebrew original. What is the etymological relationship between “man” and “land”?
2. What can we learn from this relationship about the importance of land?
3. Read Genesis 3:17-19, 4:10-12 and 6:5-7. What does each of these sections tell us about the changing nature of the relationship between man and the land?
4. How can we explain this change?
5. Against this background try to explain the significance of the call to Abraham to build a nation in a particular land.

### **VII. Literature for Further Reading**

Buber, M. *Israel and Palestine: The History of an Idea*. London: East and West Library, 1952

Hoffman, L, ed. *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986

Schweid, E. “Land of Israel” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987, pp. 535-541

Sicker, M. *Judaism, Nationalism and the Land of Israel*, San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992