Lesson 18

Ksharim
Lesson 18:
Teaching the Bible, Teaching Israel – a Pause for Reflection

1. Outline
   a. Sacred space
   b. Pre-Zionism
   c. What is the Bible?
   d. Where is home?

2. Introduction
   As mentioned in Lesson 1, this course is based on the assumption that in liberal
   Jewish education, the three primary texts are the Bible, the Siddur, and the
   calendar; thus about two thirds of the course meetings focus on study of these
   sources, with the last third devoted to modern history and current issues. The
   emphasis in the first third, the Bible section, has been on helping participants
   maintain their alertness to the opportunities for teaching Israel in just about
   any Bible lesson. After all, the Bible is a book about God, the Jewish people,
   and the Land of Israel. However, in recent generations, the land has lost some
   of its centrality, at least in liberal Jewish classrooms in North America. So, first
   of all, this course seeks to refocus the teaching of Bible, to keep Israel always
   within the field of vision; the Bible must be understood and taught as not only
   the biography of God, nor only the history of the Jewish people, but as the
   story of the three-way relationship of God, people, and land.

   This lesson seeks to present an opportunity to step back and reflect on some of
   the underlying questions that must be addressed in our teaching of this
   relationship.

3. Lesson goals
   a. Awareness of different conceptions of the role of Israel in Jewish identity
   b. Awareness of different views on the nature of the Bible and the goals of
      studying it
   c. Formulation of a personal philosophy regarding the significance of the Bible in
      defining our relationship to Israel
4. Expanded outline
   a. Sacred space
      i. It is interesting to consider the whole topic of the sanctity - and the sanctification – of place in the Bible, as a basis for discussing just what is the nature of the Land of Israel – what is the meaning of the term “Holy Land.” Here are some suggested texts for discussion:
         1. Genesis 28:10-19: Jacob has a dream, and realizes that “God is in this place…” What does that mean? Are there places on earth that are gateways to heaven?
         2. Exodus 3:1-6: Moses and the bush: “… the place on which you stand is holy ground.” So – is there holy land in the desert of Midian too?
         3. Exodus 19: The revelation at Sinai: why there and not somewhere else? Was it holy ground? Is it still? Why is there danger attached to sacred space?
         4. Leviticus 25:23-24: The Jubilee year: “But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine…” What does that mean? Does it refer only to the Land of Israel?
      b. Some mostly post-biblical traditions regarding the Temple Mount:
         a. That it is Mt. Moriah where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. See Genesis 22, especially verse 14.
         b. That it is the center, or foundation stone, of the world.
         c. II Samuel 24: That it was purchased by David as a place of worship where God would answer his prayer.
         d. That it was sanctified by the acts of kindness of two brothers; see Source 1.
         e. Solomon suggests that prayers offered “toward” the Temple will be heard with favor by God – is this indeed a gateway to heaven? I Kings 8:27-30
         f. What about the placing of prayer-notes between the stones of the Western Wall?
      ii. See Mircea Eliade, Source 2, on the general concept of the Center of the World.
      iii. See Abraham Joshua Heschel on sanctification of time vs. place in Judaism; see Source 3.
      iv. What about cemeteries in the Diaspora? Synagogues? Are they “hallowed ground?” What does that mean? Can they be decommissioned?
b. Pre-zionism
   i. Before the end of the 19th century, our relationship to Israel was not complicated by issues of real life politics, economics, etc. We were deeply connected with a mythical Israel that was the scenery of most of the Bible, the location of the Torah state described in the Torah, the utopia to which we constantly prayed to return. The depth of this mythical and somehow tragic connection is nicely depicted in Agnon’s famous “Fable of the Goat,” Source 4.
   ii. While it is often said that Zionism has been an integral part of Judaism since the exile began, that implies that the word Zionism has a meaning different from its common usage as the political movement that began in the late 19th century, with the aim of creating a modern Jewish nation state in Palestine. Compare, for example, Herzl (Source 5) with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-5), or with Judah Halevi (Source 6)
   iii. See Steve Israel’s essay: http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Eye+on+Israel/Israeli+Culture/The+Land.htm

c. What is the Bible?
   i. The significance of the Bible’s treatment of our relationship to the land depends greatly on what our basic assumptions are regarding the nature of the Bible and its authority. Before we teach the Bible’s treatment of the land, we should articulate our assumptions and beliefs and analyze them. For example, is the Bible...
      1. the word of God, literally
      2. a human document written under divine inspiration
      3. a human document reflecting the ideological assumptions of its authors
      4. the written compilation of a variety of oral traditions
      5. a history of the world
      6. a history of the Jewish people
      7. a work of literature whose aim is to teach eternal values
      8. a national epic
      9. an anthology of various documents with various purposes and origins
      10. open to interpretation based on its historical context
      11. subject to the authoritative interpretation of the Oral Law
   ii. These questions of course relate to discussions that often come up in classrooms: was Abraham a historical figure? Did God literally promise Israel to the Jewish people? etc. Obviously this is a large and deep topic, beyond the scope of this lesson. Our point is that it is useful for teachers to spend time and energy clarifying their views on
these questions, to try to clear up inconsistencies in their own thought and to be prepared for difficult questions from students.

iii. See Steve Israel’s essay on the Bible in Israeli culture
http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Eye+on+Israel/Israeli+Culture/The+Bible.htm

iv. A dense scholarly article on the history of Jewish interpretations of the Bible up to but not including modern Israeli education

v. A review and excerpt on the historical-critical approach:

vi.

d. What is home?

i. In examining the Bible’s view of the sanctity of land, and our own view of the sanctity of the Bible, it is interesting also to consider our own spiritual – or visceral – connections to landscape, and the place of land in our identity.

ii. See Source 7 for an activity to help participants think about this, in small groups. Follow up questions for the whole group:
   1. what is home?
   2. what is a homeland?
   3. texts for consideration: Source 8

How much of our attachment to place is based on personal memory? How much on collective memory, learned through traditions, through literature? What is the difference between our attachment to our present homes and that to Israel? To the country from which our families emigrated? What part does Israel play in our identities?
Sources

1. Louis Ginzburg, Legends of the Jews IV p. 154
[Ginzburg suggests that this medieval folk tale may be based on a midrash on Psalm 133]
[Solomon] was long in doubt as to where he was to build [the Temple]. A heavenly voice directed him to go to Mount Zion at night, to a field owned by two brothers jointly. One of the brothers was a bachelor and poor, the other was blessed both with wealth and a large family of children. It was harvesting time. Under cover of night, the poor brother kept adding to the other's heap of grain, for, although he was poor, he thought his brother needed more on account of his large family. The rich brother, in the same clandestine way, added to the poor brother's store, thinking that though he had a family to support, the other was without means. This field, Solomon concluded, which had called forth so remarkable a manifestation of brotherly love, was the best site for the Temple...

...It follows that the true world is always in the middle, at the Center, for it is here that there is a break in plane and hence communication among the three cosmic zones. Whatever the extent of the territory involved, the cosmos that it represents is always perfect. An entire country (e.g., Palestine), a city (Jerusalem), a sanctuary (the Temple in Jerusalem), all equally well present an imago mundi [picture of the world]... Palestine, Jerusalem, and the Temple severally and concurrently represent the image of the universe and the Center of the World. This multiplicity of centers and this reiteration of the image of the world on smaller and smaller scales constitute one of the specific characteristics of traditional societies.

To us, it seems an inescapable conclusion that the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World...

3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath  see:

It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word kadosh is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.
This is a radical departure from accustomed religious thinking. The mythical mind would expect that, after heaven and earth have been established, God would create a holy place—a holy mountain or a holy spring—whereupon a sanctuary is to be established. Yet it seems as if to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.

When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time. When at Sinai the word of God was about to be voiced, a call for holiness in man was proclaimed: “Thou shalt be unto me a holy people.” It was only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of worshipping a thing, a golden calf, that the erection of a Tabernacle, of holiness in space, was commanded. The sanctity of time came first, the sanctity of man came second, and the sanctity of space last. Time was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses.

4. The Fable of the Goat; adapted from S.Y. Agnon

There was a widespread legend that an underground tunnel—through which it was possible to pass in a very short time—connected the Diaspora to the land of Israel. According to the legend, there was no doubt of the tunnel's existence; its entrance, however, was all but impossible to find. It is told of different scholars, including Rabbi Shalom Shabbazi of Yemen and Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, that they would disappear from their homes on Friday and spend the Sabbath in Jerusalem, returning home only on Saturday night.

“A particular old man was sick, and his doctors said that he must drink goat's milk. The man purchased a goat, but one day, without warning, she disappeared. A few days later she returned, her udders filled with milk that had the flavor of paradise. The goat would repeat this strange behavior from time to time until the old man said to his son, ‘I want to know where the goat is disappearing.’

“The son tied a rope to the goat's tail, and when she began to wander, he held on to the rope and followed. They entered a cave, and after a long time, they emerged in a fertile country flowing with milk and honey. When the son asked people where he was, they told him, ‘You are in the land of Israel.’

“The son penned a note telling his father what had happened. He wrote that his father should join him in the land of Israel by following the goat through the cave as he had. The son fastened the note to the goat's ear, and she returned home by herself. When the old man saw the goat returning without his son, he was certain that his son had been killed. Realizing that the sight of the goat would always bring him painful memories of his dead son, the man slaughtered her. Only afterward did he discover
the note attached to the goat's ear. But what was done, was done. The goat was dead, and the underground route to the Holy Land would remain forever secret.”

From Theodore Herzl, The Jewish State
http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/6640/zion/judenstchpt2.html
Should the Powers declare themselves willing to admit our sovereignty over a neutral piece of land, then the Society will enter into negotiations for the possession of this land. Here two territories come under consideration, Palestine and Argentine. In both countries important experiments in colonization have been made, though on the mistaken principle of a gradual infiltration of Jews. An infiltration is bound to end badly. It continues till the inevitable moment when the native population feels itself threatened, and forces the Government to stop a further influx of Jews. Immigration is consequently futile unless we have the sovereign right to continue such immigration.

The Society of Jews will treat with the present masters of the land, putting itself under the protectorate of the European Powers, if they prove friendly to the plan. We could offer the present possessors of the land enormous advantages, assume part of the public debt, build new roads for traffic, which our presence in the country would render necessary, and do many other things. The creation of our State would be beneficial to adjacent countries, because the cultivation of a strip of land increases the value of its surrounding districts in innumerable ways.

Shall we choose Palestine or Argentine? We shall take what is given us, and what is selected by Jewish public opinion. The Society will determine both these points. Argentine is one of the most fertile countries in the world, extends over a vast area, has a sparse population and a mild climate. The Argentine Republic would derive considerable profit from the cession of a portion of its territory to us. The present infiltration of Jews has certainly produced some discontent, and it would be necessary to enlighten the Republic on the intrinsic difference of our new movement.
Palestine is our ever-memorable historic home. The very name of Palestine would attract our people with a force of marvelous potency. If His Majesty the Sultan were to give us Palestine, we could in return undertake to regulate the whole finances of Turkey. We should there form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism. We should as a neutral State remain in contact with all Europe, which would have to guarantee our existence. The sanctuaries of Christendom would be safeguarded by assigning to them an extra-territorial status such as is well-known to the law of nations. We should form a guard of honor about these sanctuaries, answering for the fulfillment of this duty with our existence. This guard of honor would be the great symbol of the solution of the Jewish question after eighteen centuries of Jewish suffering.
6. Yehuda Halevi, “Ode to Zion”


Oh! who will give me wings
That I may fly away,
And there, at rest from all my wanderings,
The ruins of my heart among thy ruins lay?
I'll bend my face unto thy soil, and hold
Thy stones as precious gold.
And when in Hebron I have stood beside
My fathers' tombs, then will I pass in turn
Thy plains and forest wide,
Until I stand on Gilead and discern
Mount Hor and Mount Abarim, 'neath whose crest
Thy luminaries twain, thy guides and beacons rest.

Thy air is life unto my soul, thy grains
Of dust are myrrh, thy streams with honey flow;
Naked and barefoot, to thy ruined fanes
How gladly would I go;
To where the ark was treasured, and in dim
Recesses dwelt the holy cherubim.

... The Lord desires thee for his dwelling-place
Eternally; and blest
Is he whom God has chosen for the grace
Within thy courts to rest.
Happy is he that watches, drawing near,
Until he sees thy glorious lights arise,
And over whom thy dawn breaks full and clear
Set in the Orient skies.
But happiest he, who, with exultant eyes,
The bliss of thy redeemed ones shall behold,
And see thy youth renewed as in the days of old.
7. Land and Identity – an activity for starting discussion

- Have participants work in groups of 3 or so; have them discuss these topics in order:
- Does your family own its home? How long have you lived there?
- Describe previous homes. How many times have you moved in your life?
- Is there a former home of which you have special memories?
- Describe the terrain of the land around your home?
- What is your favorite season or weather condition in your neighborhood? Why?
- What degree of emotional attachment do you feel toward your home? Why?
- Is there a place to which you feel a stronger attachment?

8. Texts on home and homeland, land and identity

a. Sir Walter Scott: From "The Lay of the 14th Minstrel," CANTO VI.

Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned,
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign strand?
If such there breathe, go, mark him well;
For him no minstrel raptures swell;
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,
Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, concentred all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonored, and unsung.

b. Saul Tschernichovsky, “A Man is Nothing but…”
A man is nothing but a small plot of land,
A man is nothing but the image of the landscape of his birthplace,
Only what his ear recorded when it was still fresh,
Only what his eye took in before it had seen too much,
Whatever was encountered on the dew-covered path
By the child who tripped over every bump and clod of earth...
c. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia*

The small farmer or peasant’s attachment to land is deep. Nature is known through the need to gain a living... For the laboring farmer, “nature has entered” - and beauty insofar as the substance and processes of nature can be said to embody it. The entry of nature is no mere metaphor. Muscles and scars bear witness to the physical intimacy of the contact. The farmer’s topophilia is compounded of this physical intimacy, of material dependence and the fact that the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope. Aesthetic appreciation is present but seldom articulated.

d. Chief Seattle [Washington Territory, 1877]

Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks, which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore in solemn grandeur, thrill with memories of past events connected with the lives of my people. The very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred.

e. Robert Frost, from “The Death of the Hired Man”

>'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.'

>'I should have called it Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'