

God's Land on Loan
Israel, Palestine, and the World

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People and the Land

Many Faces, Many Voices

This book is about land and some theological insights about the way humans are connected with land. It begins by focusing on a very special land, Israel/Palestine, which has claimed the attention of many, many people across the past three millennia or more. Especially have the adherents of three of the world's great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—shown continuing interest in this land, which they have often called the “promised land” or the “holy land,” with Jerusalem being the “holy city” or in Arabic, *al-Quds*. What is more, this relatively small piece of geography, about the size of the state of Maryland, has, for centuries, been at the center of military strategy and political intrigue. This territory, controlled largely by the government of modern Israel at the present, has received and continues to receive more attention per square mile than perhaps any other area in the world.

To begin to understand something of the attraction of this land, we will start with the people who live on the land. This beginning point is chosen for several reasons. First, the people of Israel are fascinating in their multiplicity and diversity. Many who have never visited Israel are amazed by the wide

variety of people who live within this small country. Israel is in some ways a microcosm of our world, with many ethnic, language, racial, and religious communities. People from all over the world have immigrated to Israel to join with many whose families have always lived in Palestine/Israel—some Jews, some Christians, and some Muslims. The reality of the diversity of Israel's population quickly challenges and shatters the stereotypes that many have of this land. This is not a homogeneous society by any standard of measure.

Second, the people in Israel tend to hold strong views about their land. Often, they have a greater attachment to particular parcels of land than is usually expressed by urbanites in Europe or the United States. Many people in Israel, Muslims and Jews alike, are prepared to fight and even die for their land, identifying themselves with the land in a way that seems to go beyond mere nationalism. To begin to understand these people is to gain insight into how questions about the land might be framed and addressed. To ignore the people living on the land so central to the biblical accounts would surely be a mistake.

Third, the people who live on the land express a number of contrasting views about the significance and importance of land. For some their land is a divine legacy never to be compromised. For others their land is a place to live and raise their families as they see fit in light of their own worldviews. For still others land is a bargaining chip in the ongoing struggle for a secure peace. If anyone were tempted to believe there is a single Jewish position or a single Arab understanding or a single Christian teaching about land in general or about the land of Israel/Palestine in particular, speaking with people who live in modern Israel will at least give serious cause for hesitancy. Before fashioning any broad, general view about the theological significance of land, it is important to listen to and reflect upon what real people have to say about their particular land. This is a crucial topic, and Israel's pluralism regarding this matter is critical to recognize and hear.

Finally, to begin this book with the views of the people who inhabit Israel/Palestine requires an acknowledgment of the cen-

turies-long struggles provoked by claims about and over land. To talk about land in the abstract would surely be a disservice. Land takes on significance because it is claimed, fought for, tilled, built upon, treasured, and loved by human beings. The passions and controversies encountered in Israel are reflections of similar feelings and commitments held by other human communities around the globe. Any wider theological reflection about land should be informed by the reality of the conflicts, the injustices, and the vision that land evokes in any particular space. Some believe that the only solution is to quit talking about land altogether and stress the oneness and unity of humankind. The reality of Israel/Palestine, however, argues not for less reflection and talk about land, but for more. Thus, the people of Israel/Palestine—for whom the debate over land is vigorous—offer an appropriate beginning place for the discussion.

THE SETTING

The nation Israel is a parliamentary democracy, and its multi-party political system reflects the cultural, ethnic, and ideological diversity of Israel's population. The openness and freedom of its debates are uncommon in most of the Middle East. A multiplicity of opinions about almost every significant issue is readily apparent in Israel and is considered a national value.

By history and tradition, Jerusalem is the preeminent city in Israel. Its population of approximately 718,000 reflects the cultural, ethnic, religious, and political diversity of the country more clearly than any other city or region. Israel declared the whole of Jerusalem its capital in 1980, an action still disputed by many governments around the world. At the center of this modern city is a very old section known as the Old City. Surrounded by a wall about two and a half miles long built in 1537 CE by the Ottoman ruler Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the Old City peculiarly exemplifies the cultural and religious diversity of contemporary Israel. For many centuries, Muslims, Christians, and Jews have occupied parts of this town.

Sometimes one group banned others, but each group was always aware of the others and the claims of tradition that each group had on this place.

Some of the most ancient remains of biblical Jerusalem have been uncovered within the Old City, and some of the most modern tensions are being lived out here. The people who go in and out of the Old City are a microcosm of Israeli society. Spending time at two historic gates into the Old City, Damascus Gate and Jaffa Gate, provides a dramatic illustration of the diversity of Israel's population and the multiplicity of views about land.

THE PEOPLE OF DAMASCUS GATE

Damascus Gate is the most elaborate of the eight gates into the Old City. This creation of Suleiman rests upon the remains of a gate dated to the second century CE. The gate is situated on the north side of the Old City and is the most direct means of access to the Muslim and Christian sectors. The name of the gate in itself is a testimony to the diversity of those who use it and the controversy among them. Arabs call it *Bab el Amud* (Pillar Gate) for a pillar associated with the gate from which the distance to Damascus, the destination of the original road, was measured, a little over 150 miles. Jews, particularly in recent years, call the gate *Shaar Shekhem* (Shechem Gate) because the road leads north to the site of biblical Shechem (now surrounded by the modern Arab city Nablus), around 30 miles to the north.

An hour at Damascus Gate provides enormous insight into Israel's diversity. It is difficult to describe the various sounds and smells on a busy morning. At the top and slightly to the west of the sloping entrance to the gate is one of the main thoroughfares and shopping streets of East Jerusalem. A major Israeli military checkpoint monitors traffic and provides a visible reminder of who is in control of Jerusalem these days. People—all manner of

people—come and go. Around the entrance to the gate, vendors sell their wares. Voices rise and fall as people haggle over prices. Much of it is common tourist stuff, but many different types of food add to the aroma of the place as well. There are animals—donkeys and, especially, cats; camels are seen less frequently in recent years. A delivery boy runs pell-mell down the sloping incline to the gate, his cart bouncing every few feet on a step while the load sways from side to side. Men, women, and children move in and out of the gate offering a panorama of the some two hundred thousand Arabs residing in and around the Old City.

Approximately 1.4 million Arabs, or some 20 percent of Israel's total population of roughly 7.1 million residents, are citizens of Israel. Approximately another 2 million Arabs live under Israeli control but are not citizens. Most of Israel's Arabs are Sunni Muslims, the larger of the two major sects of Islam and by far the largest group within Israel and Palestine. Arabs of the other group are known as Shiites and live mainly in Iraq and Iran. The division occurred shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and originally centered on whether rulers (caliphs) could be descendants only of Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law (the Shiite position), or could be elected from Muhammad's tribe (the Sunni position). Today the Shiites consider themselves to be the more conservative and enthusiastic proponents of Islam.

Within the largely Muslim Arab population is an important subgroup, namely the Christians. They are Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox (Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, and Syrian Orthodox); Catholics (Armenian, Latin-rite, Maronite, Melkite, Syrian); Anglicans and members of several Protestant denominations (Assemblies of God, Baptist, Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and others). While not all the Christians in Israel are Arabs, approximately 9 percent are. Some Arab Christians trace their ancestry to pre-Islamic days in Palestine. Nazareth in the Galilee, for instance, the place of Jesus'

childhood, and a town of over seventy thousand, was once largely Christian, with many inhabitants who traced their roots back to the earliest centuries of the Common Era. Today the population is 55–60 percent Muslim. Further, about forty thousand Israeli Jews occupy what is known as Upper Nazareth. Many Christians who lived in the area have left the country. Nonetheless, in a number of municipalities in the Galilee, Christian Arabs continue to occupy key positions, being particularly prominent in education and service agencies.

For the most part, the people streaming through the Damascus Gate are not wealthy. Their clothes are not stylish and are patched and well worn. Shopping bags contain mainly necessities. Their eyes show the weariness and the wariness common to people for whom life is an unrelenting struggle. Some older Arab men wear full-length robes as outer garments as well as the traditional headdress, a *keffiyeh*. Most men, however, wear Western-style suits, with and without a *keffiyeh*. While younger women and girls wear skirts and blouses, most of the older women wear long, loose-fitting, cloaklike gowns. Few Arab women in Israel wear veils. Among the throng one may see a Greek Orthodox priest in a long robe or Roman Catholic nuns in traditional garments. Those walking in and out include business and professional people going about their duties, shoppers, and school children.

ARAB VOICES AND VIEWS

Were we to stop some of those hurrying by and ask why they are in this place and in this land, we would get a variety of responses. Pressing them to explain why they are here can be interesting. The answers reflect values that are sometimes not so obvious. Each of the following examples is a fictional person drawn from interviews with many Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem.

Muyad lives in the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem. A Muslim, he was not even born when his grandparents fled from

Jaffa (Joppa in the Bible) during the 1948 war. He and his family have lived in the camp for more than fifty years, which deeply colors his perspective. Now twenty and a third-generation refugee, Muyad works as a day laborer, whenever he can get work. That is why he is in Jerusalem now. He longs to return to Jaffa. His family has described the family home, the neighborhood, the schools, the market. He has been given the keys to the familial home, though that house has long been gone. In fact the whole area has changed and Jaffa is now a part of Tel Aviv. New streets, plazas, shops, and apartments stand in the place of the old neighborhoods. To Muyad, though, it still exists, at least in his imagination, and one day he hopes, expects, intends to return and claim what is his. He is at the Damascus Gate only because he cannot go home, home to Jaffa. But one day, he believes, he will. His birthright is a small parcel of land overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and he intends to claim it. What's more, he will not be content until the whole of Palestine—the entire mandate ruled by Great Britain before 1948—is once again in Arab hands.

Miriam, a middle-aged Christian Arab, offers a similar account. Her village was destroyed decades ago. She is a teacher and has found her way to Jerusalem, where she lives with relatives. She has a deep commitment to assist her Palestinian neighbors, both Muslim and Christian. Unlike many of her friends who want to leave Palestine and go to the United States, Miriam feels a sense of vocation to Palestinian children. This place, this land, is theirs by right of habitation and biblical mandate. She vehemently denies Jewish claims to the land. She considers herself one of the rightful offspring of Abraham and Sarah. Her people were in Palestine long before it became modern Israel, and thus her sense of vocation is complemented by a deep sense of belonging to this place. She has no dream of reclaiming and rebuilding her village in the Galilee, but she cannot imagine leaving her homeland. Her attitude toward Israel is resigned hostility.

For Paul, a seventy-year-old Armenian Christian who has lived in Jerusalem his entire life, his passion for this place centers

on the holy sites. He has watched as over the years more and more Christians have left. Political and economic hardships have driven many out, and the pressures have increased dramatically over the past decade. Paul grieves that those in the West do not seem to care about maintaining a Christian presence in Jerusalem. His forebears came as early as the fifth century CE, but now the Christian population of Jerusalem, and of Israel as a whole, is declining dramatically. Who will care for the ancient shrines? Who will maintain the ancient rites? If Christ is forgotten here, of all places, what hope can there be? Paul worries about these matters.

Faida, a young Arab woman of twenty, is from a small village south of Nablus. Her whole life has been lived under the Israeli occupation that began with the 1967 war. She and her family are Muslims and have struggled under the military administration. One of her brothers was arrested in a general roundup of Arab youths several months ago and is being detained by the authorities without specific charges. Faida has attended the university in Ramallah, which at the moment is closed by military order. She would not ordinarily be in Jerusalem but came in to visit relatives. She is intensely aware of the limitations that the Israeli occupation has placed on her generation. She wants Israeli forces to withdraw and allow her people to govern themselves. She dreams not about a return of land lost, but about a release of land held captive. Faida's family was not driven out nor have they fled, but they live under military occupation and long for independence. They have land but are not free. Faida's dream is for her own nation, a Palestinian state, alongside Israel if need be, where Palestinians can have their own way of life, their own institutions, their independence. Israel has a right to exist, but it should allow Palestinians that same right and leave the occupied territories.

Ali, a handsome young Muslim of eighteen, is hesitant to talk with strangers. His identity papers are not in order. He is not employed and sees little likelihood of ever being able to support himself or have a family of his own. His hatred for the "occupiers" is deep. He admires the courage and dedication of the

young men and women who have volunteered to become suicide bombers. He is not certain whether to make the same decision or not, but he wants to find some way to demonstrate his conviction that the Jews, indeed Westerners in general, have no right to Palestine and should be forced out of the land. One day, he hopes, because of the resistance and martyrdom of young people like himself, the some 770,000 Arabs, in his view forced by the Jews to leave Palestine, will be able to return and once again claim their ancestral land, their heritage. He intends to find a way to enable such a happening, but he has no expectation of personally enjoying the benefits of such a glorious victory.

We could hear other Arab voices if we stayed long enough at Damascus Gate. An Israeli Arab would reflect on the difficulties posed by the dual identity of being Arab and a citizen of Israel. The 1.4 million Israeli Arabs often feel they are second-class citizens in terms of educational and career opportunities. They do not serve in Israel's armed forces. Nonetheless, they are protected under Israeli law, have a passport, vote in Israel's elections, and can be elected to public office. They are constantly torn between conflicting allegiances to the cause of the non-Israeli Arabs, on the one hand, and their own self-interest, on the other. Yes, we could hear other voices, but we must go to another gate, to Jaffa Gate, to listen to others, to Jews who make up approximately 80 percent of Israel's population.

THE PEOPLE OF JAFFA GATE

Jaffa Gate (*Shaar Yafu*, in Hebrew) is located on the western side of the Old City. The road leading to Jaffa on the coast, approximately thirty-five miles away, begins here. This gate is much less elaborate architecturally than Damascus Gate. What's more, the old gate has been widened to allow small trucks and other vehicular traffic to enter. While another gate, Dung Gate on the south, gives easiest access to the Western Wall (formerly known as the "Wailing Wall"), the major Jewish religious site in the Old City, Jaffa Gate for nontourists is

probably the most important entry point into the Jewish section of the Old City. It is not that Arabs cannot use this gate, which they call *Bab el Khalil* ("the gate of the friend" in reference to the city of Hebron that takes its name from Abraham, the friend of God; Isa. 41:8), nor that Jews cannot enter at the Damascus Gate; members of each group can and do use them both. Local custom, however, keeps more Jews using Jaffa Gate and more Arabs at Damascus Gate.

The very existence of these two gates is a vivid symbol of the deep division between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Many Jews have little or no contact with Arabs. Even in Jerusalem, which still has a significant concentration of Arabs, it is possible for Jews and Arabs to avoid serious contact almost completely. Arabs fill the menial-service and construction positions, but Jews can ignore them easily enough. To be sure, Jaffa Gate is nearer the new part of Jerusalem where most Jews live, while Damascus Gate is opposite the older part of the city, mainly Arab East Jerusalem. But the symbolism of these two gates is more significant than their actual usage.

Jaffa Gate does not have the same hubbub as Damascus Gate; things at Jaffa Gate are more orderly. Sights, sounds, and smells caress the senses more than they assault them. The people going in and out are better dressed, and more family groups are seen walking together. Jaffa Gate provides ready access to Jewish shops that by and large sell a higher quality of merchandise. There are art galleries and archaeological excavations to visit, and nearby are several religious schools. All of these factors affect the number and kinds of people using Jaffa Gate. Time spent here offers insights that are as valuable as those gained at the Damascus Gate.

JEWISH VOICES AND VIEWS

Rachel, for instance, is nineteen years old, a *sabra* (a native-born Israeli), in the second year of her mandatory military serv-

ice. In her fatigues, with her weapon slung over her shoulder, she epitomizes a major segment of Israeli society. She has grown up in a world where constant military preparedness has been a necessity. She is determined that no one will destroy her nation, and the pride and confidence in her dark, flashing eyes are unmistakable. She would rather find a peaceful way to live with Arab neighbors and is ready for her government to negotiate peace for land so long as the borders are appropriate and secure. But when use of force is necessary, she believes doing so is fully justified. Like a majority of the Jews in Israel, she is not religious. For her, "Jewishness" is a matter of identity, not primarily a question of religious observance. She is Jewish, and her nation is Jewish. All Jews, secular and religious, have a place in Israel. Others are welcome so long as they acknowledge the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. Rachel believes she has a right to this land because she is here. She is Israeli! There is no other place she wants to live.

Bernie is the forty-five-year-old son of parents who fled Nazi Germany in 1940. Many of his distant relatives died in the Holocaust. Life has not been easy for Bernie. His family was destitute when they arrived in Palestine. Eventually, after the 1948 War of Independence, Bernie's father opened a small grocery store. A few years after Bernie's birth, his father died. All his life, Bernie has struggled to get by. Now that his mother is dead and his oldest brother was killed during the Yom Kippur war in 1973, Bernie longs to go to the United States. He has a sense of loyalty to Israel and certainly hopes it will have a secure and fruitful future. But he wants out—out of military service, out of an economic situation marked by high inflation and limited opportunity, out of personal frustration. Bernie has no religious convictions that make it necessary for him to live in Israel. He could be as Jewish as he wants to be in the United States and would certainly have more opportunity to better himself financially. He keeps working and frankly hopes to meet an American woman who will marry him and provide him a way out of Israel. Bernie cares for his nation, but his

personal situation is more compelling, and the United States looks like the answer.*

David, age thirty-eight, is an American-born engineer who moved to Jerusalem ten years ago. He grew up on Long Island, went to school in Baltimore, and then worked there. He is a thoughtful, deeply religious man. After a trip to Israel to visit relatives and see the country, David decided to move to Jerusalem to participate in the miracle of Israel. Although he still retains his U.S. citizenship, he is certain that God is responsible for Israel's rebirth as a nation out of the horrors of the Holocaust and for the preservation of this small country despite the surrounding hostile powers. For David, Israel's right to exist is God given; the deed to the land is in the Bible. He is enthusiastic about reclaiming biblical place names, like Shechem for Nablus, Samaria and Judea for the West Bank. The appropriate boundaries of Israel are those of the kingdom of David and Solomon, the land promised to Abraham by God. Israel is God's special nation, and David is certain it will prevail.

Holding somewhat similar views, but coming from quite a different background, is Dvorah, age twenty-eight. She lives with her husband and three children in a settlement about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem and comes to the city only rarely. Like David, she believes the land was God given to Israel and thus is to be claimed to the exclusion of any who resist. Her reasoning, however, is somewhat different; she traces her ancestry through Jews who have lived in Palestine since before the Romans. The Romans drove her ancestors from Jerusalem, but

*Population growth in Israel has been substantially dependent upon people immigrating to Israel to become citizens. The Law of Return allows anyone who is defined as "Jewish" or a relative of any Jewish citizen in Israel to come and receive immediate citizenship. Most of those who come to Israel as immigrants stay in Israel.

On the other hand, should an Israeli citizen want to emigrate, to leave Israel to become a citizen of another country, then the rules of the country to which one wishes to go must be met. These rules vary greatly from country to country. There are large Jewish communities in a number of countries in the world (e.g. Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Russia, South Africa, Uruguay), but the largest is in the United States.

To immigrate into the United States one can qualify in several ways, but the quickest route is to have relatives already here. The surest way is to be married to a U.S. citizen or to be the parent of a U.S. citizen. Having a profession or skill that is considered important to U.S. authorities is the second best way to gain entrance, but only a certain number of people can enter in any one year. In comparison to that of Great Britain and France, the United States' policy is more restrictive.

not out of Palestine. They moved to the Galilee, where they lived for centuries. Shortly after the 1973 war, Dvorah's parents returned to the outskirts of Jerusalem, where Dvorah was born. To Dvorah, the continual presence of Jews in Palestine is a testimony to God's promises. She is quick to share her family's history because, in her opinion, it establishes a prior claim to the land, superior to that of any "latecomers" among the Arab population. She believes that Jewish rights to the land are better established than those of the Palestinians by reason of the Bible and the ongoing Jewish presence in the land. Her current goal is to see all the territory that Israel has occupied since 1967 settled and established as Jewish. Arabs may or may not be welcome to live within this expanded Israel, depending on how they choose to relate to Israelis, but Israel's right to all the land west of the Jordan River is unquestioned in Dvorah's mind.

Yael is the mother of two. Her husband is a chemical engineer. A *sabra*, Yael grew up in the home of an ardent Zionist. During her childhood and early adulthood she accepted the nationalism (sometimes militarism) of her family with little thought. Now, however, at the age of forty-two, she has begun to have serious doubts about the tactics her government is employing, particularly in the Occupied Territories. The inconvenience and humiliation often imposed on the Arab population at the numerous military checkpoints scattered through the West Bank, which she has personally witnessed, seem to her unjust, and as such, inappropriate for a Jewish government to continue. She has begun to question the long-standing axiom in her own family and in the country that the only answer to violence is greater violence. She considers the tactics used in Gaza and in Lebanon to be excessive and unwarranted. She is tired of war and believes that women will probably have to take a stronger lead in bringing an end to the bloodshed, as did the pan-banging women in Argentina. Yael's is clearly a minority voice, but a growing number of women and men share her dismay and grief.

Moshe is an orthodox Jew. His long black coat, fur-lined hat, and *pieyot* (sidelocks) indicate the Eastern European origins of

his particular group. He belongs to a very strict orthodox sect whose members live in a part of Jerusalem called Mea Shearim. Moshe prefers to speak Yiddish, a language derived from High German. He believes Hebrew should be used only in prayer and in reading the Bible. A desire to be near the Western Wall and other holy places drew Moshe to Jerusalem some thirty years ago. Now, at the age of sixty-two, he is convinced that the state of Israel is the result of human rebellion, the work of human hands. Because only the Messiah can rightly restore Israel and bring back the Jews dispersed around the world, Moshe and his group refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the state of Israel. In his own eyes, he lives here in Jerusalem as a Jew, not an Israeli. His hope for a homeland can be fulfilled only with the Messiah's coming. In the meantime, Moshe is more concerned with the desecration of the Sabbath by secular Jews than with the threats of hostile Arab governments.

For most of Israel's existence Ashkenazic Jews (like Moshe, whose roots are in Eastern Europe and Russia) constituted the majority Jewish segment of Israeli society. It is they who provided most of the nation's leaders. In terms of the overall population, however, their majority has declined over the decades. Sephardic Jews (those whose roots are in countries around the Mediterranean Sea) have immigrated to Israel in large numbers and now challenge the Ashkenazim for leadership. These Sephardic Jews share much with Arabs in terms of culture because most grew up in Arab countries. Their Arab-like appearance and customs evoke suspicions among the Ashkenazim. The Sephardim as a group are less educated and less skilled. They have experienced some discrimination as they have taken their place in Israeli society. In addition, they are largely secular Jews or are only minimally religious.

Yaacob is a Sephardic Jew born in Morocco. He came to Israel in 1965, in his late teens, and served in the military during the 1967 war. He is as fluent in Arabic as in Hebrew. Now in his late fifties, he works as a tour-bus driver, a relatively good job, though that sector of the economy has suffered tremendously during the last several years. Yaacob is conservative in

his political outlook. He does not question Israel's right to be in Palestine and will fight to protect his country. He is not hostile to Arabs in general—he grew up with Arabs and appreciates much in their culture—but he is convinced that Israel must deal from a position of power with any Arab governments that threaten Israel. While Yaacob is not a religious man, he does have a deep sense of Jewish tradition and the behavior that goes with that tradition. He is grateful for the State of Israel and sees it as a place where Jews can live in freedom as Jews. He accepts without much reflection the idea that the Jews of today are the continuation of the Israelites of the Bible. Thus it is appropriate for them to be here in Jerusalem and elsewhere in this land. Before the uprisings in the Occupied Territories and the series of bombings in Jerusalem and elsewhere, Yaacob could conceive of an Israel where Jew and Arab could live together peacefully, sharing the land. Now he is not so certain.

Daniel, age thirty-one, came to Israel from Ethiopia. He does not come to Jerusalem often since he lives in the Galilee. Daniel's people were part of a Jewish enclave known as Beta Israel who practiced a pre-Talmudic form of Judaism. They left Ethiopia because of increasing pressure and persecution by a hostile government. At the age of ten, Daniel, with many other young boys, faced the almost certain fate of separation from his family and conscription into military service. He is grateful that he was one of the lucky ones whose family was rescued in Operation Moses. This rescue mission was carried out by Israel between November 18, 1984, and January 5, 1985, when the government of Ethiopia agreed to allow Jews to leave and move to Israel. Others of his people have come to Israel as part of another dramatic rescue mission known as Operation Solomon. This airlift began on May 24, 1991, and lasted thirty-six hours. At that time nearly fifteen thousand Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel, nearly completing the evacuation of the Beta Israel community. Some two thousand remain, and efforts continue to secure their release. Life in Israel for Daniel and the many who have followed—there are now approximately thirty-six thousand Ethiopian Jews in Israel—has not been easy. He

left a primarily agricultural, closely knit community that was almost primitive by modern standards and had to adjust to a new culture with a new language and new style of life. His people have experienced some degree of discrimination, but not the physical threats and violence they knew in Ethiopia. Daniel has done reasonably well as a day worker, and is steadily taking his place in Israel as a good and committed citizen. He will defend his new country in whatever ways he is asked.

Sasha, age forty-two, has been in Israel for some fifteen years. She came among the first wave of Russian immigrants in the early nineties. She and her family could take very little with them when they left to come to Israel. Now she and her husband, who is a doctor, and their four children occupy a small two-bedroom apartment in one of the new communities encircling Jerusalem. She is grateful to be in Israel and learned Hebrew quickly. Like the Jews who came some years earlier from Ethiopia, Sasha's family cannot be said to practice traditional Judaism. Though religious Jews consider her "secular," that in no way reflects her attitude toward life. It merely testifies to her having grown up in a country where she was not permitted to practice her religion. She has empathy for many of the immigrants who find it difficult to adjust to their new situation in Israel. In general, because of the housing needs her friends experience, she supports the idea of settlements in parts of the land that are occupied primarily by Arabs, even if this means disregarding Arab claims of ownership. She is somewhat afraid of most Arabs anyway, viewing them as potential terrorists.

The impact of the million or more Russian Jews who have moved into Israel during the past decade has been significant. The changes that these new residents have caused are seen in the effects on housing, health care, education, labor policies, and the political process. The Ashkenazim "majority status" is once again secure. But most of the Russian immigrants are secular, and some have openly voiced their desire to return to their former homeland. Their depth of commitment to the State of Israel, to the land of Israel, is yet to be tested, though most seem to have made a good transition.

STILL OTHER PEOPLES AND OTHER VOICES

Other groups live within Israel, but they are rarely seen at the gates of the Old City in Jerusalem. The Druse, whose first language is Arabic, live mostly in the northern districts of Israel and in the Golan Heights. In much larger numbers they are found in parts of Syria and Lebanon. The Druse have developed a religion that seems to combine elements of both Christianity and Islam, though details are shared only with the initiated. They tend to stay close to their home areas and are known as fierce fighters when it comes to protecting their own. Unlike Arabs (Israeli and non-Israeli), the Druse serve in the Israeli army and border police. The government of Israel has allowed the Druse a fair amount of autonomy. In return, the Druse have generally been good citizens of Israel. It is only in the Golan Heights, which belonged to Syria prior to 1967, where any problems seem to exist. The Druse who live in this area have strong cultural ties with the large number of Druse who live in Syria. These cultural ties are much stronger than the geopolitical divisions that separate the Syrian Druse from the Israeli Druse in the Golan Heights. Loyalties are tested whenever Israeli or Syrian ambitions force the Druse to decide for Israel or Syria at the expense of other Druse.

The Bedouin, another group, primarily inhabit the Negev in the south of Israel. They are Arabs, and most are Muslims. Their traditional lifestyle is radically different from that of most Israelis, whether Arab or Jew. The Bedouin culture is patriarchal and organized in tribes. Women are veiled, marriages are arranged, and girls do not attend school. Until recently, the tribes roamed the desert freely with fierce independence and ignored most nationalistic pronouncements. They came into conflict with other Arabs and Jews only when the nationalistic interests of others threatened their own tribal interests. Since 1967, however, Israeli policy has discouraged nomadic lifestyles. The Bedouin have found their movements restricted by the creation of new military bases, nature reserves, and settlements. Many of the younger Bedouin have never really

known desert life, but work as day laborers in hotels, at construction sites, and so on. They resent the loss of a way of life that was dear to them. They feel that the Israeli government is treating them unjustly. They long not for a nation of their own, but rather for the right to move freely with their flocks and to preserve their lifestyle.

VITAL DIVERSITY AS THE NORM

From this montage of individuals and their views, what can we learn about Israel, about human rights and human hopes, about the significance of land? Is there a single message or many messages? Given the wide variety of individuals and ethnic groups within Israel, clearly a number of important positions deserve recognition.

Both Jews and Arabs know a love for land; many have a genuine attachment to the land. Their identities are tied up with the land on which they live or to which they desire to return. For most, however, this is not a matter of philosophy or theology, but a much more concrete reaction to the realities of life. They want land on which to live and work. Those who have a place are committed to keeping it. Those who are without are determined to remedy that situation.

This issue has another level. Many Arabs and Jews possess nationalistic hope and pride. Many Jews, even those who do not want to live in Israel, are deeply proud of Israel as a nation. It is the homeland for Jews, a place where Jews can be Jews in safety and with dignity. The nation was established by international law, won and defended by military victory, and developed through hard work. Some Israelis trace their lineage to Jews who lived in the land in Roman times and even earlier. Israelis who may not agree on anything else are unified in their determination to protect their homeland.

Arabs also possess nationalistic fervor but obviously of a different sort. The more militant want to return to a bygone time, by force if necessary, a time when Israel did not exist. This desire

is unrealistic. Others hope for some measure of autonomy, expressed preferably by a new nation for Arabs fashioned out of the Occupied Territories and coexisting with Israel. Still others want only to be treated fairly and allowed to maintain their own culture with some independence. Basic to all of these notions is the fact that some Arab families, Muslim and Christian, have lived in Palestine for generations. Their sense of entitlement to the land is based on their tenure on it, and sometimes their actual legal title to it, and the conviction that the United Nations had no right to partition Palestine in the first place.

What is most striking, though, is that relatively few have a well-developed religious notion or theology about land. When asked about their relationship to and understanding of Israel, most Arabs and most Jews answer at a secular level and emphasize nationalism or personal goals and desires. For non-Israeli Christians, this usually comes as a surprise, because many Western Christians talk about Israel/Palestine as the Holy Land, the promised land, the land once given to ancient Israel and now restored by God to Jewish descendants of the first Israel. While some Israeli Jews express these sentiments, they do not do so as frequently or with the fervor Western Christians generally expect. Some use the religious and historical tradition to defend the establishment of a Jewish state in this particular place in the Middle East as opposed to some other part of the world, but the creation of the nation by the United Nations and the successful defense and development of the land are far more important to most Israelis than the religious claim.

Arab Muslims and Arab Christians usually reject any religious claim by Jews to the land. According to these Christians and Muslims, even if the land once was given to ancient Israel, it was lost because of disobedience. The ancient promise has no continuing value and certainly does not justify displacing Arabs in favor of Jews. Some Israeli Jews agree and disavow any religious claim on the land.

The rich diversity of people and opinion we have surveyed offers a brief, fundamental understanding of contemporary

Israel. No single view concerning land emerges as normative. Efforts to articulate a theological perspective about land must begin with an acknowledgment of Israel's pluralism. Many opinions are expressed and are worthy of consideration. Formulations based on religion have often been more hurtful than helpful. Nonetheless there is a religious, a theological, dimension to the talk about land that, though not paramount, should not be ignored. In bringing to expression this theological understanding, it is important to review the history of the people in the land of Israel. That will be the aim in chapter 2.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the opinions of the people described that surprised, disturbed, or delighted you? Why? In what ways?
2. What points of agreement, if any, can be found among these different points of view?
3. In what ways are the nationalistic and religious claims of Jews and Arabs concerning the land similar and different?
4. What are some of the reasons (negative and positive) for the author's contention in the final paragraph: "Formulations based on religion have often been more hurtful than helpful. Nonetheless there is a religious, a theological, dimension to the talk about land that, though not paramount, should not be ignored."

FOR FURTHER READING

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