



‘Religions and Ideologies,  
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews  
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Presentation by Rabbi Ehud Bandel  
Wednesday July 6, Collegium Novum, Cracow

**Panel B : Promised Land – Land of Israel - Land of Palestine - Holy Land?**

My presentation will include four parts: the first part is about the two narratives, the Israeli and the Palestinian, the second part is about Jewish attachment to the Land, the third part is about possessing the Land and the fourth and final part is about sharing the Land.

**1. Two Narratives**

Three years ago our president Dr. Debbie Weisman hosted an ICCJ seminar in Jerusalem entitled "From Two Narratives to a Culture of Peace". I would like to begin my talk with reference to the question of these two narratives.

The issue of the two narratives came up recently once again, after the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas published an op-ed in the New York Times entitled "The long overdue Palestinian State". In his article Abbas tries to explain the value of a United Nation's recognition of a Palestinian state that is due this coming September. "It is important to note" Abbas writes, "that the last time the question of Palestinian statehood took center stage at the General Assembly, the question posed to the international community was whether our homeland should be partitioned into two states". "In November 1947", he continues, "the General Assembly made its recommendation, and answered in the affirmative. Shortly thereafter, Zionist forces expelled Palestinian Arabs to ensure a decisive Jewish majority in the future state of Israel, and Arab armies intervened..."

Mind you, not a word about the fact that it was the Jews who immediately and without question, accepted the Partition Plan while the Arabs rejected it outright. Not a word about the fact that armies of 5 Arab states invaded the newly established state in order to liquidate it. Instead a revisionist history in which the cause becomes the outcome and outcome becomes the cause. Is this a narrative that can assist in building a Culture of Peace?

In response to Abbas' piece, Prof. Shlomo Avineri, a professor of political science at the Hebrew University and former director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry published in Haaretz daily newspaper an article entitled "Truth, not Narrative".

Avineri begins his article saying: "On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. That is truth, not narrative...Of course, there are also narratives. For example, the Germans had quite a few complaints against Poland. "Not every claim in the German narrative was baseless", writes Avineri, "but the factual truth is clear: On September 1, 1939, it was Germany that attacked Poland, not Poland that attacked Germany".

Then Avineri goes on to speak about the existence of two "narratives," within the Israeli Palestinian conflict which he says, is true of course. "The pain of the other should be understood and respected, and attempts to prevent Palestinians from mentioning the Nakba are foolish and immoral: But just as nobody would dream of teaching the German "narrative" regarding World War II, the 1948 war should also not be taught as a battle between narratives. In the final analysis, there is a historical truth. And without ignoring the suffering of the other, that is how such sensitive issues must be taught.

One week after Avineri's article, Haaretz published another article responding to Avineri. In this article entitled "The bitter truth about two peoples in one land" the author, Dr. Dmitry Shumsky arguing against Avineri, says that the historical facts of 1948, were a direct result of the Western powers' acceptance of the Zionist narrative three decades earlier, referring to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which the British Government declared that it views with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, "The Zionist movement got lucky"; writes Dr. Shumski, " its fate had been placed in the hands of a power that had a theological sensitivity to the idea of a link between the biblical Jewish people and its land". But had it been different, if for example, Great Britain would have adopted the Palestinian narrative and decided that Palestine, would be the Palestinian nation-state, would then the Jews accept such decision without fighting it? Of Course not.

"The national narratives", concludes Shumski, "are an inseparable part of the factual reality of the Israeli-Palestinian national dispute. This, then, is the one and only historical truth - the truth and not a narrative. It's the bitter truth about two peoples in one land."

Now, if you will ask me who is right and who is wrong in this debate, I will have to say like in the old joke about the rabbi, both are right. Indeed it is bitterly true that the different narratives of the two peoples in the one land are part of the factual reality; however there are times that we must say no to narratives that distort factual historical truth for example, a sentence that

appears in an American textbook: "Christianity was started by a young Palestinian named Jesus."

Or, another example, look what Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, the previous Mufti of Jerusalem has to say about the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif:

There is not even the smallest indication of the existence of a Jewish Temple on this place in the past. In the whole city, there is not even a single stone indicating Jewish history... The Jews cannot legitimately claim the Western wall, neither religiously nor historically".

Similar claims have been made by Yasser Arafat and even by the current Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who said in an interview to *Kul Al-Arab* (August 25, 2000):

Anyone who wants to forget the past [the Israelis] cannot come and claim that the Jewish temple is situated beneath the Haram. They demand that we forget what happened 50 years ago to the refugees while at the same time they claim that 2000 years ago they had a temple. I challenge the assertion that this is so [that there has ever been a Jewish Temple]. But even if it is so, we do not accept it, because it is not logical for someone who wants a practical peace

To this we must say, practical peace will never be achieved through narratives that negate basic historical truth.

## **2. Judaism's attachment to the Land**

In addition to the problem of the different narratives regarding the land there is also a fundamental difference in the way land in general is perceived by Christians and Jews. While Christianity as a universal religion generally focused on the spiritual concept of "heavenly Jerusalem", Judaism had never forsaken the physical earthly Jerusalem. In fact, one of the main challenges for Christians that our ICCJ's Berlin Document notes is the need to understand "more fully Judaism's deep attachment to the Land of Israel as a fundamental religious perspective".

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

Jerusalem is not divine; her life depends on our presence. Zion is not a symbol, but a home, and the land is not an allegory but a possession, a commitment of destiny.

That destiny, started with the very beginning of Judaism. The story of the Jewish people starts with Abraham but it also starts with Eretz Yisrael. The first commandment to Abraham is: *Lech Lecah*:

Go forth from your country, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

When Abraham arrives at the land, God appeared to him and said, "To your seed will I give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

This is the covenant - the everlasting covenant between God and the Jewish people: In the words of Genesis:

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you for an everlasting covenant, and I will give the land to you and to your seed after you, for an everlasting possession. (Genesis 17:7-8).

This covenant with Abraham was confirmed to Isaac and reaffirmed to Jacob and then to Moses and the entire Jewish people at Sinai.

When Moses is called to liberate the Israelites from bondage in Egypt he is also called to bring them back to the land:

And I have come down to save them from the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey. (Exodus 3:8)

That is the meaning of the "Promised Land", the land that God promised to Abraham and to his descendants. The basic story of the Bible is the journey to the land – The entire relationship between God and the Jewish people are focused on the land. The reward for following God's ways is the inheritance of the land while disobedience will result in exile and then *Teshuvah* - repentance but, the word *Teshuvah* in Hebrew comes from the same root as in return. The spiritual return to the God of Israel is also the physical return to the Land of Israel.

As the journey to the Land is the basic story of the Torah, the exile and the return are the central motifs of the classical prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel.

And for us, who saw only yesterday the valley of the dry bones, I am sure the words of the Prophet Ezekiel resonate most powerfully:

Thus says the Lord God: Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And I shall put my spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own land; (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

The pledge of the exiled people by the rivers of Babylon: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning (Psalms 137:5) continued to accompany the Jewish people ever

since the first exile and for two millennia. Three times a day Jews pray for the return to Zion. After every meal they thank God for the good and spacious land that he had given their ancestors. In every wedding a Jewish groom smashes the glass and utters the pledge if I forget you O Jerusalem, and every Jew in the world is buried with a small bag that contains dust from Eretz Yisrael.

In the middle ages, the love and yearning for the land was expressed most beautifully by the poet and philosopher Yehuda Ha-Levi who wrote:

My heart is in the east, and I am in the west. How can I taste whatever I eat, and how can it be pleasing? It would be easy for me to abandon all the goodness of Spain, just as it would be precious for me to see the dust of the desolate Temple

In 1996 when Shai Agnon the Israeli novelist was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, he said in his acceptance speech:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.

### **3. “And shall you possess the land?”**

The question of Jewish right to Eretz Yisrael is not new. In fact this question is raised already in an ancient Midrash and repeated in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Rashi, the most important commentator of the Torah. The first Rashi commentary to the first verse of the Bible raises the following question: If the Torah is first and foremost the Jewish book of *Mitzvot* commandments, then why did it start with the story of creation rather than with the first commandment that was given to the Jewish people upon leaving the Land of Egypt? The answer that Rashi gives is:

Should the nations of the world say to Israel, "You are robbers, for you have taken by force the lands of the Seven Nations," they [Israel] will say to them: "All the earth belongs to God. He created it and gave it to whomever He saw fit. It was His will to give it to them and it was His will to take it from them and give it to us.

Amazing, isn't it? There sits a Jew in Northern France, on the eve of the first crusade, and the one thing that bothers him as he starts the enormous project of biblical commentary is the moral question of Jewish possession of Eretz Yisrael.

For me the answer is secondary. The important thing is actually the question. Indeed this question is based on the Biblical Theology that the Jewish possession of the Holy Land is subject to the moral conduct of its inhabitants.

The Land of Israel is different from any other land. It will not tolerate immoral behaviour. “If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (Leviticus 18:25). Again Rashi gives a parable to “a king's son who was fed disgusting food,

which did not remain in his bowels but which he vomited--- so is the Land of Israel: It cannot sustain sinners”.

In 1902 Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism published his utopian novel *Altneuland* – The Old New Land, outlining his vision for a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. *Altneu* in German is Old New but the Hebrew meaning of Al Tnai is on Condition. Therefore *altneuland* may also mean a land on condition. Indeed, ever since biblical times we must always remember that our dwelling on the land is conditional.

And again, the words of the prophet Ezekiel, written sometime between the Exile of King Yehoyachin in 597 BCE and the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE echo in our ears:

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, those who inhabit those ruined places of the land of Israel speak, saying: Abraham was one man, and he inherited the land; but we are many; the land is given to us as an inheritance. Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: You eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood; and shall you possess the land? You stand upon your sword, you commit abominations, and every one of you defiles his neighbor’s wife; and shall you possess the land?” (Ezekiel 33:23-26)

I wish some of the settlers living in the southern Mount Hebron area or in Yitzhar near Nablus would read these words more carefully, And yet, even with the best moral conduct and the most compassionate treatment of all the inhabitants of the land we must always remember who is the real owner of the land .

There is a story about two neighbours who were fighting over a piece of land. They came to the great Hassidic master Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk to arbitrate between them. The Rabbi listened to the one, then to the other and then he fell on ground with his ear to the earth. What are you doing asked the two Hassidim, I could not make up my mind answered the rabbi so I decided to ask the Land itself to whom does she belong. And what did she reply? asked the Hassidim, She replied that she does not belong to any of you; instead you both belong to her.

In Leviticus (25:23) we read: “And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine”. And Rashi on the words for the land is Mine comments: “Do not begrudge it, for it is not yours”.

#### **4. Sharing the Land**

In 1967, shortly after the unification of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shlomo Goren then the IDF Chief Chaplain and later the Chief Rabbi of Israel was asked about the future of the city. Can it be divided between the Jews and the Arabs? In response, Rabbi Goren quoted the Biblical story of King Solomon’s Trial saying that anyone who is willing to cut the city and divide it proves that she is not the real mother. Interestingly enough, this very parable was used by Nabil Shaath the first foreign Minister of the Palestinian Authority in response to the question why did the Arabs reject the 1947 Partition Plan. We regarded ourselves as the true mother of Palestine said

Shaath and therefore, refused to cut our baby. Yehezkel Landau a good friend of many of us here and one of the founders of the Israeli religious Peace Movement brings this story and says: they are both wrong. If this parable makes any sense at all, it should be reversed. The Holy Land and the Holy City are not the baby but rather the mother of us all.

In Psalms (87:5) it says: "But of Zion, it shall be said: 'This man and that was born in her'" We, Israelis and Palestinians are her children, all of us this man and that.

We must try to be more creative in dealing with the Holy Land. There is a beautiful Hassidic commentary of The Rabbi of Kobrin to the verse "Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. (Exodus 3:5) "The Holy One is saying to every person as he said to Moses, 'Take off your shoes. נעליך from your feet רגלך Remove the lock from your habit and you will recognize that the place where you now stand is Holy Earth.

Abraham our common father already showed his courage and benevolence in dealing with the land. It was he, not his nephew Lot who received the divine promise: "I will give this land to your offspring". And yet, when there was strife between his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen, Abraham said to Lot:

Let there be no strife between me and you, **for we are brothers**. Separate yourself, I beg you, from me; if you will take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left. (Genesis 13:7-9)

For the sake of peace between brothers, Abraham is willing to compromise and share.

I'd like to conclude with two poems by the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. The first one is called: "The place where we are right"

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the spring.

The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined  
house once stood.

And second poem one is called: "Tourists"

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

I pray for the day when we all come to recognize that the man who bought fruit and vegetables is more important than Roman arches; that human lives are more important than marble and stone, shrines and temples; that *Adam* – a human being is more important than *Adama* Land -

*Bayom hahu yehiyeh Adonai ehad ushemo ehad.* On that day, the Lord shall be one and His name one.