

THE GATEWAY

My great-grandfather, Rabbi Arye Leib Frumkin, went to Israel in 1871; his father had settled there 20 years earlier. His first act was to begin writing his History of the Sages in Jerusalem, chronicling the Jewish presence there since Nachmanides arrived in 1265.

In 1881, pogroms broke out in more than a hundred towns in Russia. That was when he realized that *aliyah* was no longer a pilgrimage of the few but an urgent necessity for the many. He became a pioneer, moving to one of the first agricultural settlements in the new *yishuv*. The early settlers had caught malaria and left. Rabbi Frumkin led the return and built the first house there. The name they gave the town epitomizes their dreams. Using a phrase from the book of Hosea, they called it Petach Tikva, 'the Gateway of Hope.' Today it is the sixth-largest city in Israel.

The Jewish connection with Israel did not begin with Zionism, a word coined in the 1890's. It goes back 4,000 years to the first recorded syllables of Jewish time, G-d's command to Abraham: "Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the Land that I will show you" (Bereishit 12: 1). Seven times G-d promised Abraham the Land and repeated that promise to Isaac and Jacob. If any nation on earth has a right to any land – a right based on history, attachment, long association – then the Jewish people have a right to Israel.

Judaism – twice as old as Christianity, three times as old as Islam – was the call to Abraham's descendants to create a society of freedom, justice and compassion under the sovereignty of G-d. A society involves a land, a home, somewhere where the 'Children of Israel' form the majority, and can thus create

a culture, an economy and a political system in accordance with their values. That Land was and is Israel.

Jews never left Israel voluntarily. They never relinquished their rights. They returned whenever they could: in the days of Moses, then again after the Babylonian exile, then again generation after generation. Judah HaLevi went there in the 12th century. So did Maimonides and his family, though they found it impossible to stay. Nachmanides went after being exiled from Spain. There was a large community there in the 16th century. There are places, especially in Galilee, where they never left at all.

Those with a sense of history long ago recognized the injustice of denying Jews their ancestral home. In 1799, Napoleon, at the start of his Middle East campaign, called on Jews to return (the campaign failed before there was a chance to act on this proposal). So did many British thinkers in the 19th century, among them Lord Palmerston, Lord Shaftesbury, and George Eliot, in her novel, Daniel Deronda.

The Balfour Declaration in 1917, ratified in 1922 by the League of Nations, was an attempt to rectify the single most sustained crime against humanity: the denial of Jewry's right to its Land and its subsequent unparalleled history of suffering. Winston Churchill never wavered from this view. There were Arab leaders who understood this too. In 1919, King Faisal wrote to the American-Jewish judge, Felix Frankfurter: "We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist Movement... The Jewish Movement is national and not imperialist. Our movement [Arab nationalism] is national and not imperialist... Indeed I think that neither can be a real success without the other."

The idea that Jews came to Israel as outsiders or imperialists is among the most perverse of modern myths. They were the Land's original inhabitants: they have the same relationship to the Land as native Americans to America, aborigines to Australia, and Maoris to New Zealand. They were ousted by imperialists. They are the only rulers of the Land in the past 3,000 years who neither sought nor created an empire.

In fact, no other people, no other power, has ever created an independent state there. When it was not a Jewish State, Israel was merely an administrative unit of empires: the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, Fatimids, Abbasids, Crusaders, Mamluks and Ottomans. The existence of Israel, in ancient times and today, is a sustained protest against empires and imperialism: against Mesopotamia of Abraham's day and the Egyptians of the Exodus.

Do we really need a Jewish State? Yes. There must be someplace on earth where Jews can defend themselves, where they have a home in the sense given by the poet Robert Frost as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Every nation has the right to rule itself and create a society and culture in accordance with its own values. That right, to national self-determination, is among the most basic in politics. Today there are many Christian and Muslim nations, but only one Jewish one: in a country one-quarter of one percent of the landmass of the Arab world.

Long ago, Jews recognized the right of the Arab population of the Land to a place of their own. There were various plans for the partition of the Land into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, in the 1920's and 1930's. Jews accepted them; the Arabs rejected them. In 1947,

OF Hope

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks



the United Nations voted for partition. Again, Jews accepted, the Arabs refused. David Ben-Gurion reiterated the call for peace as a central part of Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948. Israel's neighbors – Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – responded by attacking it on all fronts.

The offer was renewed in 1967 after the Six-Day War. The response of the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum in September 1967, was the famous 'Three Nos': no to peace, no to negotiations, no to the recognition of the State of Israel. The call was repeated many times by Golda Meir, and always decisively rejected.

The boldest offer was made by Ehud Barak at Taba, 2001. It offered the Palestinians a state in the whole of Gaza and 97 percent of the West Bank, with border compensations for the other three percent, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Many members of the Palestinian team wanted to accept. The Saudi ambassador at the time, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, said, "If Arafat does not accept what is available now, it won't be a tragedy, it will be a crime."

Tragically, the Palestinians have been betrayed by those who claimed to be their supporters. They were betrayed in 1948 by the Arab states who promised them that if they left now they would return soon, all Jews having been expelled. They were betrayed by the Arab nations to which they fled, who refused to grant them citizenship, in marked contrast to Israel and its treatment of Jewish refugees from Arab (and other) lands.

They were betrayed by countries that encouraged them to pursue violence instead of peace, bringing poverty to an entire population that, under Israeli rule from 1967 to 1987, had achieved

unprecedented levels of affluence and economic growth. They are betrayed today by those who encourage impossible expectations – Palestinian rule over the whole of Israel – thus condemning yet another generation to violence, poverty and despair.

The Egyptians, who ruled Gaza between 1949 and 1967, could have created a Palestinian state, but did not. The Jordanians, who ruled the West Bank during the same years, could have created a Palestinian state, but did not. Instead, Egypt persecuted its Islamist intellectuals, sentencing many to death. The Jordanians expelled the Palestinians in 1971, after killing almost 10,000 of them in 1970 in the massacre known as 'Black September.' The only country that has ever offered the Palestinians a state is Israel.

What has systematically derailed Israel's efforts for peace is the fact that every concession it has made, every withdrawal it has undertaken, has been interpreted by its enemies as a sign of weakness, and has led to more violence, not less. The Oslo process led to suicide bombings. Ehud Barak's offer led to the so-called El Aqsa Intifada. The withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza led directly to the onslaught of Katyushas and Kassams. How does any nation make peace under these conditions? Hamas and Hezbollah have made it clear that they do not seek peace. They seek Israel's destruction.

Under constant threat of violence or war, Israel's achievements have nonetheless been immense. It has taken a desolate landscape and turned it into a place of farms, forests and fields. It has taken immigrants from more than 100 countries, speaking more than 80 languages, and turned them into a nation. It has created a modern economy with almost no resources other than

the creative gifts of its people. It has sustained democracy in a part of the world that had never known it before. It has taken Hebrew, the language of the Bible, and made it speak again. It has taken a people devastated by the Holocaust and made it live again. Israel remains a Petach Tikva, a gateway of hope.

Is criticism of Israel antisemitism? No. Criticism is a legitimate part of democratic politics and free speech. Many of Israel's most acute critics are Israelis. No nation is perfect; no nation can be perfect; a good society is one that makes space for, and listens to, constructive criticism. That is something with which we must live. The Hebrew Bible is the most self-critical document in religious or national history.

What we must challenge are the blatant falsehoods: that Israel is the aggressor, that it has not sought peace; above all the idea that it has no right to exist. Equally, we must challenge the false paradigm that the Israel-Palestinian relationship is a zero-sum game in which one side loses and the other wins. It is not. From peace, both sides gain. From war, violence and terror, both sides lose. Peace is sacred, violence a desecration. Too many lives have been lost, too much blood has been shed. Eventually, both sides must recognize the other's right to be – and if not now, when?

1 A complete treatment

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth