The Obsession with Land

I was not born into a religious family but grew up in a warm and traditional South African Jewish home. To the great credit of my dear parents, and through the influence of a young dynamic Rabbi, we began going to shul on Shabbat on a regular basis, which sparked the beginning of a spiritual transformation. I was 12 years old when this family odyssey towards more serious Torah observance began.

A good place to start studying Torah was from the very beginning, so I began with the book of Bereishit. As I began learning about Avraham, I was totally perplexed. The very first time G-d speaks to the very first Jew, He commands him to leave wherever he is and to journey to another land to fulfill his destiny. This baffled me. After all, was this really the most important thing for Avraham to do in order to begin his mission? What about studying Torah, keeping mitzvot, committing himself to total obedience to fulfill the will of G-d?

Incredibly, the more I studied the book of Bereishit, the more I realized that this original encounter between G-d and Avraham was not an exception but rather the rule. It seemed as if G-d had some type of obsession, so to speak, with this land. It was clear that the new spiritual mission of Avraham and his children was somehow intricably linked to this tract of land.

This conclusion is inescapable. As soon as Avraham arrives, G-d promises to give the Land to his children.1 As he returns from Egypt after the famine, G-d commands him to walk around the Land, look in all directions and promises the whole Land to him and his progeny once again.2

G-d makes two distinct and dramatic covenants with him, promising that his children will return after Exile and that the Land will be an ‘Eternal Inheritance’ for them.3

G-d forbids Yitzchak from leaving the Land, despite famine, and he spends his entire life there. G-d promises the Land to him and his children.4

To escape his brother, Ya’akov has no choice but to leave the Land, but his whole life revolves around it. In his dream on departure, G-d assures him he will return and 20 years later commands him to do so.5 Upon his return, Ya’akov is promised the Land for him and his children.6 Then after being pushed into Exile once again, to reunite with his son Yosef in Egypt, Ya’akov asks Yosef to swear to bury him in the grave of his forefathers in the Land.7

The book of Bereishit ends counterintuitively with Yosef, despite his meteoric success in Egypt, making his family promise to bury him in the Land of his fathers. Remarkably, the last verse of the book conveys his death, embalming and placing him in a coffin. No burial is mentioned. The message is clear – he is waiting, no matter for how long, to return to the Land with the Children of Israel and to be buried there.

The singling out of a person, a family and a people for a unique mission is interlocked at every stage with the singling out of the Land. They are inseparable.

I also noticed that in the book of Bereishit, one city in the Land – Chevron – stands out more than any other, in three distinct ways. First, it is the site of the first legally purchased part of the Land, the Cave of Machpelah, which Avraham acquires to bury Sarah. Second, despite our forefathers’ many travels and sojournings, Chevron is the main area in the Land where all three of them lived.8 And third, it is where all three sets of our forefathers and mothers are buried.9

Therefore, Chevron – more than any other place – represents our founding fathers’ and mothers’ extraordinary connection to the Land.

As I was finishing high school, I made a further amazing discovery. One of the world’s leading historians, Paul Johnson, had just published his monumental work, “A History of the Jews,” in which he highlighted the very same reflections about the Land in general and Chevron in particular.

In his opening chapter, he emphasized the remarkable centrality of the Land from the dawn of Jewish history: “The election of Abraham and his descendants for a special role in G-d’s providence, and the donation of the land, are inseparable in the Biblical presentation of history.”10

Strikingly, Johnson traces the very beginning of Jewish history to Chevron itself: “The Jews are the most tenacious people in history. Chevron is there to prove it. It lies 20 miles south of Jerusalem, 3,000 feet up in the Judean Hills. There, in the Cave of Machpelah, are the Tombs of the Patriarchs. According to ancient tradition, one sepulcher, itself of great antiquity, contains the mortal remains

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of Abraham, founder of the Jewish religion and ancestor of the Jewish race. Paired with his tomb is that of his wife Sarah. Within the building are the twin tombs of his son Isaac and his wife Rebecca. Across the inner courtyard is another pair of tombs, of Abraham’s grandson Jacob and his wife Leah. This is where the 4,000-year history of the Jews, in so far as it can be anchored in time and place, began.11

He also pointed out what the city teaches about the nature of Jewish spiritual history: “Chevron is thus an example of Jewish obstinacy over 4,000 years. It also illustrates the curious ambivalence of the Jews towards the possession and occupation of land. No race has maintained over so long a period so emotional an attachment to a particular corner of the earth’s surface... Chevron is the site of their first recorded acquisition of land. Chapter 23 of the Book of Genesis describes how Abraham, after the death of his wife Sarah, decided to purchase the Cave of Machpelah and the lands which surrounded it, as a burying-place for her and ultimately for himself. The passage is among the most important in the entire Bible, embodying one of the most ancient and tenaciously held Jewish traditions, evidently very dear and critical to them. It is perhaps the first passage in the Bible which records an actual event, witnessed and described through a long chain of oral recitation and so preserving authentic details.”12

Thus the Jewish people’s connection to Chevron is a microcosm of our people’s unparalleled relationship to the Land. The mainstay of Bereishit is the concurrent singling out of a particular people and a particular Land for a unique spiritual mission and the ineradicable connection between them.

Today we are privileged to be participating in and witnessing the miraculous return of our people to our Land. This remarkable reunion is a fulfillment of the promises made to our forebears in the book of Bereishit and is bringing us closer to fulfilling our historic destiny. At the same time, there are anti-Israel forces from within and without who wish to sever this link, with disastrous consequences. Without integrating the foundational principles of Jewish particularism as a people intertwined with the Land, any attempt to create either a religious or a humanistic Jewish identity betrays the essence of the Jewish mission.13

It is my hope and prayer that the great religious and universal values of Judaism will always remain inherently connected to the inseparable foundational principles of Jewish peoplehood and nationhood – the Land and people at the heart of Bereishit. It is a privilege to be part of a breathtaking drama unfolding today; a phenomenon unrivaled in all of human history: the remarkable return of a people to its Land as designated by G-d at the very dawn of Creation.

1 Bereishit 12:7.
3 The Covenants of the Pieces in Chapter 15 and of Circumcision in Chapter 17.
6 Ibid 35:12.
8 Avraham settles – וַיֵּשֶׁב – in Chevron, connoting a permanent settlement as opposed to a previous place where he only pitched his tent (Bereishit 13:18). See Rashi’s commentary (21:34), where he quotes Seder Olam regarding Avraham’s sojourning in the Land and shows how Chevron is his and Sarah’s primary dwelling place. Although Yitzchak spent many years in Eretz Pelishtim he also settled in Chevron (35:27). Upon returning to the Land from Lavan’s house, Ya’akov moves from place to place eventually settling in Chevron as well (37:14).
9 Bereishit 49:31. Rachel was buried along the way to Efrat, Beit Lechem (35:19).
10 Paul Johnson, A History of the Jews, published by George Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1987, p. 19. It is fascinating that Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has mentioned that this work is arguably the most important work of Jewish history and should be in every Jewish home.
13 It is also true that fixation on the people/Land without being tempered with religious, ethical and universalist values does the same and has the potential to create a coarse and destructive brand of nationalism. The Torah ideal, explains Rav Kook (Orot HaTechiya 18), is a blend of religious, universal and nationalist ideals that form a wholesome Jewish identity.