The Long, Complicated Jewish History of Israel

David Wolpe

MY FIRST visit to Israel was when I was 12 years old. The group was led by my father, a rabbi from Philadelphia. We had been invited to participate in an archaeological dig near the city of Beit Shean, in the country's north, near the Jordan River Valley. Soon after we arrived, one of my friends happened upon a pottery shard, really an ostracon, a fragment with writing on it. The archaeologist on site said something to him in Hebrew. My father translated: "He said you are the first person to hold that in over 2,000 years."

Such shocks of antiquity are not rare in Israel. In 1880, archaeologists discovered a Hebrew text carved in stone in a tunnel under Jerusalem. It recounted how workers had chiseled from opposite ends of the ancient city; as they grew closer, the sounds of stone cutting grew louder until they met in the middle. The tunnel is believed to be dated from the time of Hezekiah, a king who reigned 715-687 B.C., almost 3,000 years ago and 100 years before the Temple was razed, and Jews were sent into the Babylonian exile. Hezekiah ordered the tunnel's construction to bring water from outside the city walls into the city. Jerusalem may be a city of sanctity and reverence, but its citizens needed water as much as they did God.

That intersection of the holy and mundane remains. Over the past month of crisis, turmoil, protest and death we have been inevitably captured by the situation of the present. But part of the intractability of the conflict in the Middle East is that the Jewish relationship to Israel did not begin in 1948. Our history here, of both pain and holiness, stretches back dozens of generations.

Our ancient historical markers, scattered throughout this land, are the tactile expression of Jewish memory, and an ancient spiritual yearning. For thousands of years, Jews in the Diaspora would leave a corner of their homes unpainted, to remind themselves that they were not home. They prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. They knew the geography of a land they would never see, often far better than the country in which they lived. They recited prayers for weather — in services during the winter, we yearn for rain or dew — not to help the harvests outside Vilnius or Paris or Fez, but for those in Israel, since we expected at any moment to return.

The Bible depicts an ideal land, one flowing with milk and honey. Yet Israel has always been one thing in dreams and another in the tumult of everyday life. When the five books of the Torah end, the Israelites are still in the wilderness and Moses, our leader out of Egypt, has been denied the promised land. The message is manifest: The perfect place does not yet exist, and you must enter a messy and contested land armed with the vision God has given you. Jews conclude the Passover Seder with "next year in Jerusalem." Yet if one has the Seder in Jerusalem, the conclusion is not "next year here." Rather, it is "next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem" — a city that reflects the ideals and aspirations of sages and prophets, one marked with piety and plenty.

For many Jews, that vision is as relevant today as it was in ancient Israel. That means the past, present and future of the land is not just an argument about settlements or structures alone, but also an ideal of a place of safety, a heavenly city on earth, one that we continue to strive and pray for, especially after the violence of these last few weeks.

Though we famously admonish ourselves to ever remember Jerusalem in Psalm 137 — the sacred city of stone and tears is not the sole focus of Jewish yearning. Israel is haunted by historical memories. In the northern town of Tsfat, a pilgrim can wander among the graves of the Jewish mystics who re-established a community in that mountain town after the expulsion from Spain in 1492: Isaac Luria, who taught that God's self-contraction made way for the world; Joseph Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch, the authoritative code of Jewish law, who believed an angel dictated visions to him in the evening. They were joined there by Greek-born Solomon Alkabetz, who wrote the poem L'cha Dodi (Come to Me, Beloved), a lyrical love song to the Sabbath that is sung in synagogues all over the world each Friday night.

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Despite the deep meditations on evil and afterlife in Jewish tradition, the concept of hell is not as developed in Judaism as in other traditions. However, there is a popular name for it: Gehenna. It derives from a place where children in antiquity were said to have been sacrificed to the pagan god Moloch.

In 1979, archaeologists began excavating in the area that is believed to be ancient Gehenna. Not far from the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, they found what is considered to be one of the oldest bits of scripture that exists in the world, more than 400 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls. It dates from the time just before the destruction of the first Temple, the Temple of Solomon, in 586 B.C. The scorched ground yielded two rolled up silver amulets that are on display to this day in the Israel Museum. When painstakingly unfurled, the text was almost verbatim to the Bible verses:

"May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God turn His face toward you and give you peace." (Num 6:24-26)

This is the priestly blessing, one parents recite for their children each Friday night, a fervent prayer for the future. In other words, the oldest bit of scripture that exists in the world is a blessing of peace that was snatched from hell. In that beleaguered and beautiful land, the prayer endures. □

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