

Some Texts on Israel

Deuteronomy, chapter 7

- 1: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Gir'gashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Per'izzites, the Hivites, and the Jeb'usites, seven nations greater and mightier than yourselves,
- 2: and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them.
- 3: You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons.
- 4: For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.
- 5: But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and hew down their Ashe'rim, and burn their graven images with fire.
- 6: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.
- 16: And you shall destroy all the peoples that the LORD your God will give over to you, your eye shall not pity them; neither shall you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you.

Deuteronomy, chapter 20

- 16: But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes,
- 17: but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Per'izzites, the Hivites and the Jeb'usites, as the LORD your God has commanded;
- 18: that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their gods, and so to sin against the LORD your God.

Joshua, chapter 11

- 10: And Joshua turned back at that time, and took Hazor, and smote its king with the sword; for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms.
- 11: And they put to the sword all who were in it, utterly destroying them; there was none left that breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire.
- 12: And all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took, and smote them with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded.
- 13: But none of the cities that stood on mounds did Israel burn, except Hazor only; that Joshua burned.
- 14: And all the spoil of these cities and the cattle, the people of Israel took for their booty; but every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any that breathed.

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*

The unyielding tenor of these provisions stands in sharp contrast to the fact that such a policy of annihilation was, never carried out-the Canaanites were not annihilated. In fact, in Judg. 3:1, God himself is said to have abrogated His original command (see above, at verse 22). Later, in retrospect-taking Deuteronomy to be a post-settlement and not a Mosaic document-the reader was told that the rampant idolatry which characterized Israel's history for centuries could have been avoided had the native peoples been destroyed. Note that the sermon warns the Israelites not to intermarry with the idolaters -the very idolaters who were supposed to be doomed!

A proper understanding, then, would view these passages as retrojections of what could and might have been, and the sentiments were acceptable in view of the common practices of the times."

MASECHET KETUBOT 111a

Another text also is available: *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, [that ye awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please]* (Song of Songs 2:7). And R. Zera? That implies that Israel shall not go up [all together] as a wall. And Rab Judah?

Another *I adjure you* is written in Scripture. And R. Zera? That text is required for [an exposition] like that of R. Jose son of R. Hanina who said: What was the purpose of those three adjurations? One, that Israel shall not go up [all together as if surrounded] by a wall; the second, that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured Israel that they shall not rebel against the nations of the world; and the third is that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured the idolaters that they shall not oppress Israel too much.

***Pittsburgh Platform*, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Nov. 1885**

We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

Union for Reform Judaism resolution**"Encouraging Pilgrimage to Israel Among Reform Jews," December 2004, excerpts**

In solidarity with our people in Israel, expressed most directly through our presence, we pledge to continue our commitment to encouraging Reform Jews and others to travel to Israel....

THEREFORE, in order to deepen the solidarity, connection and engagement of North American Reform Jews with Israel, and Reform Jews in Israel in particular, the Union for Reform Judaism resolves to:

1. Call upon all Union congregations...to formulate and implement plans to significantly increase the number of our members who visit Israel and urge rabbis, congregations and regions to plan and implement pilgrimages to Israel within the near future.... 4. Call upon congregations and rabbis, our college and youth departments and NFTY regions to make a concerted effort to send all high school students and young adults to Israel... and to help secure the financial support necessary for families for whom this is a burden....

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, 1969

Well-meaning people used to say that a Jewish state would be an answer to all Jewish questions. In truth, however, the State of Israel is a challenge to many of our answers. To be involved in the life of Israel is to be in labor.

What is the meaning of the State of Israel? *Its sheer being is the message.* The life in the land of Israel today is a rehearsal, a test, a challenge to all of us. Not living in the land, nonparticipation in the drama, is a source of embarrassment.

...

It would be a distortion to reduce the meaning of Israel reborn to the necessity to deal with Jewish misery. It was above all the power of promise, the power of hope, that necessitated the resurrection of Israel. In a deeper sense, Israel reborn is a necessity of world history.

...

The ultimate meaning of the State of Israel must be seen in terms of the vision of the prophets: the redemption of all men. The religious duty of the Jew is to participate in the process of continuous redemption, in seeing that justice prevails over power, that awareness of God penetrates human understanding.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (p. 82)

The ancient rabbis discern three aspects of holiness: the holiness of the Name of God, the holiness of the Sabbath, and the holiness of Israel. The holiness of the Sabbath preceded the holiness of Israel. The holiness of the Land of Israel is derived from the holiness of the people of Israel. The land was not holy at the time of Terah or even at the time of the Patriarchs. It was sanctified by the people when they entered the land under the leadership of Joshua. The land was sanctified by the people, and the Sabbath was sanctified by God.

A.B. Yehoshua, “The Meaning of Homeland,” August 2006

I keep bringing up the matter of texts, because in liberal Jewish circles this has recently become the most important anchor of identity, as evidenced by the return of manifestly secular people to the synagogue—not in order to find God, but to clutch onto identity. The struggle for Soviet Jewry is over; the Security Council will deal with Iran; there is nothing left but to return to the familiar and the known. As someone who has spent his whole life dealing with texts—writing, reading, and analyzing—I am incensed by the increasingly dangerous and irresponsible disconnection between the glorification of the texts and the mundane matters of daily life. Instead, I propose that we continue to nurture the concrete and living value of “the homeland,” rather than the dull and worn-out value of Jewish spirituality.

Yossi Beilin, “First and Foremost a Jew,” Haaretz, May 15, 2006

In Israel, you can stay away from religious ritual and still know that your children will remain Jewish, because their environment is a Jewish environment, they speak Hebrew, and from kindergarten through university they study subjects connected to Jewish heritage (even if we have criticisms of the quantity and quality of these studies). But our role, the role of Jewish intellectuals and Jewish leaders worldwide for whom the issue of Jewish continuity is important, cannot be confined to making statements like “come to Israel or you will disappear.”

...When I initiated the birthright project, I did this in the conviction that Israel must be a meeting point for the Jewish people as part of the effort to ensure Jewish continuity. The project’s success should convince the Israeli government and Jewish communities worldwide to expand it, so that no Jewish young person who wants to visit Israel will be unable to do so.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, URJ President

commenting on Pastor John Hagee’s Christians United for Israel (CUFI), April 2, 2008

...mainstream Christian Zionists are, by their own admission, not "advocates" of Israel but "Biblical advocates" of Israel, and this means that they oppose any territorial concessions by the Government of Israel for any reason whatsoever. It follows that their vision of Israel rejects a two-state solution, rejects the possibility of a democratic Israel, and supports the permanent occupation of all Arab lands now controlled by Israel...

Are they entitled to such views? Of course. But we are entitled to say, and are obligated to say, that such views may advance their theology but they do so at the expense of Israel's security and well-being. If implemented, in fact, these views would mean disaster for Israel...

MJ Rosenberg, “Does ‘Pro-Israel’ Mean Anything?”, *IPF Friday*, July 25, 2008

It is only here in the United States that pro-Israel advocates insist that politicians rely on canned talking points to show their devotion to Israel. It is as if they believe -- and perhaps they do -- that thinking about the Middle East can only lead to anti-Israel conclusions. They demand that politicians mouth pieties and, all too often, that demand is met.

There is a real irony here, one which most of us who deal with this issue in Washington confront daily. It is that the politicians who are most deft at spouting memorized "pro-Israel" talking points tend to care about Israel the least. The ones who speak from the heart and the head, who study the issue, and try to come up with ways to break out of the deadly status quo are the ones who care the most. This includes Jewish politicians, many of whom pretend that they care deeply but only discovered Israel when they decided that playing the Jewish card would help them politically.