

## THE IDEA OF THE PROMISED LAND

It is common knowledge that the Jews have shown an unusually persistent emotional attachment to their fatherland, notably when they were exiled and dispersed. The sentiment has found many expressions throughout Jewish history and is too well known to require repeated documentation, but a few examples may remind us of its ardent nature.<sup>1</sup>

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion,” opens a well-known *Psalm* (137). And the weeping does not meander into a passive nostalgia, but leads to an active determination expressed in the oath: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.” When the moment of return from Babylon arrives, the experience transcends the confines of reality: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.” (*Psalm* 126).

The Jewish legend expresses the adulation for the Land of Israel in its own way, usually by using the supernatural and miraculous. This Land is believed to have been created before the other part of the world and remains located in the centre

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analytical exposition of the relationship between Israel (or the Jews) and their land, as expressed in various epochs of Jewish history, see Martin Buber, *Israel and Palestine (The History of an Idea)*, London 1952. Translated from the German by Stanley Godman. The German original was published in 1950, preceded by the Hebrew version, published in 1944.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

of the earth.<sup>2</sup> Shekinah (the Presence of God) resides in the Holy Land,<sup>3</sup> though it follows the Jews in their exile.<sup>4</sup> The resurrection of the dead will take place in the Holy Land.<sup>5</sup> On a more pedestrian level, a legend asserts that "although Hebron was the poorest tract in all Palestine, it was still much better than Zoan, the most excellent part of Egypt."<sup>6</sup>

Even more significant is the expression of this sentiment in the Jewish prayerbook, for it has served as the text from which the dispersed Jews have recited their prayers for hundreds and hundreds of years. If one remembers that until fairly recent times prayers formed a part of the daily routine of practically all of the Jewish males, the psychological and social significance of the prayer-book will not be underestimated. Three times on weekdays the prayers ask of the Almighty "assemble us speedily all together from the four corners of the earth to our land." The request is repeated also in other forms on the same occasions. On the Sabbath the same yearning is expressed in different words: "May it be Thy will, O Lord, our God and God of our fathers, to bring us up in joy to our land and to plant us in our country." On various holidays the quest reappears in the following wording: "Our Father and King . . . Bring together our dispersed from among the nations and assemble our scattered from the ends of the earth. And bring us to Zion, Thy city, in merriment, and to Jerusalem, Thy sanctuary, in eternal joy."<sup>7</sup>

It is this spirit of the ages which was expressed in the yearning for Zion of Hebrew poets in mediaeval Spain or in modern Russia. It is this spirit which dominated modern Zionism. The idea is emphatically expressed in the moment it reached a point of culmination, on the eve of a renewed fulfilment. The Proclamation of Independence of the State of Israel of 14th May, 1948 asserts:

<sup>2</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vols. I-VII, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938. Vol. V, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 371 and Vol. II, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 374.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 129. Cf. also Vol. V, pp. 362-363.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> This and the preceding quotations were translated by the present writer from the traditional Hebrew Prayer Book.

In the Land of Israel the Jewish people came into being. In this Land was shaped their spiritual, religious, and national character. Here they lived in sovereign independence. Here they created a culture of national and universal import, and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

Accordingly we ..., by virtue of our natural and historic right ... do hereby proclaim the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel...<sup>8</sup>.

In sharp contrast to the attitude of the Jews to their land, one can point to a philosophy exhibiting an unusual degree of detachment, not to say indifference, in this respect. Some such philosophy must have served as the understructure of the endeavours of the colonizing nations in their diverse undertakings to populate and take over new territories. It is interesting to note that this attitude is occasionally spelt out.

Thus, Herodotus tells us that Themistocles (the Athenian), trying to persuade Eurybiades (the Spartan in command of the entire Greek fleet) to engage the Persian fleet at Salamis rather than retreat to another point south, used the following argument. If you do not stay at Salamis, Themistocles is reputed to have said, "we will take our families on board and go, just as we are, to Siris in Italy, which is ours from of old, and which the prophecies declare we are to colonize some day or other."<sup>9</sup> It is unimportant, in this connection, whether Themistocles actually used this argument, or whether, if he did, he meant what he said or was merely bluffing. For us it matters that Herodotus, writing in fifth century B. C., seriously expresses the idea that a polis could contemplate an organized move to a distant land—be it in circumstances of a great national crisis. No doubt, Herodotus here voices a widely accepted philosophy in his times, namely, that the land on which a human community lives is not essential to its existence as a community; it is not the land, but the social ties and the political organization which sustain the polis. Therefore Athens will remain its own self wherever it will be located, provided its social-political structure (and, by implication, its culture) remains intact.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from *Facts About Israel 1970*, Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, translated by George Rawlinson, Book VIII, Chapter 62.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

The assumption that it is the society which is the relevant element in political life and aspirations—a society connected with a territory as a part of physical reality, but discarding the notion of fundamental ties with a fatherland—is clearly implied in a typical statement from the more recent history, in this case of the British Empire. When at the Imperial Conference in London in 1911 the resolution was put forward by New Zealand to establish an Imperial Council of State representing the self-governing members of the Empire (i.e., the Dominions) whose function would be to advise the Imperial Government on matters affecting the overseas Dominions, the resolution was categorically rejected. In rejecting the proposal, Mr. Asquith (representing the British Government and presiding over the Conference) asserted that “the authority of the Government of the United Kingdom in . . . the conduct of foreign policy . . . cannot be shared, and the co-existence side by side with the Cabinet of the United Kingdom of this proposed body . . . would, in our judgment, be absolutely fatal to our present system of responsible government.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the idea of a political communion of those British who had left the United Kingdom and established self-governing (but, at that time, not yet sovereign) Dominions with the mother country is emphatically rejected. Once the settlers have left the country they have not only lost a say in its affairs, but cannot claim a system of co-ordinated administration of foreign affairs, a system based on a notion of kinship, common history and cultural heritage and common fatherland. The physical separation is decisive for a political separation and outweighs all the other considerations. The feeling for Britain as a home, still lingering in the hearts of the emigrants to the Dominions, or even in the hearts of their children, is not allowed to blossom, is not encouraged by the formation of closer political links. Once the home is left, it is the new place which has to be regarded as home. The fatherland is not to be Zion in the Anglo-Saxon civilization.

It is a curious paradox that the Athenians, with their detached attitude to their land, created the myth of being an autochthonic people, that is to say originating in the land they occupied. That

<sup>10</sup> *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Imperial Conference, 1911*, p. 71, as reproduced in Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Nationalism*, London, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 136.

this is not historically true, did not prevent Herodotus,<sup>11</sup> and even such a careful historian as Thucydides,<sup>12</sup> from believing in it. The Israelites, on the other hand, with their unusual attachments to their land, maintained that their origins were elsewhere. In the story of Abraham, the legendary father of the nation, he is told by God: "Get thee out of thy country . . . unto a land that I will shew thee." (Genesis 12:1.) In the story of Exodus it is the people of Israel that is to be brought out of Egypt "unto a good land and a large . . . unto the place of the Canaanites . . ." (Exodus 3:8.) Why should a people who, in all probability, actually reached some kind of a national existence before occupying their land and who retained and emphasized in their national consciousness their pre-territorial existence, why should such a people become so profoundly attached to the land they came to settle, emerges as a unique enigma. Its solution seems to lie in the idea of the Promised Land.

That the ancient Athenians (*pace* their autochthonic tradition) and the modern Anglo-Saxons retained their rather detached attitude to the fatherland is probably due to the fact that, in both cases, we have to do with maritime nations. A nation of sailors, or one with a very substantial proportion of sailors and a correspondingly significant fleet, is used to the idea of movement over the expanses of sea to distant and large lands. The experience of contact with distant places, the inevitable comparison of one's own land with other lands, creates a frame of mind which is more objective and less loco-centric. Thucydides makes the following general observation about the Greek seafaring peoples: "And yet those who applied their energies to the sea obtained a great accession of strength by the increase of their revenues and the extension of their domain. For they attacked and subjugated the islands, especially when the pressure of population was felt by them."<sup>13</sup> While the Greek historian emphasizes the economic, political and demographic aspects of the policies of the maritime peoples—and these are certainly significant—they must have been accompanied by the attitude, referred to above, which de-emphasizes the attachment to the

<sup>11</sup> See Herodotus, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter 56. Also Chap. 57.

<sup>12</sup> See Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book I, Chap. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chap. 15. The quotation follows the translation of Benjamin Jowett.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

original fatherland. And, of course, once colonization succeeded, it must have strengthened the philosophy that the fatherland is where the new community of people settles down.

On the face of it, one would be tempted to speculate that a nomadic people should exhibit similar attitudes. Nomads, by their very mode of life, are unattached to any one location. Their subsistence usually depends on changing their abode, whether in order to find pasture for their herds or in order to discover other means of livelihood for themselves. Yet, it is the people whose origin seems clearly to be rooted in a nomadic civilization—the stories about the Patriarchs with their herds symbolize it and the tale of the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert reiterate the national recollection of a nomadic past—who developed that unusual attachment to their land. As already indicated, the explanation of this peculiar turn of sentiment seems to be rooted in the idea of the Promised Land.

The stories of the wanderings of Abraham, and even more so of the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert, focus on the idea that the wanderings have an aim that they are designed and destined to end, that they are means to a goal. The goal is nothing less than settling in a fertile land. The divine message to Moses refers to the prospective abode as “a good land and a large . . . a land flowing with milk and honey.” (*Exodus* 3:8.) God’s promise to Abraham announces: “all the land which thou seest to thee will I give it and to thy seed for ever.” (*Genesis* 13:15.) Not only is the land good, which makes the transition from the previous habitat an improvement; the land is also to become Israel’s patrimony for ever—which means that the nomads are to change their mode of existence, they are to become peasants tilling the land and no more obliged to move and travel. Thus the biblical stories seem to convey an aspiration of the nomadic tribes to become an agricultural nation, a wish to make a transition from one way-of-life to another which is regarded—and here modern anthropologists concur with the judgment of the ancient Hebrews—as a higher form of civilization, or simply, a better life. Viewed from this angle, the Promised Land is no more a new convenient abode for the wandering tribes, comparable to another coast settled by a seafaring nation. It is a haven putting an end to the wanderings, it is a solution to a way-of-life with which the people has become

dissatisfied, it is an aim fulfilled. Thus the description of the Promised Land, especially when given against the background of the thirsty and hungry wandering Israelites in the Sinai desert, has almost eschatological overtones: "a land flowing with milk and honey" (*Exodus* 3:8), "A land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it." (*Deuteronomy* 11:12.) As a poor man catching a glimpse of a rich man's house, which is to become his, sees in it more than the rich man who is used to it, the Hebrew nomads idealize the Promised Land.

This idealization becomes even more ardent when the Promised Land is contrasted not only with the hardships of nomadic existence but also with the slavery under alien yoke. For whatever the historical details of the subjugation by the Egyptians, it seems evident that the Biblical account expresses a traumatic memory in the nation's beginnings. At one time subjugated, the Hebrews must have dreamt of freedom, freedom in their own land. The hope for that freedom must have shone so much brighter as the enslavement darkened the daily lives of the oppressed and it must have been natural to compensate for the suffering in Egypt by extolling a Promised Land of liberty and bliss.<sup>14</sup> Tragically, the old oppression and the hope of delivery connected with it have been repeated again and again in the Jewish history and thus the recording of the beginnings of the nation turned into a pattern, into a model resorted to on all too often recurring occasions. As the Passover Haggadah puts it:

This (faithfulness) it is that has stood by our fathers and us. For not one man only has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation do men rise up against us to destroy us: but the Holy One, blessed be He, delivers us from their hands.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the divine delivery proved rather tardy in the last two millennia or so. Paradoxically, these circumstances, far

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 22. Buber emphasises the significance of the contrast of the two lands, Egypt and the Promised Land, in the book of *Exodus* (as against the Land of Promise as such in *Genesis*).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from *The Haggadah*, translated by Cecil Roth, London, The Soncino Press, 1934, p. 19. The word "faithfulness," which is an interpretation of the original text, was put in parentheses by the present writer.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

from tarnishing the idea of the Promised Land, in a way added to its lustre. The Promised Land tended to become less and less of a tangible land in a certain geographical location, and because of its unattainability turned into a dream land, a land of superior natural and even supernatural attributes. For dreams, while less concrete than reality, do not accept the limitations of reality. Nor are dreams necessarily less vivid than reality. Thus the image of the Promised Land—the centre of the earth, the divine abode, the place of future resurrection—was filling the lives and hopes of the afflicted people, despite—and in a way, because of—its unattainability. The afflictions and persecutions increased the intensity of the high hopes and added bright colours to the picture of the land of future salvation.

But there is more to the idea of the Promised Land than this. The idea is not only the reflection of the circumstances of a people, whether at its emergence or throughout its history, it is not only a combination of a recollection and a dream; it also is the expression of a creed, of a religious belief. For in the consciousness of the Israelite the Promised Land is not a land found or discovered by them—an America or an Australia; it is a land promised and given to them by God. The relationship involved is not merely between a people and a land, but among a people, God and a land. The divine element in this constellation elevates the relationship of the people to the land from a mere psychological attachment to what they conceive as their destiny. It is the *terra firma* of the religious belief which lends the idea of the Promised Land its absolute mastery over the minds of the believers. This religious aspect requires further elaboration.

That God is conceived as the donor, past and future, of the land to the people of Israel is all too well known: God promises the land to the patriarchs, and it is God who sends Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt and lead them to the land of their fathers. The book of *Deuteronomy* abounds in references to God as the giver of the land to Israel (9:6, 18:9, 19:1, 21:1, 26:1, 27:2, etc.). It is God who, in a different historical moment, announces through Ezekiel: "I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." (*Ezekiel* 11:17.) It is again in the name of God that this promise appears in *Jeremiah*, who significantly draws a parallel between the



delivery from Egypt in the past and the exodus from the new exile projected into the future (*Jeremiah* 16: 14-15). The motif of divine delivery of the people and their return to the land is most prominent in *Deuter-Isaiah*, of course. The Jewish prayer, obviously, turns to God in his request to return Israel to Zion. A Jewish legend summarizes the perennial belief in the link between God and the people-land relationship when it says: "... God vowed a vow to His people that He would never exchange them for any other people or nation, and that He would never permit them to dwell in any land other than Palestine."<sup>16</sup> It is God who chose Israel to be His people and it is God who chose the Land which was to be eternally that people's abode. The notions of the "holy people" and of the "holy land," characteristic of the Jewish tradition, are rooted in God's choice of the people and of the land and in His linking of the two. As Martin Buber admirably puts it:

... holiness is ... a quality bestowed on this particular people and this particular land because God "elects" both in order to lead His chosen people into His chosen land and to join them to each other. It is His election that sanctifies the chosen people as His immediate attendance and the land as His royal throne and which makes them dependent on each other.<sup>17</sup>

Implied in the divine linking of the people and the land is the belief in an absoluteness which reaches beyond historical dimensions. If we stressed before that it was the historical memory of a transition from nomadic to settled existence and from slavery to freedom that lay at the root of the idea of the Promised Land, the religious element added an aura of absoluteness and completeness to the idea. For it was not a mere lucky co-incidence of history, but a decision of Providence, which appointed the land to the people.

In fact, from the point of view of Judaic philosophy, no distinction can be made between history and divine will. They

<sup>16</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. III, p. 356.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, *op. cit.*, p. x.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

are not opposed to each other, nor is divine interference in human affairs sporadic or whimsical. Though Judaism is known to be an historically-minded philosophy—it is always the historical memory of the patriarchs, the delivery from Egypt, the independence in the Land of Israel, the many misfortunes and the occasional deliveries, that are cherished and revived—its historical consciousness is bound with a religious belief. History is dominated by God's guiding hand, history is one facet of the manifoldness of divine manifestation in human affairs. God created the world and what is in it, as the story of Genesis expounds, and God sustains it, as the Psalmist asserts (*Psalm* 104); God can be turned to by an individual, as testify many Psalms, as well as various stories in the Bible, and as the Jewish believer has trusted from times immemorial; but God also expresses His will through the occurrences of history, notably through the history of the people of Israel. Thus the history-mindedness of the Jews is profoundly bound with the religious belief, Jewish history being one—in fact, a cardinal—expression of God's mastery over His people. This divine will in history lends the national past its absolute dimension; it is not merely history, it is divine revelation. Because of the divine will history cannot be a mere concoction of incidents—fortunate or unfortunate—but becomes a meaningful process.

Moreover, not only the past benefits by this theocratic foundation, but so does the future. It too will be determined by God, according to His perfect judgment. Thus the past and the future unite, history transcends history, the whole series of human events—including those not yet born—is one intelligible process. Therefore, with respect to the attainment of the Promised Land, it is not merely a lucky event in the past of the nation; it is an historical event which originated in a divine decision, it is the expression of an absolute will, which appointed the land to the people, who cannot be deprived of it. Despite the vicissitudes of history—again due to God's design—the fundamental link of the people and the land, willed by God, cannot be affected. God's promise is good for ever, the divine mastery of history assures the land to its people in the future, as it gave it to them in the past. The adherence to the idea of the Promised Land becomes an expression of trust in God.

The theo-historical notions of the Jews facilitated not only

the trust in their future return to the Holy Land; they also allowed them to glorify that future far beyond the experience, or even the legend of history. Already in Israelite prophecy, the future often becomes transposed into the "last days," a perfect era when the permanence of bliss succeeds and puts an end to the fluctuation of history. Thus, the return to the Promised Land is not merely a re-enactment of a past event, a historical occurrence projected into the future. The future return becomes the absolute return, a future to end all futures, because of its being an absolute and permanent fulfilment. This eschatological notion of the future easily blended with the dreamlike embellishments of the Promised Land, referred to above.

The religious aspect of the idea of the Promised Land affects it also in another manner; it relates the idea to issues of morality. For if God is not merely the Lord of Hosts, a tribal-military chief and commander, but also the only God and a just ruler of the universe, his deeds become inextricably bound with the judgment of right and wrong. In respect of the Promised Land this is expressed in two issues: the morality of assigning the land to Israel and the moral condition under which the Israelites will exercise their tenure. Each of these requires elaboration.

The problem of the moral justification for the occupation by the Israelites of the Promised Land, a land inhabited by other peoples, is already adumbrated in the Biblical text. Thus when God, in a revelation to Abraham, promises the land to his descendants, he relegates the actual possession of the land by these to the fourth generation, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." (*Genesis* 15:16.) In a similar vein, Moses admonishes Israel before they cross the Jordan to conquer the Promised Land: "Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee . . ." (*Deuteronomy* 9:5.) But it is the later homiletical exegesis of the Bible which develops this moral theme fully.

Thus a famous exegetic story explains that God revealed to Israel the way He created the world, so that the Israelites could show the nations of the world that they did not rob the land, but received it from God, the universal creator: "When He wished, He gave it to you, and when He wished, He took it

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

from you and gave it to us.”<sup>18</sup> While this might sound like an arbitrary, rather than moral, decision of God (though it is not intended as such), there are other arguments in the post-Biblical literature which stress the moral aspects of the problem more emphatically. Thus, it is contended that the Canaanites in the first place took an unlawful possession of the land which had been destined for Abraham and his descendants.<sup>19</sup> Therefore the subsequent Israelite conquest was nothing but the enforcement of right. The problem of the right to the land of Esau, a descendant of Abraham and Isaac’s firstborn, is solved by the arguments that he had sold his birthright to Jacob, that Jacob acquired the right from Esau on Jacob’s return from Mesopotamia and that Esau gave up his rights to the patrimony by emigrating to Seir.<sup>20</sup> The issue is looked at from a different angle, when the assertion is made that the land was the people of Israel’s award for the observance of the Sabbath.<sup>21</sup>

However diverse all these arguments, they all aim at the moral justification for the Israelites’ conquest of and right to the Land of Israel. Whether because of the sins of other peoples or out of their own desert, whether as a legal right or as a reward for piety, the land is Israel’s of right, and not merely because they happened to be mightier than their enemies at one juncture of history. The moral implication in these arguments is aimed not only at God, whose righteousness must match His power, but also at Israel, for whom justice is at the core of the way of life. (Of course, the notion of a just divinity, and the quest for justice as such have been intertwined with one another for the better part of the history of Judaism.)

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That Israel is allowed by God to hold on to its land, actually to live there, only on the condition of righteous conduct is another point in the moral aspect of the idea of the Promised Land.

<sup>18</sup> *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, translated by H. Freedman, London, Soncino Press, 1939, Vol. I, pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 219-220.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, pp. 320-321.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 47.

Indeed, this point is much more emphasized in the Biblical and later Jewish tradition than the previous one—and for no mean reason. For the problem of the initial conquest of the land was bound to wane after centuries and millennia separated the present from the distant beginnings of the nation, as recorded in the Bible, while the issue of exile from and return to the land was a continuous concomitant of Jewish history, an ever relevant problem.

The belief that Israel's possession of the land is rigorously subjected to the condition of an ethically and religiously correct behaviour is clearly and vigorously expressed in *Deuteronomy*, a book composed well before the first exile (if not by Moses to whom it is attributed):

When... ye... shall corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image, ... and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord thy God...: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land... And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen... But if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul. ... he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto them. (*Deuteronomy* 4: 25-27, 29, 31).

In another passage the promise of God to reward the people for their repentance and return to His ways is more explicit:

... then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations... And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it... (*Deuteronomy* 30: 3, 5).

The formula "the wages of sin is exile and the reward for righteousness the possession of the land" is indicated here with absolute clarity. Indeed, the subsequent exhortation and consolations of the prophets (as for example, *Jeremiah* 16: 10-15, *Ezekiel* II: 16-20, or (*Deutero*) *Isaiah* 40:1-2 ff) are merely a reiteration or an adaptation of the basic motif. A prayer, repeated on all major holidays, is a testimony to the perennial clinging to

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

this formula; it is worded with a moving simplicity: "And because of our sins we were exiled from our country and we were removed far from our land."<sup>22</sup>

The rabbinical literature, as Buber points out, elaborates on the sins which led to the moral pollution and desecration of the land, and the consequent separation between the people and its land. Significantly, it adds to the sins of bloodshed and idolatry the more sophisticated one of pride: "'Whoever is proud causes the pollution of the land and the withdrawal of the Shekhina (the world-inhabiting hypostasis of God), the Shekhina which the humble cause to dwell among men on earth."<sup>23</sup> That God appears here not as the active judge and punisher of the Bible, but as a semi-contemplative deity whose presence and absence in themselves affect the reality of man and the universe is an aspect of theological transition which need not concern us in this context. However, it may not be amiss to point out in this connection that it is this kind of God who is capable of wistfully exclaiming: "'Would that my sons were in the land of Israel, even though they pollute it!'"<sup>24</sup> This benign and compassionate image of God, indulged in the legendary tradition of Judaism, while exuding warmth and consolation to the exiled believers, has not changed the fundamental belief in the rigorous formula ruling the destiny of the Jews. This formula sees in the exile from the land a punishment, and trusts in the return of the penitent people to the Holy Land when God will find that people deserving.

This reward-and-punishment notion of the Promised Land revolves on issues of morality and religion, and one may wonder which of these is its true concern—namely, whether it uses religion for the sake of morality, or whether it resorts to a moral formula to save religion. To put it more explicitly: Is the fundamental function of the formula, as its face value implies, to promote the righteousness of the people of Israel by using the land as a divine reward and the exile as God's punishment? Or is there, so to say, an ulterior motive to this formula, namely that it aims not at Israel's righteousness, but at saving Israel's belief in God? For, to pursue this eventuality, if the Jews were

<sup>22</sup> Translated from the traditional Hebrew Prayer Book by the present writer.

<sup>23</sup> M. Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted from Buber, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

exiled and have suffered in exile through no fault of theirs, they would have to blame God for His moral failing in not saving them. The only way to save their belief in a just God would be to blame themselves for their suffering. The formula of national sin-and-punishment, whatever its face value, would be but a means for the vindication of God, and thereby for the salvation of the belief in Him.

The answer to the dilemma as to the true aim of the formula hinges on one's personal beliefs. Obviously, an orthodox Jew—or, for that matter, a devout Christian as well—will not question the face value of the formula of national sin-and-punishment as annunciated in the Bible. The theo-ethical nature of the formula is guaranteed by the belief in the supernatural inspiration and origin of the Holy Scriptures. A non-religious person, on the other hand, may find it very difficult indeed to put the blame of Jewish suffering through exile on the sins and depravity of the Jews. For one thing, he may doubt whether there is a causal connection between the religious and moral failings of the Israelites, whatever they may have been, and their exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, or between the transgressions of the Jews and their suffering at the hands of the Romans. The iron hand of the military superiority of those nations would have crushed the holiest of nations. For another, he will be at a loss to justify the repeated martyrdom of the pious generations of exiled Jews through the more recent centuries of history. To him it is the saving of the religious belief—and partly a mistaken historiosophy—which are at the root of the formula.

While the controversy between the religious and secular philosophies cannot be explored—still less resolved—here, the problem may be further examined by the non-believer (though hardly by the devout) along an historical, rather than a philosophical, path. Such an examination will suggest a somewhat more flexible interpretation. The fact that the sin-and-exile formula in the form of an admonition is announced already in *Deuteronomy* (that is to say, well before the first exile), indicates that the ethical and religious behaviour of the people was originally the basic motivation of the formula: the reward and punishment were used as means for shaping a holy and righteous people (though this does not mean that the propagators of this theo-ethical complex did not genuinely believe in it). However, later on, in one exile

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

or another, when the transgressions of the repentant and pious people all but disappeared, the formula was adhered to primarily for the sake of saving the integrity of the religious doctrine—the trust in a just God.

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The religious-moral aspect of Judaism makes it transcend the limitations of a community consciousness and a national culture. The God of Israel being the only God and a just God cannot remain indifferent to the rest of mankind. He must be concerned also about humanity's conduct and destiny. This universalistic aspect of Judaism affects and colours the idea of the Promised Land.

Perhaps the most prominent testimony to the universal-ethical conception of the Land of Israel—or, more precisely, its centre, Jerusalem—is the famous eschatological vision of Isaiah:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (*Isaiah 2: 2-4*).

The concern with the affliction of war and annunciation of a universal and permanent peace have, of course, a universal appeal. The fact that this prophecy subdues the super-natural and miraculous, and carries its promise to mankind in almost naturalistic terms, makes this passage particularly appealing to the modern man. Yet, it is noteworthy that the universal is linked to the national, that the world turns to a specific location: it is God of *Jacob* who is followed by mankind, and it is *Jerusalem*, where the



“Lord’s house” is located, which becomes the source of universal salvation.<sup>25</sup>

Naturally, the Jewish legend dwells in its own manner on the centrality of Zion and the Land of Israel with respect to the universe when it asserts that “in this land dwells the Shekinah,”<sup>26</sup> or that this land was created before the other parts of the world and that it is located in the centre of the earth.<sup>27</sup> Jewish mysticism goes even further, when it conditions the redemption of mankind on the return of the Jews to their land.<sup>28</sup>

What may come as a surprise is the fact that this element appears in the writings of the founder of political Zionism. Theodor Herzl was a rationalist, a man steeped in European culture, and quite removed from Jewish orthodoxy, let alone mysticism. In his utopian novel, *Altneuland* (published in 1902), in which he describes a model Jewish state of the future, he sees the old city of Jerusalem not only as a centre of various religious creeds—his own liberal variety of Jewish universalism; it also becomes the location of a Peace Palace, serving international conferences of peace-seekers and scientists.<sup>29</sup> Thus, this latter-day Isaiah looks to Jerusalem as the locus of knowledge and peace. Though this is conceived in subdued and rationalistic terms, one cannot fail to be reminded of another lofty eschatological prophecy of Isaiah, which combines the universal message with the local abode: “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain [Land of Israel]: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” (*Isaiah* 11:9).

Thus, the Promised Land, or its heart, is not in the Jewish tradition merely the Land of Israel, a national abode and a national dream. It is, due to the religious-moral aspects of Judaism, also the centre of universal salvation, it is source of the ultimate betterment of the nature and lot of mankind. The attachment to

<sup>25</sup> The centrality of Zion in respect of the universe, with special emphasis on the Book of *Isaiah*, is discussed profoundly and elaborately by M. Buber, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-35.

<sup>26</sup> L. Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 322.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> See M. Buber *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>29</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, Berlin 1902, Book Five, Chap. 1. English translation by Paula Arnold, Haifa, 1960, p. 184.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

the place, besides expressing the craving of a nation, becomes bound with an eschatological expectation which encompasses humanity. The national sentiment flies even higher on universal wings.

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The idea of the Promised Land has been shown to constitute an integral part of the historical memories and expectations of the Jews. The idea's significance is increased by its being a part of a religious-ethical belief: God gave the land to the people on condition of their abiding by His statutes and judgments. Moreover, the Promised Land was elevated to a universal stature to keep in pace with the universalism of the Israelite belief. Thus, the idea of the Promised Land has been not merely a cherished dream: it has been an ingredient of a complex belief in a national-universal God concerned about the morality of His Chosen People and the destiny of the entire world. To give up the belief in the Promised Land would be tantamount to depriving God of His means for controlling His people's ways and depriving the people of their belief in divine salvation. For salvation in Judaism, however miraculous its supernatural traits, has essentially remained linked to the concrete and earthly return of the people to their land. It seems almost unimaginable that Judaism could give up its tenacious clinging to the idea of the Promised Land and survive as Judaism. Nonetheless—and this is a curious testimony to the undogmatic nature of Judaism—the idea of the Promised Land, though dominant, has not remained unchallenged in the long history of Israel and the Jews.

It is a remarkable fact that doubts concerning the Promised Land have been recorded already in the Bible and in connection with the earliest stages of Israel's history. As is well known, the story which expresses these doubts is that of the twelve men sent out by Moses from the desert "to spy out the land of Canaan" (*Numbers* 13: 17) as a preparation for an eventual conquest. That the crucial moment of the realization of the divine promise is also a moment of human caution may have bothered the latter Jewish legend, with its pietistic bent,<sup>30</sup> but need not surprise us:

<sup>30</sup> Thus a story tells us about God's reaction to the idea of spying out the land: it was another case of the people's disbelief in the Almighty and He was annoyed. (L. Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 262-263).

religiously inspired armies throughout human history—whether Arab Moslem or English Puritans—have not dispensed with reason and strategy because of their belief. In fact, the story of the twelve spies seems to reflect an actual historical occurrence, *because* it shows that practical caution accompanied the trust in God. But whether fact or legend, the story reveals the possibility of a critical and even skeptical attitude towards the Promised Land.

The spies, as is well known, were given the task to find out “what the land is, whether it be fat or lean,” (*Numbers* 13:20) and whether “the people that dwelleth therein . . . be strong or weak, few or many” (13:18). In other words, two fundamental questions had to be answered before an assault was attempted: Is the land worthwhile, and, if this is the case, is it attainable? All the twelve spies agreed on the worthwhileness of the objective: The land “floweth with milk and honey” (13:27). It lived up to the dream of the wandering nomads and to the divine promise. However, the majority—ten out of twelve—concluded that the people of the land were too strong to be overcome by the tribes of Israel. That the people of Israel trusted the majority report and did not dare to embark on a dangerous conquest may seem to us quite sensible. That their trust in the good designs of the Lord was shaken when they thought the Promised Land was not to be theirs, but rather their undoing—“And wherefore hath the Lord brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword...?” (*Numbers* 14:3)—is perfectly understandable. The connection between the belief in the Promised Land and the trust in God is clearly reflected in this reaction. It seems to be realized also by the Lord who intends to “smite them with the pestilence” (14:12) as a punishment for their doubts. Just as the people lose their trust in God’s benevolence on account of the land, so God is ready to disown and annihilate the people on account of their renunciation of the same land.

The collision between the trust in the attainability of the Promised Land and the doubts and despair led neither to divine annihilation of the people nor to their return to Egypt, as was suggested (*Numbers* 14:4). Instead, God’s punishment was reduced to forty years wandering in the desert, so as to prevent the skeptical generation from enjoying the fulfilment of the promise. Whether we take the Biblical story at its face value,

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

or see in the protracted wanderings a compromise between the two parties, those who wanted to return to Egypt and those who wanted immediately to possess the Land of Canaan, or even if we regard the wanderings as a period of physical and mental preparation for the conquest, one point remains clear: the idea of the Promised Land was seriously challenged and the challenge led to serious repercussions, though not to the abandonment of the design.

Significantly, doubts concerning the Promised Land rose in connection with an impending realization of the design. This happened at the dawn of Israel's history and was due to recur, as we shall see further, in the incipient stages of modern Zionism. During the very long era of a hopeless exile the dream of the Promised Land remained untarnished. This is easily understandable: as long as a dream is only a dream the practical obstacles can be ignored and the dream beautified. Attempts at realization, however, cannot afford to ignore obstacles, and occasionally the impediments may seem to some people as great, or even insurmountable, and consequently undermine the belief in the realization of the dream.

But the doubts about the Promised Land were not solely related to problems of the practical implementation of the dream or design. The basic idea came to be questioned on other occasions—again, not in times of hopelessness when the ancient dream was clutched at, but in times when new hopes and new consciousness illuminated, or seemed to illuminate, the darkness of Jewish history.

A prominent case of this sort is linked with the emancipation of the Jews in western and central Europe which led to the Reform movement in Judaism. The hope of attaining equality created an eagerness on the part of many Jews to integrate fully with the host country. Such integration required the abandonment of the yearning for another land, the traditional Land of Israel. Consistently with this line of thinking, the 19th century Reform movement in Germany, and subsequently in the United States, developed the notion of Judaism as a monotheistic ethical religion with a universal mission to spread its fundamental truth to the rest of the world. References to messianic delivery and return to Zion were omitted from the revised prayer book. Indeed, the traditional belief that Jewish exile was divine punishment and the

return to Zion the ultimate redemption was reversed: the dispersal became a charitable act of Providence, aiming at the universal enlightenment. In the phrasing of the *Prayer Book* of the Berlin Reform Association:

Thou has called us, O Lord, to found the kingdom of truth and love on the whole earth. And for this Thou didst disperse us, so that the sparks of Thy light might fly to all nations, to dispel the darkness of delusion from the farthest corners of the globe.<sup>31</sup>

While, under the impact of the horrors of antisemitism in this century and the emergence of modern Israel, the mainstream of the Reform Judaism in the United States has become a supporter of the Jewish renaissance in the ancient land, the original attitude remains an interesting case in Jewish history of an attempt to create a Judaism without the idea of the Promised Land.

While the Reform movement dissociated itself from the attachment to the Promised Land on grounds of a theological doctrine (whatever the ulterior motives of this theology may have been), another movement reassessed and revised the traditional yearning for the ancient fatherland in the name of a new kind of nationalism. The idea of nationalism without a fatherland, ancient or new, may sound like a paradox; yet it was at one time fairly widespread among East European Jewry and had its organized framework in the *Folkspartay* and a prominent theoretician and spokesman in the person of the distinguished Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow. This philosophy, known under the name of "Autonomism,"<sup>32</sup> distinguishes between political and civic rights (the attributes of citizenship in a state) and national rights (the attributes of national-cultural identity). While Jews, along with other national minorities, are the citizens of a modern state and as such participate in the political life, they have their own national culture which evolved through a long history, and this

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from W. Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism, A Sourcebook of its European Origins*, New York, 1963, p. 140.

<sup>32</sup> The following summary of the essential doctrine of autonomism is based on Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History, Essays on Old and New Judaism*, edited with an introductory essay by Koppel S. Pinson, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

entitles them to communal self-government preserving and sustaining the national language, independent schools, the peculiar cultural heritage. While in the case of most minorities they may constitute a majority in a certain region of the country, the Jews are a "non-territorial" minority, but this does not impair their right to an autonomous national-cultural organization. Such an organization must not be confused with a church, for Judaism is conceived as a national culture which has encompassed religion in its historical development but is not restricted to a religious outlook. "Judaism is broad enough and variegated enough so that any man in Israel can draw from its source according to his spirit and outlook."<sup>33</sup>

This idea of a Jewish national-cultural autonomy within the modern state was evolved in the early twentieth century alongside Zionism. For Autonomism is not opposed to Zionism. Indeed, Dubnow admitted that "we cannot hope to achieve in the diaspora as full and complete national-cultural development as is possible for a nation living in its own independent state."<sup>34</sup> Doubting the possibility of realization of a Jewish state, he went so far as to admit that even an autonomous Jewish centre in the Land of Israel will have a national culture "purer than that of the Diaspora."<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, as he thought that the great majority of the Jews would remain in the Diaspora, their national fulfilment must be sought in their own autonomous institutions. Thus, in a sense, the transposing of the idea of the Promised Land from the focus of Judaism to an important, but not indispensable and central, place is the result of a certain evaluation of reality. The pessimism in respect of the political possibilities of the Jews makes the autonomists look for an alternative, and suggest a courageous and dignified solution: a Jewish national autonomy, despite the minority status of the Jews, besides the limited efforts at a fuller renaissance in the fatherland. While the Autonomists' philosophy is affected by the impediments on the way to a full political renaissance of the Jews—and in this respect is reminiscent of the majority report of the committee sent out by Moses—it also reveals another dimension: a belief

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

in an enlightened humanity in which nationalism will not become aggressive and the principle of national self-determination will be sincerely applied to minorities, even dispersed minorities. Of course, at the foundation of the movement was a renewed national awareness, the will to national self-assertion which rejected the way of assimilation. Though the trust in a tolerant and humane political order proved entirely unwarranted as far as Eastern or Central Europe is concerned and while even in the tolerant Anglo-Saxon civilizations the cultural autonomy of the Jews falls short of the proud anticipations of Autonomism, the attempt remains another interesting case of a Judaic philosophy not absolutely bound to the idea of the Promised Land.

If the modified and restrained attitude to the old fatherland was in the case of Autonomism partially due to the difficulties encountered and envisaged in the rebuilding of modern Israel, these difficulties were the major justification for another movement co-eval with early Zionism which was singularly detached in its attitude to the Promised Land—namely the movement known as “Territorialism.” Unlike Autonomism, Territorialism was pessimistic (justly, a subsequent event proved) about the prospects of Jewish minorities dispersed among other nations. Concerned with the survival and wellbeing of the Jews as preceding the problems of the renewal of national culture, Territorialism focussed on a political solution and saw it in the establishment of a territory with a dominant and autonomous Jewish population which would lead to a Jewish state or at least point in that direction. In this respect, Territorialism was identical with political Zionism. The only difference was that, whereas the latter combined with its rational solution the romantic attachment to the Promised Land as the only place for the realization of Jewish territorial dominance and political autonomy, the former—in face of the difficulties on the road to Jerusalem—was ready to look for a new Jerusalem, for an Israel in another geographical location. Like in the case of the ten spies in the desert, the difficulties in gaining the Promised Land seemed insurmountable to the Territorialists. But unlike the Israelites in the desert, the Territorialists, on encountering the difficulties, did not want to return to Egypt—i.e., to give up the basic dream; they only wanted to explore the possibility of other territories, other lands, where the Promise could be fulfilled with greater ease.

## *The Idea of the Promised Land*

This rationalist dissociation from the commitment to the ancient fatherland is expressed by the foremost spokesman of Territorialism, Israel Zangwill: "The Holy Land was not holy while it belonged to the Perizites and the Jebuzites, and any land in which Israel should find his soul again would be also a Holy Land."<sup>36</sup> Significantly, the first theoretician of political Zionism, Leo Pinsker, and even its practical founder, Theodor Herzl, were essentially Territorialists rather than Zionists: the political autonomy of Jews in a feasible territory took precedence over the return to Zion.<sup>37</sup> If the old land could not be obtained as an autonomous territory for a Jewish settlement, Herzl was ready to consider various other territories which might be available. The offer by the British Government of a more or less autonomous territory in East Africa met not only with Herzl's approval, but was seriously considered by the Sixth Zionist Congress (Basle 1903) and the sending of an exploratory commission was decided upon by a majority vote. Even though this did not mean giving up Zion—it was only further exploration that was involved, and an eventual settlement in East Africa was presented only as an intermediary step towards the ultimate end, the return to the Land of Israel—the achievement of the Territorialist principle was not insignificant. Curiously—perhaps on account of the difficulties encountered in practicing Zionism under adverse circumstances—the East African plan had a decisive support in the Jewish settlements in Palestine at that time.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, the Territorialist philosophy stopped short of success. The East Africa project failed—partly because of the opposition of the white settlers in that region, partly because of an adverse report of the exploratory commission and partly because of the fierce opposition of the pure Zionists who objected to any plan

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Israel Zangwill, *Speeches, Articles and Letters*, selected and edited by Maurice Simon, London, The Soncino Press, 1937, p. 124.

<sup>37</sup> Herzl in the entry in his Diary of August 31, 1903 writes: "Although I was originally in favor of a Jewish State no matter where, I later lifted up the flag of Zion and became myself a 'Lover of Zion.'" (Quoted from *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, edited and translated by Marvin Lowenthal, New York 1956, p. 409). But even as a Zionist, the urgency of the Jewish question justified for him the quest for alternative autonomous territories, pending a strictly Zionist solution.

<sup>38</sup> See H. H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), *History of the Jewish People*, Vol. III, *Modern Times* by S. Ettinger (in Hebrew), Tel-Aviv 1969, p. 205.



of a national renaissance outside the borders of the Promised Land. The East African plan was finally dropped by the Seventh Zionist Congress (1905).<sup>39</sup> The splinter Jewish Territorial Organization which was founded to pursue the Territorialist cause did not succeed in its endeavours, despite the energetic efforts to find a suitable land which were aimed at East Africa, Australia, Canada, Cyrenaica, Mesopotamia and Angola. While the game of hypothetical history may be regarded as questionable, perhaps it is not too bold to assert that, had the Jews devoted half of the energy with which they pursued the cause of Zionism to an autonomous settlement in some less controversial territory than the Promised Land, they would have met with success. The historical fact, however, was that the sentiments of the mainstream of Jewry would not be dissociated from the perennial attachment to the God-promised land, the land of the glorified past and of the eschatological future. Like the other attempts to detach Judaism or Jewish aspirations from the devotion to the Promised Land, Territorialism proved to be a sidetrack in the way of Jewish history.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed account of the abortive attempt of Jewish colonization of East Africa, see Robert G. Weisbord, *African Zion*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968.