

In commemoration of the 700th Anniversary of Nachmanides' arrival in Israel, TRADITION presents an analysis of the central role which the Holy Land occupies in the world view of one of the most outstanding Halakhists and Kabbalists of Spanish Jewry. The author of this essay, a well-known writer and a frequent contributor to these pages, is director of the Religious Education Department of the Jewish Agency in Israel.

THE CENTRALITY OF ERETZ YISRAEL IN NACHMANIDES

What's all this business about God's country? Is not the whole world God's country? He created and formed all things and all is His! — But the land of Israel is the nub of the world, the Almighty's very personal and private estate, that He manages directly. He appointed over it no heavenly custodian, no officer nor governor when He did bequeath it to the people who proclaim the unity of His Name, His darling seed. This is the force of the texts:¹ "You shall be to me the pick of all the peoples, for all the land is Mine; You shall be My people and I shall be your God" — you shall not be subject to any other gods at all.

So Nachmanides began to outline his doctrine of the all-pervasive centrality of the Land of Israel to his listeners, seven centuries ago, in a *Rosh Hashanah* sermon,² in the ancient port of Acco, on the northern seaboard of the Holy Land. His audience comprised some of the outstanding spiritual leaders of the time, the sages of Provence, the Tosafists who like him had left the Diaspora to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*. Fifty years previously they or their parents had participated in what is known as the *Aliyah* of the 300 rabbis from France and England. Most of his forty-page sermon Nachmanides devoted to outlining the laws of *Rosh Hashanah*. But towards the end, as he dwelt upon the theme of repentance and the idea of *noblesse oblige*, he introduced the idea of the special obligation devolving on those who have been granted to live in "the king's own palace." His concluding remarks are a brief summary of his teachings in respect of *Eretz Yisrael* as expressed at length in his classic commentary to the

Pentateuch. "Judaism was designed for those living in the Land of the Lord" and "living in *Eretz Yisrael* is equal in importance to all the commandments" — this³ is what brought me out of my country and thrust me from my place. I abandoned my home and forsook my heritage. I made myself as the raven⁴ to my sons, heartless to my daughters, because it was my desire to end my days in the bosom of my mother" (i.e. in *Eretz Yisrael*).

The poet-philosopher of the preceding century, Judah Halevi, breathed a similar love of the Holy Land. He, too, spoke of the special virtues of the land of Israel in the *Cuzari*,⁵ and used as his starting point the very text cited by Nachmanides from the Song of Moses:⁶ "When He separated the children of men, He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. For the portion of the Lord is His people, Jacob the lot of His inheritance." The chosen of mankind was joined to the chosen country. Halevi supported his thesis by quoting many of the Talmudic dicta extolling the virtues of the land of Israel and the rulings that were based on its favored position in Judaism. Similarly, Maimonides a generation later incorporated them in his code of Jewish law.⁷ But neither of them went so far as Nachmanides. The latter provided both an halakhic and philosophic basis that far transcended his predecessors' positions.

His teachings on this subject seem to have emerged from his close reading of the Scriptures, and are almost invariably expressed through his classic commentary to the same. He demanded that the text of Holy Writ be related to daily living. We find him admonishing his son in his ethical testament: "Be sure to read the Scriptures regularly for the purpose of honoring its teachings, and when you get up from the book see if you can find something in your studies of immediate practical application."⁸ To Nachmanides Moses' admonitions to the children of Israel to take possession of the Promised Land, drive out the native inhabitants and settle therein were of immediate practical application. The down-to-earth halakhic basis for his attitude to *Eretz Yisrael* derived from what he regarded as a specific commandment, the *mitzvah* to live in the Holy Land. In his com-

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mentary to the Torah on the text:⁹ “You shall take possession of the land and dwell therein, since I have given you this land to inherit it,” he states:

“In my opinion, this constitutes a positive commandment (*mitzvat asseh*). He (i.e., the Almighty) commanded them to reside in the land and take possession of it. He had given it to them and it was not for them to disparage the inheritance of the Lord. For them therefore to contemplate the conquest of Babylonia, Assyria or any other country and make their home there instead would be a violation of a Divine commandment.

“Our Rabbis went to great lengths in extolling the virtue of living in Eretz Yisrael, declared it forbidden to leave the country, penalizing the woman who refused to follow her husband to Eretz Yisrael and likewise the husband. Their attitude was prompted by this commandment, since this text amounts to a positive commandment which is actually repeated a number of times elsewhere in the Torah.”

He goes into greater detail in his addenda to Maimonides’ *Sefer Hamitzvot*.¹⁰ In his opinion, Maimonides was guilty of a serious omission by not including the commandment to take possession of and dwell in the land of Israel in his list of the 613 precepts of Judaism. He writes:

We have been commanded to take possession of the land which the Lord gave to our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and we are specifically forbidden to abandon it to any other nation or allow it to become desolate. This is implied in the text:⁹ “You shall take possession of the land and dwell therein since I have given you this land to inherit and you shall inherit it.” He specified for them the exact boundaries of the territory to which this religious obligation applied. The proof that this is an outright commandment emerges from Moses’ exhortation to the spies: “Go up, take possession, as the Lord, God of thy fathers, hath spoken unto thee; fear not, nor be dismayed.” It is further stated: “The Lord sent you from Kadesh Barnea saying: ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you.’”¹¹ When they refused to go up, the text observes: “You rebelled against the commandment of the Lord and disobeyed Him.” This indicates quite clearly that a specific commandment and not a mere promise or prophecy is involved. This is what our sages termed a holy war (*milchemet mitzvah*).

Do not be misled into imagining that this commandment only ap-

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plies to the displacement of the original seven nations [in Joshua's time]. Those nations we were commanded to destroy or make peace with them under certain conditions. But the land itself was not to be left in their possession or in that of any other nation, in any generation.

Similarly when those nations fled from before us, for example the Gergashite (who according to the Midrash repaired to Africa), we were still commanded to enter the land, conquer the cities thereof and settle our tribes therein. We were also forbidden to leave it and conquer Assyria, Babylonia or other countries. The commandment specifically refers to Eretz Yisrael.

Our Sages extolled the virtues of Eretz Yisrael in extravagant terms. They said: "He who leaves it and lives outside the land should be regarded by you as idolator." I maintain that such hyperbolic statements were prompted by their concern to honor this explicit positive commandment of the Torah to take possession of the land and live therein. Accordingly, it is a positive commandment applying to every generation, binding on each one of us, even during the period of exile, as is clear from many passages in the Talmud.

Nachmanides thus introduced a new dimension of urgency into the Jew's relationship with Eretz Yisrael. There was no question of mere nostalgia and yearning, of extra piety. There was a positive *mitzvah* to keep the Sabbath holy, to believe in God and to live in Eretz Yisrael, to reconquer it if it fell into alien hands and never to leave it uninhabited by Jews. The latter was not one of those precepts of historical interest only, nor was it one that could be shelved till the Messiah arrived. It belonged to the daily rota of commandments that the Jew had to take account of, in all ages. But it was even much more than that.

"Equal in weigh to all the *mitzvot* put together" the rabbis said — a value definition that could not be satisfied by merely including it among another 612 commandments. The full meaning of this sweeping statement is pieced together by Nachmanides from direct or oblique allusions in the Pentateuch. His thesis is that none of the laws of Judaism have any intrinsic validity outside Eretz Yisrael. Judah Halevi had waxed eloquent over the many commandments belonging to the soil of the Holy Land (*mitzvot teluyot ba'aretz*), but Nachmanides determined that *all* the *mitzvot* were tied to the Land!

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We first meet with this idea in a discussion of the extent to which the Patriarchs observed the Torah, prompted by the statement:¹² “Abraham obeyed Me, kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” Rashi takes this to imply, in the wake of Talmudic sources, that Abraham kept all the minutiae of Jewish law. Nachmanides indicated that Jacob and Joseph, too, had observed the Mosaic law. How then, he queries, was it that Jacob set up a monument and married two sisters in clear defiance of Deut. 16:22 and Lev. 18:18 respectively. His answer is unequivocal but uniquely his:

It seems to me that it was the view of our rabbis that Abraham derived his knowledge of the whole Torah from the prompting of the Holy Spirit. He studied and observed it, voluntarily, as one who performs without being commanded to. But his observance was restricted to the confines of the Holy Land. Jacob and likewise Amram married two sisters only outside the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael. The commandments are the laws of the God of the land, and this is the case, in spite of the fact that duties applying to the person [*chovot haguf*, such as the prohibition of marrying two sisters] are binding everywhere.

Nachmanides was well aware that this was not the plain sense of the text, the *peshat*,¹³ and this he gives too. But the homiletic sense was equally valid. He was able to build up an ideology of Eretz Yisrael subscribed to by the authentic voice of Judaism — the opinion of the rabbis in Talmud and Midrash. He endeavoured to leave no objection unanswered, displaying the same thoroughness and debating power that characterized his disputations with Christian clerics¹⁴ and his arguments in the halakhic area that went under the appropriate title of *Milchamot Hashem*, “The Battles of the Lord.”¹⁵ The prohibition of building a monument was exceptional. The Torah distinctly states “Thou shalt not raise up for thyself a monument which the Lord hateth.” On this the rabbis had commented “hated now but beloved in the days of the Patriarchs.” Joseph had observed the Sabbath in Egypt although he should have been exempt, since he was resident outside Eretz Yisrael “because it is equal in weight to all the *mitzvot*, bearing witness to Divine creation. He did so to educate his sons in the belief in God and eradicate from their hearts idolatrous notions and Egyptian cults.”

Thus the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael constituted a unique spiritual frontier. Within it the constitution of the Torah's manifold precepts reigned supreme, even long before an Israelite had trod on its soil. The death of Rachel "on the way" as she entered the Holy Land fits this pattern. By the mysterious workings of Providence, noted Nachmanides, the Matriarch's own merit saved her from dying outside Eretz Yisrael, whilst Jacob's merit assured that he would not live in the Holy Land whilst married to two sisters.

It is one of the axioms of our author's Bible exegesis that the story of the Patriarchs is meant to illustrate the principle that history repeats itself and that the very details of their experiences foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. The way in which Nachmanides works this out is beyond the scope of this article.¹⁶ We are merely concerned with the application of this principle to his view on the role of Eretz Yisrael. The Torah had always been, even before it was given, the constitution governing Eretz Yisrael and did not apply outside its boundaries. It was, as Nachmanides worded it: "the law of the God of the Land." This principle which was embodied in the conduct of the Patriarchs, *ma'aseh avot*, persisted in their descendants — *siman levanim*.

One historical illustration he gives is the experience of the Samaritans about whom it is stated:¹⁷ "They knew not the law of the God of the land, whereupon He sent against them the lions which devoured them because they knew not the law of the God of the land." The Samaritans, reasoned Nachmanides, would not have been punished in such a manner for serving their gods in their own country. But once they entered the land of the Lord and persisted in their previous practices they became liable to punishment.¹⁸

This distinction requires further clarification. Nachmanides does not mean that there is no moral or religious law outside Eretz Yisrael and that man is free to engage in barbarous and heathen practices so long as he lives outside God's country. But he does accept that the principle of *noblesse oblige* applies no less to countries than to people. Eretz Yisrael will not tolerate conditions that would be acceptable in other climes. The

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judgment of Sodom was an example of this.¹⁹ Other peoples had behaved no less barbarously but Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction reflected the special virtue of Eretz Yisrael, foreshadowing its sensitivity to misconduct in the case of the children of Israel. The latter were warned on numerous occasions to desist from immoral practices so as not to court expulsion. The land itself would vomit them. How so? Nachmanides himself asks. Surely every human being is under obligation to desist from sexual perversions? Such laws are part of personal morality and are not dependent on the Holy Land. For the answer we must go back to what seems like a medieval astrological concept that Nachmanides found also in the Bible.

Every nation lives under its own star allotted to it by God.²⁰ The children of Israel were commanded not to make a graven image, the likeness of anything on heaven and earth "lest thou be drawn away and worship them and serve them which the Lord thy God hath allotted unto all the peoples under the whole heaven."²¹ Israel had been singled out to be under God's direct rule. The other peoples were subject to intermediaries, to tutelary angels assigned to them which they had been misled into worshipping as deities. Perfect purity was unattainable in the Diaspora owing to the interference of these intermediaries, but God will ultimately bring about their downfall. "The Almighty is the supreme God of the gods outside the land of Israel and simply the God of Israel which is his heritage." Accordingly, a Jew who lives outside the land of Israel is regarded as living without God. He is no longer under His direct rule. By returning to Israel he returns to the domain of God. This idea is substantiated by the text "To give you the land of Canaan, to be your God" and the rabbinic comment: "So long as you live in the land of Canaan, I shall be your God; when you are no longer there, I am, as it were, no longer your God." But there is a mutual interaction of forces. The Torah announced that when the children of Israel eventually conquer the Holy Land, "the land will be subdued before the Lord and before His people." Surely, asked the rabbis, would it enter your mind for one moment that Israel would subdue the land before God did? Surely the land was under God's subjection in any case! But:

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“so long as Israel occupies it, the earth is regarded as subject to Him; when they are not in occupation, the earth is not subject to Him.”²⁰ Israel’s absence from Eretz Yisrael diminishes or detracts from God’s sovereignty over the world.

In more modern terminology we might legitimately read into Nachmanides the idea of national differentiation. Each people has been allowed to develop its own genius, influenced by climatic and other environmental conditions. But the national ideal is divorced from the religious and ethical. Only in the case of Israel is the national ideal synonymous with the religious and ethical one:²² the acceptance of the kingdom of heaven. But this ideal can only be truly realized in the Holy Land. Outside, the Jew will find too many un-Jewish influences pervading the scene. His aspirations will be disturbed by the foreign gods, by “the intermediaries” of Nachmanides. All mankind is obliged to aspire to spiritual perfection. But one people proved themselves specially gifted in that direction and one particular country was set aside as the ideal soil for the cultivation of holiness, from which the rest of the world would also draw its inspiration and spiritual sustenance.²³

Perhaps the most eloquent support of his thesis Nachmanides found in the rabbinic comment to a text in the second paragraph of the *Shema*, cited too by Rashi.²⁴ There we are told that if we are disobedient we shall “speedily perish from the good land which I have given thee.” Exile is held out as the penalty of our disobedience. But we are commanded immediately afterwards to “put these My words upon your hearts and souls and bind them as a sign upon thy hands . . . and write them on the doorposts of thy house.” This is taken to mean by rabbinic exegesis that: “though I do exile you from Eretz Yisrael, continue to be distinguished by the observance of *mitzvot*, so that when you return, they will not be new to you.” Why should we imagine, asks Nachmanides, that we would dispense with these *mitzvot* in exile? Surely *Mezuzah* and *Tefilin* referred to here are *chovot haguf* — personal duties, not agricultural laws tied to the land! But this indicates quite clearly that “basically all the *mitzvot*, even the moral laws and religious symbols of Judaism are meant for those living in the Land of the Lord.”

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In the Diaspora Jewish observance is provisional and preparatory for the real Jewish life in the homeland.

In his zeal for Zion Nachmanides was not a respecter of persons. He found the patriarch Abraham wanting in this respect when he went down to Egypt: "In leaving the land which was the subject of God's first command to him, on account of the famine, Abraham committed a sin. For in famine the Eternal would have redeemed him from death. For that deed his seed was condemned to exile in the land of Egypt by the hand of Pharaoh."²⁵

Many other explanations have been advanced down the ages for the texts used by Nachmanides to build up the prestige of Eretz Yisrael. Some authorities have taken issue with him, but once we accept his premise, the one with which he ends his *Rosh Hashanah* sermon — *hakol lema'alat eretz yisrael ukedushatah*, "all is designed to extol the pre-eminence and holiness of Eretz Yisrael," the rest follows.²⁶

NOTES

1. Exodus 19: 8; Ezek. 36: 28.
2. *Kitvei Haramban*, Rabbi B. Chavel, Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem. The sermon was reprinted in booklet form from that edition by the Israel Ministry of Religious Affairs in Elul 5728 to mark the 700th anniversary of Ramban's immigration to the Holy Land, pp. 249-250.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 251.
4. Cf. Psalm 147: 9 and Talmud B. *Ketuvot* 49b.
5. II 9-24; V, epilogue 22.
6. Deut. 32: 8-9.
7. *Mishneh Torah, Melachim* 5: 9 till end of chapter.
8. *Iggeret Haramban* usually printed at the end of Luzzatto's *Messilat Yesharim* along with *Iggeret Hagra* and *Iggert Hamussar* by R. Yisrael Salanter.
9. Num. 33: 53.
10. *Mitzvah* 4.
11. Deut. 1: 21.
12. Gen. 26: 5.
13. "My Charge" — the belief in the One God; "My Commandments" — leaving his country for the promised land, sacrificing his son and driving out Hagar; "My statutes" — the ethical precepts of righteousness and love of man; "My

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laws" — the precept of circumcision and the Noachide laws which was the Torah of those times.

14. Disputation at Barcelona with Fra Pablo Christiani in M. Braude, *The Conscience on Trial*, New York, Exposition Press.

15. In defense of Alfasi's rulings against strictures of R. Zerachya Halevi in *Hamaor Hagadol* and *Hamaor Hakatan*, printed in all full size Talmud editions.

16. But see *Ma'aseh Avot Siman Levanim al pi Haramban* no. 2 of *Midiarei Rishonim Bemitzvot Hatorah Uvemachshevet Yisrael* — a series of mimeographed booklets by Moshe Ahrendt and Yehoshua Bachrach, published by the Torah Education Dept. of the World Zionist Organization. The relevant excerpts are quoted together with questions aimed at stimulating self study.

17. II Kings 17: 26.

18. Commentary to Pentateuch on Lev. 18: 25.

19. Comm. to Pent. Genesis 19: 5.

20. *Op. cit.* Lev. 18: 25. See also Dov Rappel: *Haramban al ha-galut ve'al ha-geula*, p. 124, and whole article in *Mayanot*, Vol. 7. Jerusalem, 1960, W.Z.O. Torah Education Dept.

21. Deut. 4: 19.

22. See *Perakim Bemishnato Haiyyunit shel Harav Kook*, 3, *Yisrael Veeretz Yisrael*, edited and explained by Yeshayah Hadari in collaboration with Zvi Zinger, Amana, Jerusalem 5725, especially first chapter on "Nationalism."

23. Cf. Ramban in his commentary to Pentateuch on Deut. 11: 1: "Here we have a profound mystic idea indicating that this land is sought after in everything, is everything and that all countries really draw their sustenance therefrom."

25. Gen. 12: 10. Contrast the Netziv in *Ha'amek Davar*, *ad loc.*, who takes issue with Ramban and cites the Talmud to show that Abraham was justified in leaving because of famine conditions. Nachmanides similarly condemned Sarah for mistreating Hagar for which the Jewish people were punished by Ishmael's persecution of Israel in later times (see *Iyyunim Besefer Bereshit*, Nehama Leibowitz pp. 109-112 or my translation in *Studies in the Weekly Sidra, Lekh Lekha*, 3rd Series, both published in Jerusalem by Torah Education Dept. of World Zionist Org.). . . . Again the Netziv dismisses Nachmanides' criticism reflecting the modern East European yeshiva approach which outlaws, as a matter of principle, any fault-finding with the Biblical heroes. Maimonides would also probably have subscribed to Nachmanides' view of Abraham's conduct, since he includes in his Code *Melakhim* 5: 9 condemnation of Machlon and Kilion's leaving Eretz Israel in time of famine. For a discussion of this, see *Torah Temimah* on Gen. 12: 10.

26. For a digest of Jewish religious law on the subject of settlement in the Holy Land see the item "Eretz Israel" in vol. 2 of the *Encyclopedia Talmudit*. For the views of recent authorities on the subject see *Sefer Eretz Chemdah* by Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, Tel Aviv, 5717, part I, and *Netzer Mata'ai* part I, Tel Aviv 5717, by Rabbi N. Z. Friedmann, pp. 146-153.