

Theological Reflections — Land, People and the State

by Moshe Greenberg¹

I want to begin with a few ideas that are not mine, and follow them with a statement of my own thinking on the subject. The opening thoughts are culled from two publications: *The Jerusalem Colloquium on Religion, Peoplehood, Nation and Land* (Jerusalem, 1970), edited by M.H. Tanenbaum and R.J.Z. Werblowsky, containing the proceedings of a meeting held October 30–November 8, 1970; and the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, published in New York City (volume 26, Summer 1971), in which there is a discussion on “Jewish Self-Understanding and the Land and State of Israel.” The main paper is by the late Uri Tal and is responded to by J.J. Petuchowski, R.L. Rubenstein and A. Herzberg. These represent some of the various Jewish reactions and attitudes toward the State and its possible theological significance or lack thereof.

Christians and Muslims, it is commonly said, differ from Jews in the nature of the holiness they ascribe to the Land of Israel: the former have holy memories and holy places here, while for Jews the Land itself is holy. To Jews, every other land is an exile, but whatever happens here is significant, and the people living in the Land are called to be a holy people. In general, human beings are not equally at home everywhere. To say that someone is equally at home everywhere is to say that he is not at home anywhere.

The world of creation, it is also said, knows no phenomenon which is not guided by providence toward the realization of the divine purpose. Therefore an historical and empirical phenomenon like Jewish statehood must have an inherently religious significance, although it need not be eschatological. History is the work of God, and historical reality is the medium in which the divine meaning of God’s word is unfolded. The events of history can be concep-

1. This article is based on a lecture given to the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel on October 29, 1987.

tualized in terms of judgment, reward or punishment, hope and despair. That is what Uri Tal called the halakhic approach to the State.

For the non-observant Jew, the State offers a setting for the realization of essential human rights and obligations, freedom, individuality, sovereignty over destiny, the realization of our own law. This is the value and the meaning of a state.

In a more theological vein, it is said that having chosen the arena of life in a modern state in a world in which political-military contest is the norm of relations between states, Israelis can no longer claim that their existence has greater religious significance than that of other peoples. By forsaking the cosmic for the human, by forsaking the covenantal interpretation of their destiny for a human interpretation, Jews lose nothing and gain much. According to Richard Rubenstein, covenantal theology has been emptied of meaning as a result of the catastrophe which overcame the Jews just before and during the Second World War. In its stead he regards Jewish history as "the saga of a proud people who have endured defeat, degradation and extermination yet never lost the resolve to win for themselves the awesome risks involved in becoming fully responsible for their own destiny." [I permit myself a comment on this sentence. I do not know what Rubenstein is referring to when he says that Jews "never lost the resolve to win for themselves the awesome risks involved in becoming fully responsible...." If he is speaking of the Jewish messianic hope, he is giving it an anthropocentric character it never had, as though the Jews all through the ages wished to win for themselves full responsibility for their own destiny. As I understand it, the messianic hope was an escape from bitter reality into a dream that the Jews' plight would be solved by God, that God would lead the way out of the impasse of Jewish existence.]

I would now like to offer my own views. Classical Judaism — the Judaism of the Bible and the early post-biblical literature — provided Jews with a specific world-view and a pattern of life. Relationships within society were regulated by the Torah in accord with justice, solidarity and loving kindness. The relationship between society and the cosmos was defined by Jewish society's acceptance of creatureliness, namely the acceptance of limits to human aspirations. The relationship between Jews and gentiles was based on prudent reciprocity, with the assertion by the Jews that they were elected to spiritual and moral superiority to the gentiles.

The possession of land, the possession of a land in sovereignty and freedom was, in classical Judaism, an indispensable condition of self-fulfillment — fulfillment of that pattern of life which was fundamentally communal and social and involved not merely the individual but joined him or her to fellow Jews. That fulfillment necessitated a land in which Jews exercised sovereign control and enjoyed the freedom to live the pattern of life given in the Torah.

Dispossession and powerlessness, which resulted from the political and military disasters that befell the Jews twice in their ancient history, generated a life-giving protective response whose core was a burning metaphysical hope of return and restoration. This hope was grounded in the idea that it was a divine necessity to restore Israel, and a line can be traced from Ezekiel to the mystical idea that in the exile of His People God Himself is exiled. It was necessary for

God's self-vindication that the scattered, defeated and degraded people who went by His name be restored. Something of His dignity and glory is diminished, and therefore the restoration of the Jewish People is a restoration of full divine dignity as well.

The vision of the messianic righting of wrongs, its idea of restoration in the Land, is monarchic because that was the political order of states and countries in which Jews moved and first found themselves — sovereignty was embodied in a sovereign. Hence the messianic hope clung to the figure of a sovereign, a king like David.

The sense of the election of Israel and its moral superiority was nurtured on a quasi-ascetic personal and social life in which the discipline of the Torah was generally accepted in the Jewish Diaspora. This gave a psychological compensation for the political helplessness of the Jews, as if to say: "Although we are helpless in our external relationships, we are totally in control of ourselves and are not falling apart spiritually." Through a regimen of spiritual exercises in the name of law, Jews generated internal energy and morale; through the acceptance of an ascetic pietism, it was possible for Jews to maintain, in the face of universal contempt, a sense of their worth. The Promised Land became a symbol of redress of all wrongs. The contrast between the sense of Israel's self-worth and the external contempt it received would vanish when the People would be restored to the Land; all that was awry would then be set right.

The European Enlightenment had as its professed goal the brotherhood of humanity and acceptance of the equality of all human beings, including Jews. Particularly the Jews of Western Europe, where the Enlightenment began and flourished, regarded it as a new solution to the Jewish problem. They hoped that Jews would no longer be considered outcasts but be fully accepted as part of humanity — the problem of Jewish existence in the Diaspora thus might be settled by gradual acceptance of the notion of universal brotherhood and the realization of such slogans as "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." But the course of events quickly brought Jews to despair of finding in the European Enlightenment a solution to their anomalous existence. They found that even if they gave up messianism and limited their identity to its minimal features as a religious community, that was not a sufficient surrender of particularity to enable the gentiles of Europe to accept Jews as equals. Consequently a movement of "auto-emancipation" arose. Jews said, "As we are not being emancipated or given equal status by the nations, we must act for ourselves." The outcome was a movement of national liberation combined with a Jewish form of Irredentism which came to be called Zionism.

In the past, the Jewish will to live generated the messianic hope of redemption and the unifying ascetic discipline of life by Torah. These two now were transmuted in Zionism: instead of messianism came the idea of redemption (reconstruction and normalization) of the people through redemption (recovery and revitalization) of the Land — by peaceful means it was originally hoped, but eventually by force despite the reluctance of many Jews to use it. In place of the discipline of law came the mobilization of spirit, energy, idealism and material to create a state. The same kind of ascetic self-discipline that was characteristic of Jewish piety throughout previous centuries in the Diaspora,

could be seen in the stoical, Spartan life of the *halutzim* (pioneers) on communes in the Land of Israel during the first part of this century.

In other words, Jews took their destiny into their own hands and stopped hoping for a supernatural solution to their predicament. It was a break with the Diaspora strategy of survival which advocated quietistic endurance of the status quo as part of an understanding with God: Israel would not press for the messianic age, and God would make Diaspora life just tolerable. This understanding broke down in Europe during this century, and a Jewish state offered the best hope for Jewish survival and self-fulfillment. Such self-fulfillment needed a land in which a full range of responsibility for our individual and communal lives could be exercised in accord with the classical concept of Jewishness. Jewishness is not a matter merely of individual expression — it is expressed in the total life, including the political arena, and only in a Jewish state can the struggle to realize Judaism as an all-embracing teaching for life, *torat hayyim*, be carried forward. Here Jews are on their own in a decision-making position on all aspects of life.

To this day it is only in the State of Israel that Jews have to deal as a people with the problems, institutions and temptations of power — economic, political, and military. These issues, which are at the heart of mature societies, can be dealt with Jewishly only here; Diaspora Jewish communities leave them to the secular, gentile political order. In France Jews do not have to run a prison system and a police force for the Jews of France and face the problems of how to rehabilitate prisoners or control riots. Only here can Judaism be challenged to see whether it has an answer, not only a better answer but any answer, to such questions in its store of values. Only here can Judaism's applicability to the complex problems of modernity be tried. I give three such examples:

- 1. The problem of a democratic political system**, endowing the people with power and responsibility and protecting the minority from the tyranny of the majority. Does the Jewish heritage suffice? Will it meet the test of a democratic society?
- 2. Pluralism**, accepting the co-existence and legitimacy of a variety of life patterns and values — given that these various life patterns all share the common goal of upholding the State. Short of legitimating groups whose aim is to destroy the State, can Jewish heritage sustain, justify and enhance the ideal of pluralism?
- 3. The challenge of equality under the law** of sexes and creeds, including varieties of the Jewish religion and, of course, ethnic groups among its citizens.

The great value of the Land and the State is that they allow the ultimate experiment with Judaism, testing whether Judaism can supply the ideology and wisdom to engage modernity. This involves a severe restraint on messianism, that is, on the view that the State of Israel is the beginning of the eschaton, the beginning of the final age — in Aramaic *athalta de-geula*, the beginning of redemption — a concept incorporated in the prayer for the State composed by the Chief Rabbinate.

This messianic view of the State in effect is a mandate to pursue national egoism, because all rules are suspended if we are living at the beginning of the final age — all normality, rationality and common morality are suspended if we are living in the eschaton. My view of the State as the great experiment to see whether Judaism can face the test of politics, economics and social amelioration in modern terms demands a restraint of messianism. We cannot say what current history means, we cannot interpret it in terms of reward and punishment, in terms of the covenant idea literally understood. Military victories are not simply portents of divine approval or a license to do what national egoism would lead us to. Defeats are not simply portents of divine disapproval or warnings to be more single-minded, not to say fanatical, in observance of the rituals of Torah.

Jews have a pattern of life consecrated by a religion containing tenets, precepts, rules and admonitions which are socially positive. Judaism lends significance to the daily life of the individual and the community. Although this pattern of life does necessitate a living space, and a living space means recognized and reasonably secure borders, the significance of Judaism ought not be reduced to defending specific borders nor tied to a particular definition of the geographic boundaries of the Jewish State.

Discussion

Halvor Ronning: If God indeed revealed Himself to Israel, then I would be forced to look at the victories and defeats. We have to look both at the Holocaust and at the State of Israel and see the dangers.... We need not go to the extreme of some wild messianism or isolationism, but should we not acknowledge that the Torah lives in Israel?

Greenberg: Two factors converge in my thinking to put a brake on my readiness to adopt a simple theological reading of events in terms of rewards and punishments. One factor, I would say, is ideological. I take the book of Job seriously, and I find that it puts a check on how I interpret the misfortunes of my fellow human beings and the fortunes and misfortunes of societies. The message I find in the book of Job is that I cannot interpret misfortune as God's disapproval, and therefore I cannot interpret fortune as God's approval.

I think that one of the most disturbing effects of adopting the views of the friends of Job — which is the view you are advocating — was seen here not long ago. (This country is a laboratory of theology.) Two years ago there was a calamity at Petah Tiqwah in which a bus-load of school-children were killed in an accident at a train crossing. At the time there was a campaign being carried out in Petah Tiqwah against the opening of movie theaters on the Sabbath, and the Minister of Interior, who was a rabbi, explained, at first to his own people and then to a larger public, that the calamity was the result of the violation of the Sabbath in Petah Tiqwah. That is precisely the attitude of the friends of Job. They knew Job deserved his sufferings and they even were willing to invent faults in order to make that charge stick. I appreciate the

viewpoint of the friends of Job, and I understand that it gives security and makes sense of things, at least as long as one does not face reality too directly. That is the reason why I espouse an agnostic stance about the possibility of reading the hand of God in everyday events and even in singular events like victories or defeats of battle.

The second factor, as I have already suggested, is the callousness toward one's fellow human beings and the recklessness in making social and political decisions which accompany the assurance that one can read and sense God's hand in the events that are occurring to the People of Israel, the State of Israel. The combination of these two factors forces me into agnosticism with respect to being able to read divine meaning into events. The alternative that I espouse — which perhaps I did not make clear enough in my presentation — is to follow the pattern of life which has been dictated in general terms by the Torah, with the assurance that the socially positive and affirmative nature of that pattern makes it intrinsically worthwhile. Having regard for my fellow human beings as for myself, doing to them as I would have them do to me, does not have to be proven right by my business success or the success of the army of Israel. Such behavior is intrinsically worthy and lends dignity to my actions without needing such signs of divine approval as material, military or political success.

John Miller Scott: Based on Thomas à Becket, while I can see the value of this approach, if one extends it to the world scene, would it require a nation state at all times to be the vindication of any particular religious position?

Greenberg: The religious position I have suggested is summed up in Leviticus 19:18, and I think it is a sufficiently positive and general principle to make the idea of nation states vindicating themselves by adherence to that principle a joyous prospect. It is the principles that involve treading on others that worry me — what I call national egoism. National egoism is also a very strong principle, in fact it is **the** principle that all nations adhere to and which makes their co-existence so problematic. I see no prospect of the nations' political leaders suddenly adopting the notion that they owe it to their own citizens to carry out what, under most great religions, is the general principle of human solidarity. If that ideal would suddenly seize the religious leaders of the nations, that would be a marvelous prospect.

Peter Du Brul: Is it only in Israel that the Jewish People could test Jewish values...? Could you say more concerning the degree to which Jews living in the Diaspora also had and still have powers that they use in political, economic, artistic and scientific spheres? The Diaspora can also be a testing place, a place in which Jewish values thrive and testify to the gentile world.

Greenberg: Since I have lived in both worlds, I speak with a certain confidence about the two. Let me respond with an autobiographical remark. Until I emigrated from the United States, I taught at the University of Pennsylvania during the troubled years of the sixties. During that time Jewish university youths found themselves in tension with the leaders of the Jewish community when they espoused a liberal stance with regard to the civil rights of Blacks, and later with regard to the war in Vietnam. Some of my

students asked me, “Is it really irrelevant to Judaism to take up the cause of civil rights? Is that something that somehow is not right? I feel my involvement in the civil rights battle is a Jewish impulse, and yet the leaders of the community and many of the rabbis say it is not so, that it has nothing to do with Judaism. Is that really the case?”

I found myself drawn into addressing the problems of American democracy and the working out of the notion of American equality — but from the Jewish angle. That characterized the whole of the sixties for me. There was a day called the “Vietnam Moratorium” when nation-wide attention was focused on the alleged illegality of the war in Vietnam. I was teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary that day, and the students there wanted to do something connected with the Vietnam war moratorium, so I prepared a lesson on “Rabbinic Positions on Defying Illegal Orders.” Within the American framework I created a Jewish text to meet an American problem.

In 1968 I had a sabbatical year in Jerusalem. At that time one of the great exponents of interfaith activity in this country and in the Jewish world in general, Zwi Werblowsky, was the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities with which I was affiliated. One evening he spoke to me about coming to live here and said, “Life is a struggle. The question is: what arena do you pick to struggle in?” He let me work out the meaning of that myself. Where will I invest my energy, in an arena in which the issues are determined from without and the Jewish community is impinged upon by its general civic environment, or in an environment in which the issues are fundamentally and totally Jewish? I mentioned the prisons, the police, the treatment of the poor, inter-Jewish ethnic tensions, Jewish-gentile ethnic tensions; all of these in an arena in which we have the power to do something on a general, social, national basis. So long as I was in the States, I could only react to these great problems which boiled down to problems of power, its use and abuse. The power was not in the hands of the Jews. Contrary to the anti-Jewish canard that the Jews control everything, they do not.

Here in Israel Jews do control all the power systems. The real testing of Judaism concerns whether it can shine a light on these major questions of sovereignty and freedom — that test can only be done here. I never had to face the reality of the prophetic denunciation of institutions of government and power in the United States. When I taught in the University of Pennsylvania, the Book of Amos and his denunciation of the aristocracy was a piece of ancient history. When I teach it at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the air is electric because it is our language and we can imagine ourselves hearing it — it speaks right off the page and it speaks to what is happening, *mutatis mutandis*, in our time. We have priests, we have kings, *mutatis mutandis*, we have an army and international relations, we have international treaties on which we depend rather than on moral and spiritual power, and all of this is current issue. It cannot be that in the United States.

Jacob Willebrands: Can there be a place in Judaism for non-Jews — local Palestinians, Muslims and Christians?

Greenberg: I have a very simple answer: if there is not, then there has to be. I think there is. For those people who say that there is not, my response is that

there will have to be because this is the reality. I do not consider the reality to be transient, and I adopt that attitude to divisions within the Jewish community, to inter-Jewish relations. Let me explain that.

All of you who have been here for some time know that within the Jewish population of pre-state Palestine there was an agreement called the "status quo" between the religious and the non-religious Jews. Boundaries were set concerning what one could and could not do, an agreement was made about what the bounds of public behavior would be on the Sabbath and so forth. The status quo is now being challenged on both sides, and that is causing a lot of trouble, especially here in Jerusalem. The status quo was agreed to in pre-state times, largely because each side thought that the other side was ephemeral. Once the State comes, the secularists thought, the religious will gradually die out and so we can afford to make this a temporary concession. The religious had their messianic dream that when the State came, the hand of God would be so visible that the secularists would gradually be drawn into the fold. So each side agreed to a temporary truce.

What attitude has to be adopted on this question within the community? Very simple: each side must understand that the other is here to stay, and that the status quo is not a truce between wars but must be converted into a positive program of tolerance, an acceptance of pluralism within the Jewish community. If either part of the Jewish community has not matured into the toleration of differences but would like to see the other side gradually disappear, then it is no wonder if it has the same view toward external irritants.

The presence of non-Jews within the Jewish State is a fact, a reality which has to be incorporated into the life-affirming fabric of Judaism. I do not think it is something that requires a revolution — perhaps a revolution in practice, but not in principle. The same, I think, is true of Islam: in principle it ought, I think, to be much more open and generous than in practice. Nonetheless, all the world religions have relevant resources, and if nurtured they can give an ideological ground for the toleration of differences. This requires world religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to make a shift in priorities among their own values. All great world religions affirm the unity of the human race, the worth of all human beings, the dearness of all human beings to God, but when it comes to details they spend more time on the differences between themselves and everybody else. The Scriptures contain summaries of what God demands of human beings: the Ten Commandments is one such summary; Psalm 15 is another; Ezekiel 18 describes what the righteous man and the wicked man are. In all these summaries the relation between man and man, the social values, are given a much greater prominence than the relation of man to God. Of the Ten Commandments, four concern man and God and six concern man and man. In Ezekiel 18 there are twelve statements: four concerning man and God, eight concerning man and man. Psalm 15 is entirely a list of ethical requirements, there is nothing at all to do with relations between man and God.

I once gave a lecture in a religious kibbutz, pointing out the fact that in these summaries in Scripture there is more emphasis placed on the proper relation between man and man than on man's relation to God. This caused a

storm of protest: "Then how are we different from anybody else? You could be a Christian and say that, a Hindu could say that." I said, "That's right, what's wrong with that?" "No, what makes us different, what makes us Jews?" I said, "If Jews would act the way these summaries prescribe, they would be so different from everybody else, they would be amazing!" This is what I mean when I say that all the world religions incorporate these great principles, but they all focus on the differentia, and that is what is popularly understood as being a Muslim, being a Jew, being a Christian — that we are different.

The time is running out for the human race, and all world religions have to realign priorities. The ethical summaries in the Bible indicate that the problem is an ancient one. I believe that those lists are polemical, as were the Prophets when they reordered priorities to say that what is important is not sacrifice and not prayer, but "let justice well up as a great river." The Jews of antiquity also often thought that what God wanted was what was peculiar to Judaism, the peculiar holidays and sacrifices. So we have come a very short distance, if any at all, from the reordering we were challenged with by the Prophets.

Kirsten Hoffgren Pedersen: At the beginning of the lecture you spoke about the Holy Land and the difference between the Jewish view, the Christian and Muslim view ... that Christians and Muslims have holy places and for Jews the whole Land is holy. But I want to point out that Christians call the whole country "the Holy Land." For instance, we have places of pilgrimage in many other places, in Santiago, Norway, Denmark, etc., but we do not call any of these countries a holy land. Here the whole Land is holy. You mentioned "being holy." In the Ethiopian tradition, by the very fact of living here one is called a saint. In the Ethiopian cemetery at Bethany, the graves are called "the tombs of the saints." Manuscripts from the Middle Ages say: "If one of the saints should say to another 'Thou bloody idiot,' then he should be fined so and so much." He was called a saint because he was living in the Holy Land.

Greenberg: This belongs to the part of the lecture which I said was not my thought. I think this is a subject well worth exploring — what the meaning of Holy Land is to the religions that call this country holy, how does it work out practically, what are the consequences of it. I can think right off of one of the differences between what you said and what Jews would say. The idea that just being here makes you holy is foreign to Judaism. Just being here makes it **possible** for you to be holy is the way we would look at it. Just being here puts a responsibility on you to be holy, because otherwise you will be rejected — an unholy saint will be rejected.

Joseph Stiasny: Do you think that the messianic consciousness of Israel is redeeming Israel from the intellectuals?

Greenberg: From intellectuals like me! You are too polite, Joseph, to say that. It always boils down to the same problem. How can you have religious enthusiasm that does not turn into fanaticism? How can you keep alive the emotional well-springs of religion without losing sight of the person who is of another religion? This is the problem, and it is a pedagogic problem.

How can you make a curriculum that encourages devotion to religious ideals, the willingness to self-sacrifice for religious ideals, but **not** sacrificing others for your religious ideals. I am willing to sacrifice myself but not another. That is precisely what has to be inculcated: self-sacrifice, yes; but that of another for your cause, no.

Malcolm Lowe: You spoke of the messianic era creating a new ethical situation in which values are changed. But there can also be a perceived continuity of values. For instance many of us remember the celebrated case of a few years ago when a group of Gush Emunim settlers tried to establish a settlement on what they claimed to be the historical site of Elon Moreh (Genesis 12:6). The Israeli Supreme Court ordered them to leave the site because it was land owned privately by Arabs which could be expropriated only on grounds of military security. What people have forgotten is that the settlers also went to the late Rabbi Tzevi Yehudah Kook, the mentor of Gush Emunim, and were surprised when he, too, told them that they had no right to seize private property of non-Jewish sojourners in the Land. So, despite the messianic expectation he shared with them, he insisted that the traditional Judaic value of respecting the rights of the non-Jew in the Land continued to hold. Nor should his ruling — which Gush Emunim seems to have observed ever since — be seen as aberrant. It stems from a view of the messianic era which sees it not as a sweeping aside of traditional values, but rather as the time when those values will be implemented in the highest degree.

Greenberg: I do not remember seeing that about Rabbi Kook's particular intervention. I suppose one reason why I do not remember it is that it was swamped by the other kind of reaction to which I referred. I think there is an inevitable dynamic that sweeps away restraints. The rabbi's ruling seems to stand out as an untypical reaction of a rabbi to the idea of redeeming the Land of Israel from the hand of the gentiles. You would not expect that — it surprises. That is my point, that the dynamic of messianism makes it a surprise when an advocate of it takes a stand restraining national egoism.

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