

# Israel: Motherland and Mother

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Rosh Beit Midrash, Zichron Dov Yeshiva University

Torah Mitzion Beit Midrash of Toronto

*And Zion said: God has abandoned me, and God has forgotten me.*

**Yeshayah 49:14**

ותאמר ציון עזבני ה' וה' שכחני  
ישעיהו מט:יד

*You shall no longer be called 'Abandoned,' and your land will no longer be called 'Desolate,' for you will be called 'My desire is in her.'*

**Yeshayah 62:4**

לא יאמר לך עוד עזובה ולא רצך  
לא יאמר עוד שממה כי לך יקרא  
חפצי בה  
ישעיהו סב:ד

## Israel as our beloved intimate

The Jew has known many reasons for his millennia-old longing for the Land of Israel; our thrice-daily recitations of “*ותחזינה עינינו בשובך לציון ברחמים*” Let our eyes see when You return mercifully to Zion,” have been fueled by motivations both religious and secular, personal and national. Focus of the biblical universe, cradle of our nation, throne of King David’s theocentric empire, haven from our foes, place at which our mitzvot are most practical and practicable, host of our most palpable connection to the world of the spirit, terraced hills across which the plangent Divine declaration, “*פה אשב כי אויתיה*,” Here I will dwell, for I have desired her,<sup>48</sup> still echoes – Eretz Yisrael has been all of these for the genetic and spiritual heirs of Avraham and Sarah.

In the vision of Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook and Rav Yissachar Techtel, though, the Land of Israel plays a more active role. Earth and stone and river and sea are anthropomorphized as limbs controlled by a humanesque consciousness, and the space formerly known as Canaan is identified as a living being, an independent spiritual entity to whom we are bonded.

*The Land of Israel is not an external thing, an external prize acquired by the nation, a means toward the end of national unification and reinforcement of the nation’s physical or even spiritual survival. The Land of Israel is an independent entity, bound to the nation in the bond of life...*

**Rav Kook, Orot, Eretz Yisrael I**

ארץ ישראל איננה דבר חיצוני, קנין חיצוני לאומה, רק בתור אמצעי למטרה של ההתאגדות הכללית והחזקת קיומה החמרי או אפילו הרוחני. ארץ ישראל היא חטיבה עצמותית קשורה בקשר חיים עם האומה...  
אורות (ראי"ה) – ארץ ישראל א

<sup>48</sup> Tehillim 132:14

Seen in this light, Yeshayah's identification of Zion as a bride is part of a broader depiction of the Land of Israel as a thinking, feeling, loving and beloved intimate being who longs for us to return home.

## Anthropomorphic land

Description of land as a thinking, feeling entity did not originate with the Land of Israel; the midrash places this concept at the start of the Torah, in the Divine creation of the third day,<sup>49</sup> when God charged the land to create both עץ פרי and עץ עושה פרי, fruit trees and fruit-producing trees, but it only produced the latter:

*Why was [the land] cursed? Rabbi Yehudah ben Rabbi Shalom said: She trespassed God's command. G-d said, 'Let the land produce vegetation, etc.' meaning that just as the fruit is edible, so the tree should be edible, and she did not do this.*

**Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna) 5:9**

ולמה נתקללה... ר' יהודה בר' שלום  
אמר שעברה על הצווי שכך אמר  
הקב"ה תדשא הארץ וגו' מה הפרי נאכל  
אף העץ נאכל, והיא לא עשתה כן  
**בראשית רבה ה:ט**

The concept of territorial consciousness does not end with Creation, either, and it is not limited to wicked rebellion; the sages also envisioned stones desiring to serve the righteous Yaakov. The Torah<sup>50</sup> records an overnight condensing of Yaakov's protective stones from the plural to the singular, and regarding this change the sages explained:

*It is written, 'And he took from the stones of the site,' and it is written, 'And he took the stone!' Rabbi Yitzchak explained: This teaches that all of the stones were gathered to one place, and each one said, 'This tzaddik will rest his head on me.' We learned: All of them became absorbed into one.<sup>51</sup>*

**Talmud, Chullin 91b**

כתיב ויקח מאבני המקום, וכתיב ויקח  
את האבן! אמר רבי יצחק: מלמד  
שנתקבצו כל אותן אבנים למקום אחד,  
וכל אחת ואחת אומרת עלי יניח צדיק  
זה ראשו; תנא: וכולן נבלעו באחד.  
**חולין צא:**

Many more classic sources ascribe consciousness to a range of inanimate objects, from the sun and moon to the plant kingdom. Certainly, at least some of these texts are meant to provide moral instruction rather than to describe ex-cerebrum thought processes. Nonetheless, the identity of Israel as a person, as a thinking and feeling entity, and particularly as a mother to the Jewish people, adds depth of meaning to our exile, and intensifies the imperative for our return.

## The meaning of Motherland

In itself, envisioning our birthplace as Motherland is not unique to the Jewish people; numerous nations describe their homelands in maternal terms, depicting these spaces as environments which passively provide nourishment, security and familiar comfort. As Professor Rosemary Marangoly George wrote, "Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few."<sup>52</sup> Our concept of Israel as Mother

<sup>49</sup> Bereishit 1:11-12

<sup>50</sup> Bereishit 28:11, 18

<sup>51</sup> See also Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 68:11 and Rashi to Bereishit 28:11 for some variation

<sup>52</sup> Rosemary M. George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, pg. 9

transcends this role, though; we envision the Land of Israel as an active matriarch, actively protecting us and summoning us home.

The Torah portrays mothers as dynamic protectors, intervening and risking their own well-being on behalf of their young. From Sarah declaring that Yishmael would not inherit “with my son, with Yitzchak,<sup>53</sup>” to Rivkah arranging Yaakov’s blessing and accepting his curse upon herself,<sup>54</sup> to Rachel pleading with God on behalf of her descendants,<sup>55</sup> to Batsheva orchestrating her son Shlomo’s ascendancy to the throne and then arranging the downfall of his challenger Adoniyahu,<sup>56</sup> the Jewish “mother” is more than nurturer. The mother is a lioness, acting to ensure the safety and success of her offspring.

Along the same lines, the Land of Israel is seen as an active Mother for the Jewish people, evicting unworthy tenants and invoking her own merit on behalf of her longed-for children.

Rav Yissachar Techtel saw this message in the Divine promise<sup>57</sup> to remember Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and “The Land”:

*I have learned this from the Torah of our master Moshe himself. It is written, ‘And I will remember My covenant with Yaakov, and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham I will remember, and the land I will remember.’ ... Rashi there wrote, ‘Why are they listed in reverse? As if to say: Yaakov the youngest is worthy of this, and if he is not worthy then Yitzchak is with him, and if he is not worthy then Avraham is with him.’ Based on this, one may add that even if all of them are unworthy, meaning that the merit of our ancestors has ended, still, ‘The land I will remember,’ for the merit of the Land of Israel itself will save them from trouble... She will protect us, to free us whenever we are placed in trouble, Heaven forbid.*

**Em Habanim Sameicha, First Prologue**

ומתורת משה רבינו בעצמו למדתי זאת  
בפ' בחקתי כתיב וזכרתי את בריתי יעקב  
ואף את בריתי יצחק ואף את בריתי  
אברהם אזכור והארץ אזכור... כי עיין  
ברש"י שם שכתב למה נמנו אהורנית  
כלומר כדאי הוא יעקב הקטן לכך ואם  
אינו כדאי הרי יצחק עמו ואם אינו כדאי  
הרי אברהם עמו עיי"ש ועפ"ז יש  
להוסיף דאף אם כולם אינם כדאים היינו  
באופן דתמה זכות אבות ח"ו אבל  
ו"הארץ אזכור" דזכות ארץ ישראל  
תחלצם ממיצר... היא תגן עלינו  
לחלצנו ממיצר בכל עת שאנו נתונים  
בצרה, ר"ל.  
**אם הבנים שמחה – פתיחה א**

Like Queen Esther approaching Achashverosh and offering herself on behalf of her people, the Land of Israel approaches HaShem and offers her own merit on our behalf.

## Returning to our mother

This personification of Israel as mother and protector should add a dimension to our longing for *aliyah*, inflaming our souls and inspiring our national return to Israel with the greatest urgency.

Our impulse to return is not only a selfish desire to live in the land of our ancestors, or to use the land and its products for our rituals. We are not only walking in the Biblical land and laying claim

<sup>53</sup> Bereishit 21:10

<sup>54</sup> Bereishit 27

<sup>55</sup> Yirmiyah 31:14

<sup>56</sup> Melachim I 1-2

<sup>57</sup> Vayyikra 26:42

to the once and future home of the Beit haMikdash, rather, we are returning to our mother, to a being who longs to have her children restored.

A midrash highlights the intensity of this longing:

*Yirmiyah said: When I ascended to Yerushalayim, I raised my eyes and saw a woman sitting atop a mountain, wearing black clothing and with her hair undone, crying out, seeking one who would console her. I cried out as well, and sought one who would comfort me. I drew close to her and spoke with her, and told her, "If you are a woman, speak with me. If you are a spirit, leave me." She replied, "Do you not recognize me? I am the one who had seven sons whose father left to go overseas. While I was yet crying for him, it was prophesied to me, 'The house has collapsed upon your seven sons and killed them.' I don't know for whom to cry, and for whom to release my hair!" I replied and told her, "You are no greater than my mother, Zion, who has been turned into grazing for the wild animals of the field." To which she replied and said to me, "I am your mother, Zion."*

**Midrash, Psikta Rabti 26**

אמר ירמיהו כשהייתי עולה לירושלים  
נטלתי עיני וראיתי אשה אחת יושבת  
בראש ההר, לבושיה שחורים ושערה  
סתור צועקת מבקשת מי ינחמנה, ואני  
צועק ומבקש מי ינחמני, קרבתי אצלה  
ודברתי עמה, ואמרתי לה אם אשה את  
דברי עמי ואם רוח את הסתלקי מלפני,  
ענתה ואמרה לי, אינך מכירני, אני היא  
שהיו לי שבעה בנים, יצא אביהם  
למדינת הים, עד שאני עולה ובוכה עליו  
הרי שניבא ואמר לי נפל הבית על  
שבעה בנייך והרגם, איני יודע על מי  
אבכה ועל מי אסתור שעריי, ענית  
ואמרתי אין אתה טובה מן אמי ציון  
והיא עשויה מרעית לחיות השדה, ענתה  
ואמרה לי, אני אמך ציון  
**פסיקתא רבתי כו**

Rav Kook understood the Land of Israel as a partner of the Jewish people, and this partner suffers our exile as a bereaved mother mourns for her children. Yeshayah envisioned the day when the Land of Israel would be like a bride returned to her spouse. Rav Yissachar Techtel portrayed the emotions of that reunion by describing the reunion of a mother reunited with her husband and children in the Ghetto, concluding,<sup>58</sup> "So I imagine will be the joy of our mother, the Land of Israel, at the moment when all of us will return to her."

May HaShem enable us to bring that day to reality, and to see the fulfillment of Dovid haMelech's words:

*He establishes the barren woman in the house as a joyous mother of children; Praise God!*

**Tehillim 113:9**

מושיבי עקרת הבית אם הבנים שמחה הללוקה  
**תהילים קיג:ט**

<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Yissachar Techtel, אם הבנים שמחה, Second Prologue