

Israel Needs a Debate about What Is Eretz Yisrael?

Kermit Zarley, July 1, 2014

Many Jewish settlers in the West Bank are religious. They adhere to the belief in Judaism that one of the worst crimes for an Israeli governmental administration to do is to forfeit land that Israel either possesses or occupies. So, in 1995 a young Jewish seminary student assassinated Israel's Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin for signing the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians two years prior, in 1993. Those Accords provided for Israel to negotiate the relinquishing of occupied territory to the Palestinians to achieve peace. This seminary student's horrible act only reflected what he had been taught by his theology professors.

What is the basis for such hostility by religious Jews to their own government? Judaism requires that Jews be bound to *halakhah*—the complete body of religious, civil, and legal laws of rabbinic tradition. It is generally accepted that Jews of all generations, including those of the Jewish state, must honor *Mitzvat Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*—a divine command in the Bible to settle the land of Israel (e.g., Numbers 33.52-53). The territory involved is generally recognized as historical Israel, which includes the West Bank. So, this *mitzvat* (Hebrew for “command”) religiously obligates today's Jews to settle the land of Israel. In addition, a *mitzvat* called *Lo Tohennem* supposedly prohibits any Israeli administration from transferring any portion of Eretz Yisrael to Gentiles. The reasoning behind this *mitzvat* is that no portion of the promised land that God gives to Israel should ever be forfeited to Gentiles. All religious Jews, however, do not agree about these two *mitzvot*.

Eretz Yisrael is Hebrew for “Land of Israel.” What is the land of Israel? Since Israel became a state in 1948, this vexing question has only been superseded in Israel in recent decades by the question, Who is a Jew? A discussion of the question, What is the land of Israel? may someday lead to the solving of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What people call “The Promised Land” refers to a much larger territory than the ancient Israelites ever possessed and dwelt in. It is variously described in the Jewish Bible, but some of the place names designated therein remain unknown today. This promised land should therefore be distinguished from the Jews' “ancestral land,” that is, the land that the ancient Israelites possessed and dwelt in, which Israel's Proclamation of Independence implicitly designates as *Eretz Yisrael*. Some religious Jews and Christians, many of them called “fundamentalists,” fail to make this distinction. This failure adds fuel to the fire in the conflict between Israeli Jews and the Palestinians concerning the land.

In October, 2001, I met with U.S. Republican Senator Don Nickles (1948-) of Oklahoma in his office to discuss my New Philistia Proposal for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This meeting was arranged by our mutual friend Jim Hiskey, who also attended. All three of us were Evangelical Christians. Senator Nickles had a lengthy career in the U.S. Senate, serving from 1981 to 2005, when he retired. He was known mostly for his fiscal conservatism while serving as chairman of the Senate Budget Committee.

I briefly shared with Senator Nickles the proposal in my book. He said, “You’re talking about the Promised Land.” I replied, “Well, some of it.” Then I explained that I believed the Bible indicates God will not give all the promised land to Jews until the second coming of Christ. I added that in the meantime I believed we should distinguish between the larger territory of the promised land and the Jews’ ancestral land, which they claim in their Proclamation of Independence. I further stated that I believed that is where Israel should be to solve this conflict. Senator Nickles then stated that he believed the Jews are entitled to all the promised land now. I knew of his home church in Oklahoma City and concluded that’s probably what his pastor taught. Don obviously didn’t care to discuss the matter anymore because he then changed the subject to golf, which was the shared passion of all three of us.

This view expressed and embraced by Senator Don Nickles used to be called by Jews Greater Israel or Complete Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael Hashleimah*). It was adopted by the Revisionist Zionists, who later formed the Likud Party. Likud members and Zionist Christians have asserted this viewpoint and thereby been not only opposed to a two-state solution but opposed to the peace process itself. On the other hand, at one time the PLO, and Hamas even now, have demanded this same greater territory for the Palestinians. Hamas also seems to call for the extinction of the State of Israel.

The Bible frequently defines the geographical territory that the ancient Israelites possessed and dwelt in during most of their existence as a nation as the land “from Dan to Beersheba.” Dan was then the far northern extent of Eretz Yisrael. This territory was so named after one of the twelve tribes of Israel that had migrated there from the coastal plain near Joppa (present Tel Aviv). This second territory of Dan is currently located in northern Israel near its border with Lebanon. Beersheba was the far southern extent of Eretz Yisrael, and it is currently located to the south in Israel’s Negev, due east of Gaza.

Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is largely a real estate dispute, to unravel its complexities we need to go back at least to the beginning of the creation of the modern State of Israel. The justification for modern Israel’s existence is based on its Proclamation of Independence. While the United States of America began with its Declaration of Independence, its existence came to rest upon its Constitution. Israel has never had a constitution. Its brief Proclamation of Independence begins, “The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people.” So, this document asserts that Jews all over the world have a right to “the land of their forefathers” and to regain statehood there. “Eretz-Yisrael” is also implicitly designated therein as the Jews’ “ancestral land.” So, according to Israel’s Proclamation of Independence, Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, ought to be regarded as the Jews’ ancestral land, that is, the land that the ancient Israelites generally possessed and dwelt in throughout the centuries of their national existence.

In 1967, Israel emerged victorious in the Six-Day War, which resulted in its possession of the occupied territories—the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights and Old (East) Jerusalem. Israel soon asked U.S. President Lyndon Johnson to recognize its possession of these occupied territories as legitimate, so that Israel would

feel free to annex them. Johnson responded wisely, “You are asking me to recognize your borders? You have never defined the borders of Israel.”

President Johnson’s remark remains relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in light of Israel’s Proclamation of Independence. Ancient Israel geographically was located mostly in the Judean hill country and northward. Ancient Israel never possessed much of the coastal plain and hardly ever possessed any of “the land of the Philistines,” which was the coastal plain south of modern Tel Aviv to beyond Gaza. But modern Israel is located mostly in the coastal plain and the northern territory, with coastal Tel Aviv as its largest city. Thus, modern Israel’s geography is reversed from antiquity.

This reversal is where a major part of the problem lies concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This reversal of demographics is at odds with the views of religious Jews who advocate *Lo Tehennem*, that it would be a major crime against Israel’s God to relinquish any of Eretz Yisrael. Israel’s Gaza Disengagement Plan was not an infraction against *Lo Tehennem* because the Gaza Strip could not be considered a part of Eretz Yisrael. But for the Israeli government to relinquish any part of the West Bank would clearly be an infraction against *Lo Tohennem*.

I believe Israel needs to have a national debate about the question, What is the land of Israel? And this debate should be centered in Israel’s religious and academic institutions. It was right for Israel to exercise its Gaza Disengagement Plan, effectively turning it over to the Palestinians. The Gaza Strip was never possessed by ancient Israel and therefore cannot be legitimately claimed by the modern State of Israel as a part of Eretz Yisrael.

I suspect there have been some Israeli leaders who have wanted to avoid a public discussion about defining Eretz Yisrael. The main reason is that Israel’s coastal territory between metropolitan Tel Aviv and the Gaza Strip, a land that the ancient Israelites hardly ever possessed, contains ample industry that Israel would not want to relinquish. Yet, to avoid a public debate in Israel about the extent of Eretz Yisrael is to prolong the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with respect to at least many religious Jews. For they will likely oppose Israel’s relinquishing territory to the Palestinians as an infraction of *Lo Tehennem*, especially regarding the West Bank, which is ancient Judea and Samaria, the heartland of Eretz Yisrael.