

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
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My Oldest Zionist Story

My sadness lingers on. How can it not?

I find that my emotions on our current situation in Israel and the antisemitism that surrounds us run so deep, that I need stories to nourish my soul. I will therefore begin this evening with an old story that I was raised on.

Long, long ago in a distant place there was a family that lived in a house that was to their eyes, the most beautiful home imaginable. It was like the fulfillment of a great life dream. The family wrote poetry about their home's delightful fragrances. There were odes to its splendid rooms and furnishings. They delighted in the views of the surrounding terrain from the home's windows and terraces. Every poem, every verse, every image was recorded in a kind of scrapbook that the family kept. They added to it regularly.

Years passed. The family grew. The family shrank. There were quarrels and divisions in the family. Even with all of this, the house passed from one generation to another until-----until, the family, fell on hard times.

The hard times eventually grew desperate and finally the eviction notice came—hard and shocking and unyielding. A mighty foreign enemy had seized the entire neighborhood as far as one could see in any direction and even beyond.

The enemy took hold of the home and evicted the family. They destroyed part of the house and trampled the treasured gardens. The kitchen—the ultimate family gathering room—which held many secrets and recipes and codes was laid utterly to waste by this unyielding foe.

A remnant of the family escaped with its special scrapbook in tact.

They became a wandering family. The scrapbook survived and those parts of the family that were not able to get any of its precious pages—held onto the stories they remembered. They told the stories to their children.

Years passed. The descendants of the family spread to many lands.

The stories remained in their hearts and minds and were passed along continually, parent to child. The memories of the old home were always in the air and on their lips especially when times were hard.

Tried as they might to be part of the people around them, they never quite fit in. The children of each generation went to bed singing songs from the scrapbook, dreaming of the house that was far away—a dream-yet real.

One day—as if out of nowhere but in a deeper sense not at all out of nowhere, the now far flung family began to move back to the old new dream home.

The story continues—but I will stop here.

This story in various tellings is how I learned Judaism and Zionism.

Recently, when I thought to write a sermon analyzing the deep theological, inspiring meaning of the land of Israel for us throughout Jewish history, nothing I wrote compared to the story on which I was raised.

If you want to understand what this beautiful word Zionism means at its root—it means that Jews are part of an extended family and our family story is a tale of home.

Even as we were exiled from our land, we took with us a book—what my story calls our scrapbook—of course our Bible. We continued to read and teach, sing and compose stories and songs about our home and our eventual return.

The Bible became our diary of remembrance and our eventual compass for return. The Bible remains a great guidebook to anyone who travels in Israel. So many place names are from the Bible. Don't ask me to list my favorites, we will be here for too long.

With all of this, our own story can be hard to understand— this Zionist idea is simultaneously obvious and yet also somehow complicated.

We can see how Ben Gurion put it over 75 years ago--
and yes—now a long quote.

Ben Gurion’s words from 1946 as he struggled to make the case for the creation of a Jewish state:

“I realize the intellectual difficulty of our case.”

He knew that we had a difficult task.

Ben Gurion went on:

“There is no precedent for the history of the Jewish People and there is no parallel to the fate of this land, no precedent for the special significance this land has for us. There is no parallel to the relations between our People and this land. It is unique. People ... think in analogies and when they are faced with a new phenomenon, they prefer to deny the existence of what they do not understand. But it remains a fact, nevertheless. You have the unique case of the homeless Jewish People and their historic homeland.

One reason why Jews came over here is love of Zion, a deep passionate love, strong as death. There is no parallel to that in all of human history. It is unique but it is a fact...

What is the source of this love? A man may change many things, his religion, his wife, even his name. There is one thing which a man cannot change, his parents. The parents of our People are this land. It is unique, but there it is.

More than 300 years ago, a ship by the name of the *Mayflower* left Plymouth for the New World. It was a great event in ... history. I wonder how many people know ... the date when that ship left Plymouth, how many people were on that ship, and what kind of bread those people ate when they left ...

...(M)ore than 3,300 years ago, the Jews left Egypt...more than 3000 years before the *Mayflower* and every Jew in the world knows exactly the date ... we left...the fifteenth day of Nisan. The bread they ate was *matzah*. Up to this ... day, all the Jews in the world on the fifteenth day of Nisan eat the same *matzah* and tell the story of the exodus from Egypt. They tell what happened, and finish with ...“next year we shall be in the Land of Israel.”

(David Ben Gurion-pleading the Zionist Case to the Anglo-American Committee 1946)

My family reads this passage at our Seder table every year as we tell our story.

This text is from Ben Gurion's, speech in 1946 to the Anglo American Commission that had been tasked with making a recommendation to their respective governments on the future of Palestine as the United Nations considered the matter.

In 1946 Palestine was under the British Mandate and still bound by the British White Paper policy which from 1939 onward limited Jewish migration to Palestine to approximately 700 people per month. The British imposed these restrictions because of the great pressure from the Palestinian Arab community.

You heard that correctly. At the height of the Shoah, the British limited the numbers of Jews who could enter Palestine to 700 per month. This policy remained in force after the war until May, 1948 when the British mandate ended and the new State of Israel unlocked the gates for the refugees of Europe.

Ben Gurion's phrase is haunting:

“There is no parallel to the relations between our People and this land. It is unique. People ...think in analogies and when they are faced with a new phenomenon, they prefer to deny the existence of what they do not understand.”

I sometimes wonder if this is not somehow the nub of the matter.

Ben Gurion’s wisdom reminds us how hard our story is to understand—especially for outsiders. Our Jewish story is centered on Torah and Torah is centered on the land of Israel as home—what Ben Gurion calls “The parents of our People are this land.”

There is no real reading of the Bible without understanding this attachment to the land of Israel.

It is embedded deep into the psyche of who and what we are.

It can be so deeply embedded that we don’t see it.

It is the invisible foundational theology of so called ethnic Jewish or cultural Jewish identity—let alone for us who proudly call ourselves religious Jews.

What I mean by this, is when Jews lack the language to describe their Jewish commitments—as in— “I’m not really religious, Rabbi” but these same Jews feel a strong Jewish pull within them. They are saying that

they have a strong connection to what I will call the Jewish family—
Jewish peoplehood.

Jewish family-hood has a story and like every family—it is a story of
home. Home—is the land of Israel.

It is even deeply embedded in what is arguably the most universal of
biblical books—the Psalms-

(Psalm 9- Sing praises to god who dwells in Zion.

Psalm 135-Blessed is God who dwells in Zion.

Psalm 87- God loves Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

We could go on and on.)

What I am trying to say here is this. There are certain things that are in
us.

Sometimes, we have to fight for them-and those remarks will come at
another time when I address other questions:

What are the limits to the way we can fight? What does it mean to
fight what we call evil? What is evil? I wish to address all of these in
coming weeks. But for this evening, I wanted to simply establish the
why—---what is this land for us?

So to end with the words that never cease to bring tears to my eyes.

The beautiful Israeli writer, David Grossman gave us this:

“Israel is the only place in which a Jewish person can live with the vital ingredients of the history and culture and mental life of all the generation of Jews that have preceded him... This is ...the place in which a Jewish person can implement the values and ideals that his culture has crystallized, and it is the only place in which he can do this ... in the language in which his identity was created over many generations-- ...living in Israel is, for me ... a spiritual adventure... My children play and love and fight in a language that no one spoke for two thousand years but for them is full of life and is taken for granted. Were Abraham, the patriarch (who would now be 4000 years old) ... to sit down for supper at my house, he would understand the greater part of the Hebrew spoken by my five-year-old daughter. What a wonder that is....”

What a wonder that is.

What a wonder we need to preserve.

Od lo adva tikvateinu

We have not yet lost our hope.

Shabbat shalom