



Land and Covenant: The Religious Significance of the State of Israel

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In his address at the 2005 International Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Rabbi Eugene Korn of the American Jewish Congress explores the biblical teaching on relation of land and covenant and its implications for the role of State of Israel, which he sees as "a return of Judaism to the body and the people to the political responsibilities of the covenant."

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[Eugene Korn](#)

Introduction

No war in our time has generated more rhetoric than the tragic conflict between the State of Israel and its Arab neighbors. Transcending politics and economics, the conflict has enlisted history, Scripture, theology and national identities to foster both honest misunderstanding and polemical debate.

Israel as a Jewish State is central to relations between Jews and Christians. Within Christian theology, the idea of the Jewish people returning to its biblical homeland has long been problematic. Today, most mainline Protestant thinkers see Israel in exclusively secular terms—a state whose justification is no different from any other: Jews deserve a state by dint of the universal right of peoples to self-determination. Most non-traditional Jews also understand Israel only in political terms—as a well-deserved Jewish refuge after millennia of persecution and exile that culminated in the Holocaust. Some liberation theologians have now teamed up with radical post-nationalists to denigrate the idea of a Jewish homeland and to deny Israel the right to exist. Conversely, for many evangelicals and Orthodox Jews, Israel evokes a biblical literalism that heralds messianic and eschatological scenarios.

Understanding Israel in exclusively political terms sets the stage for polarization between people who identify primarily with the Jewish people and those who feel closer to the Palestinians. Hence we arrive at the current, often hostile, divide between Jews and conservative Christians on one hand, and liberal Protestant church leaders on the other.

There are also profoundly troubling religious consequences to seeing Israel through only political or fundamentalist lenses. These narrow conceptions obscure how normative Jewish tradition has understood the Bible, the Jewish people's attachment to the Land, and the religious significance of Jewish political independence. In other words, they are obstacles to an appreciation of Judaism, Jews and Jewish self-identity.

This essay attempts to explain briefly how Judaism has understood the biblical narrative of God's

covenant and the role of the Jewish people in covenantal history, both of which involve the Land of Israel. It is not intended as a political document or an endorsement of any specific Israeli political position. We offer it in the hope that it will encourage greater understanding of the dreams of the Jewish people, and of Israel as a country whose security need not threaten its neighbors. And if it contributes toward Jews and Christians understanding each other better, it will be no small contribution to peace throughout the world.

I. The Biblical Covenant

I wish to discuss the relation of land—that most “mundane” of entities—to God’s covenant with human beings and the logically consequent topic of the religious significance of Jewish statehood. This contrasts with the popular political explanation for the State of Israel, namely that Israel is necessary as a refuge for Jews from gentile persecution. The Holocaust experience proved to Jews in the most tragic way that the Enlightenment’s promise of liberty, equality and fraternity was false. Jews emerged from the extermination camps convinced that they would never be secure without self-determination and that only sovereignty would give them the means to defend themselves successfully.

I do not minimize the importance of the physical protection that the State of Israel provides Jews. This is a critical achievement after almost 2,000 years of Jewish political weakness and existential vulnerability. In addition to protecting Jewish lives, Israel gives the Jewish people the dignity that comes with independence and self-reliance. Israel has transformed much of Jewish culture, dramatically rehabilitated Jewish self-perceptions and provided hope for a secure future. In addition, physical survival is a cardinal value in Judaism. Nevertheless this political justification is flawed by a serious defect.

To Jews close to the biblical and rabbinic traditions, Theodore Herzl and political Zionism reverse the correct order of things. Political Zionists believed that the fundamental Jewish problem was persecution in the Diaspora; its solution was for Jews to live in their own state in the Land of Israel—or for some political Zionists, in what later became Uganda. Security for Jews would be achieved with their own country, where, according to Herzl’s dream, Jews could build something like Vienna on the Mediterranean and at last be ‘normal’ like all other peoples. This proved empirically incorrect (life in Israel is anything but normal), and logically confused, for it inverts the biblical understanding of Jewish life on the Land.¹ According to Scripture, life on the Land is not the result of persecution from exile, but the natural condition of Jewish existence. It is improper life in the Land of Canaan that is the cause—not the result—of persecution.

The Bible posits that when Jews living in their homeland violate their covenant with God by adopting pagan practices, they will be punished with oppressive exile. Conversely, it is clear that only by returning to God and a holy life (teshuvah) will Jews effect a return home. In Leviticus, God warns the people of Israel that:

*I punished iniquity and the Land spewed out her inhabitants. Therefore keep My statutes and My judgments and do not commit any of these abominations, neither any of your nation, nor any stranger that lives with you; all these abominations men of the Land have done before you and the Land became defiled. [Therefore do not do them] so the Land does not vomit you out also if you defile it. (18:24-27)**

And in Deut.:

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—you shall take them to heart among the nations into which the Lord your God has driven you. You shall return to the Lord your God and shall obey his voice according to all that I command you this

day—you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul. Then the Lord our God...will gather you from all the nations among whom the Lord your God has scattered you...*And the Lord your God will bring you to the Land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it.* (30:1-5)

According to biblical history, Jewish life in the Land is the normative state of affairs, not the solution for exile and persecution. If so, there must be a different narrative of Jewish history and a different understanding of the Land of Israel. I would like to present one religious Jew's understanding of the covenant and Land as an essential component of that covenant.

Jewish history is born with God's call to Abraham:

The Lord said to Avram, "Go out of your country and from your kin, from your father's house to the Land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those you curse you; through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.... And the Lord appeared to Avram and said, *"To your seed will I give this Land."* (Gen.12:1-3,7)

This is the beginning of the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham that extends to Abraham's descendants—the Jewish people. The covenant is a holy contract, and as in every contract, each party acquires benefits in return for assuming responsibilities. For Abraham, the benefits of the covenant are clear: blessing, nationhood and title to the Land. But as of yet no obligations or responsibilities are stipulated. Note also that Abraham and his descendants are destined to play a role in universal human history. ("You shall be a blessing....Through you all of the families of the earth will be blessed.") The covenant demands that Abraham's children not be a parochial or ghetto people, or an insignificant footnote to the larger drama of humanity, but a central actor in universal history. The Bible repeats this universal dimension of the covenant four more times, including when the covenant is passed to Abraham's son, Isaac, and then to Isaac's son, Jacob, indicating that it is essential to covenantal destiny and mission. ²

It is also critical to note that immediately after first hearing the terms of the covenant, Abraham builds an altar and calls the name of the Lord (v. 7-9). The next time the Bible articulates the covenant occurs in Chapter 13, and Abraham again responds by calling the name of the Lord, i.e. makes the presence of God known to the people around him. In Christian terms, this is "bearing witness" to the presence and majesty of God in the world. The phrase sounds Christian, but 'witness' is authentic to Jewish Scriptures. A traditional rabbinic interpretation (*midrash*) states that, "before Abraham, God was called 'God of the heavens'; after Abraham, people called Him 'God of the heavens and the earth.'³" God challenges Abraham to teach the world that God also dwells on earth as a partner in human affairs. That is the covenantal mission thus far.

Throughout Hebrew Scriptures ("Torah"⁴), almost every time there is a redefinition or reassertion of the covenant, the gift of the Land is mentioned. This is true when God informs Isaac that his father's divine legacy is bequeathed to him (Gen. 26:3), as well as when God informs Jacob that he will carry on the universal mission of Abraham (Gen. 28:13-15). Perhaps the most famous passage that connects land with the reassertion of the covenant occurs in Ex. 32-33, in the aftermath of worshiping the golden calf. Moses succeeds in convincing God to hold fast to His covenant with the Jewish people by pleading:

Turn from Your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and *I will give your offspring this whole land of which I spoke to possess forever.* (32:12-13)

God accepts Moses' plea and reasserts the covenant, articulating it as follows:

Set out from here, you and the people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt *to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob saying, "To your offspring will I give it.I hereby make a covenant.* Before all your people I will work such wonders as have not been wrought on earthMark well what I command you this day. I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. (33:1; 34:10-12)

The Bible does not tell us why the Land is essential, but I have quoted extensively to justify the claim that the Torah considers the Land to be an intrinsic component of the covenant. Yet this nexus is perplexing: Why could not Abraham fulfill this divine mission in Ur of Mesopotamia or in Haran—or why, thousands of years later, cannot his descendants carry out this mission in New York or Chicago? If Abraham and his people contract a sacred covenant with the Creator of the universe, with God Who is incorporeal and therefore not limited to any specific location, and if Abraham's mission is to teach that this omnipresent God is available to all the families of the earth in all places, then a specific geographic location seems inconsistent with this spiritual task.

Although Gen. 17 provides an initial glimpse of God's covenantal demands of Abraham ("Walk before me and be whole."), it is in Gen. 18 where we see the first definition of how Abraham and his descendants are obligated to live in order to bring God's name into the world. For some reason, God decides to engage Abraham in his decision before destroying the cities of Sodom and Gemorah:

Shall I hide from Abraham what I intend to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and righteousness, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He (previously) spoke to him (v. 17-19).

Destined to be God's covenantal partner, Abraham stands obligated to "keep the way of the Lord," which is "to do justice (*tsedeqah*) and righteousness (*mishpat*)." This is the primary way that the Jewish people are to manifest the covenant, the hallmark of the commitment to God. Abraham and the Jewish people are commanded to be teachers of justice and models of righteousness.

This explains why God chooses to inform Abraham about His planned destruction of the two wicked cities: The failure to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty is the heart of the concept of retributive injustice. God is thus testing Abraham to determine if he is sufficiently committed to justice to fight the injustice of punishing any innocent persons of the cities. Were Abraham not so committed, I suspect he would have been disqualified as the father of the covenantal people.

Abraham passed the test by protesting God's plan and challenging God with an audacious moral argument: "Heaven forbid that You destroy the righteous with the wicked" (v. 25), and finally, "Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (v. 26) Abraham's commitment to justice distinguishes him from Noah, who evinced no concern to God whether innocent people would perish in the flood. It explains why Noah did not merit becoming the father of the covenantal people, and why rabbinic tradition was skeptical about the depth of Noah's righteousness.

Beginning with Chapter 12 the Book of Genesis becomes a family story. This family evolves into a nation in the Book of Exodus where the covenant is transformed from a contract with a clan to one with a people, i.e. it becomes a national covenant. This occurs most explicitly when the Jewish people stands at Sinai immediately prior to revelation:

Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell *Benei Yisrael*: You have seen how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to Me. Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall

be my own treasure from among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (19:3-6)

This is the moment of election, and the statement of the covenant is with *the Jews as a people, rather than with individuals*. The nation as a collective assumes the same destiny and mission as did Abraham, namely, to be witnesses to the presence of God on earth by living a life of holiness. Election is responsibility, not superiority, entailing both blessings and curses. Jews will not be a normal people like all other people (as Herzl dreamed), but a people with special responsibilities and painful punishments that are part of a unique historical destiny.

The quest for holiness is not unique to the Jewish covenantal mission. Holiness is a fundamental spiritual sensibility to all who seek transcendent meaning. Thus every spiritual tradition has a conception of holiness. The Torah spells out its particular idea of holiness and its program for holy living most explicitly in the Book of Leviticus. In 19:1-2 God formally commands the Jewish people with the obligation to lead a holy life:

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to all the congregation of *Benei Yisrael* and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’”

The Hebrew is instructive: “*Qedoshim tehiyu*.” The imperative to be holy appears in the plural form to emphasize that the commandment is addressed to corporate Israel, not separately to each individual Jew. The command is to achieve national holiness, for the Jewish people *as a people* are charged to mirror God through the holy life. This is a major distinction between Jewish and Christian theologies. Jews do not talk of individual salvation. When we read Hebrew Scriptures closely, we do not find the promise of individual salvation. There is national return and redemption in naturalistic terms; the sacred covenant is played out on a collective level within empirical history.

Hence the Jewish people must exhibit holiness through its behavior, and verses 9-18 of that chapter detail how the holy life is achieved:

You shall leave them (i.e. the crops of the corners of the field) for the poor and the stranger.

You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.

You shall not defraud your peer, nor rob him; the wages of a daily worker shall not stay with you over night.

You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind.

You shall not do any unrighteousness in judgment; you shall not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the strong.

In righteousness you shall judge your peer.

You shall not be a talebearer amongst your people. You shall not stand by idly in the blood of your peer.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but surely rebuke your neighbor and commit no sin on his account.

You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against your people, but you shall love your peer as yourself.

In this text all manifestations of holiness are in a social context. *Qedushah* (holiness) is achieved via deed, by Jews exhibiting responsible relations toward each other—and thus forming community. Holiness is constituted by the quality of interpersonal action and relations. The Bible is concerned with the values, norms and standards of interpersonal behavior that exist in the community. According to the medieval rabbinic authority Nachmanides, those values of holiness are encapsulated by the concluding generic *mitzvah* (commandment), “Love your peer as yourself.”

What kind of society is a holy society? Is it one where people produce an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, or is it one where that disparity is minimized? One where people treat each other as finite commodities to be used, or where each person regards his neighbor as having intrinsic sanctity because he is created in God’s holy image? One where the powerful abuse the less fortunate, or where law protects the dignity of the vulnerable? Is it a society of intense competition that alienates a person from his neighbor, or one where people feel deep identification and responsibility for each other? To be a holy people means to construct a society in which the behavioral norms of Lev. 19 form the primary national ethos and the roots of the society’s structure.

The Bible articulates another value at the end of Chapter 19:

If a stranger lives with you in the Land, do not oppress him. He shall be like a native. You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. (v. 33)

This is no insignificant part of the Torah, or some isolated passage that clashes with the main thrust of the Bible’s message. There is one commandment that appears in various forms no less than 36 times⁵. It is the *mitzvah* to be compassionate and resist oppressing the vulnerable, i.e. the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor. The ideal holy society is not a monolithically Jewish community, but a society where gentiles are welcomed, where compassion for the “Other” flows freely and where all respect and protect the dignity of the disadvantaged in their midst.

The end of the Five Books of Moses occurs after the generation that accepted the covenant at Sinai has died. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ last address to the offspring of the generation that left Egypt and his last opportunity to teach them before turning over his leadership to Joshua, who is destined to lead the Jewish people into the Land. God tells Moses to offer the covenant to the new generation and elicit its commitment to the covenant of their parents:

Stand here by Me and I will speak to you about all the commandments, the statutes and the judgments that you shall teach them, so that they may observe them *in the Land that I gave them to possess*....you shall walk in all the ways that the Lord has commanded you, so that you may live and be well and *lengthen your days on the Land* that you possess. This is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments that the Lord your God commanded to teach you so you will fear the Lord your God to keep all His statutes and His commandments that I command you, and your son, and your son’s son all the days of your life....Hear O Israel and take care to do it, so that it will be well with you and that you increase *as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you in the Land*

that flows with milk and honey. (5:28 – 6:3)

Here again the Land appears as essential to the divine biblical mission. From its initial appearance in Genesis to its final appearances in Deuteronomy, the covenant is consistently explicated in conjunction with the Land. We are forced to conclude that life on the Land is constitutive and intrinsic to the covenantal idea of the Jewish people.

II. Covenant, History and Religious Life

In fact, the role of the Land in the covenant is part of a much broader Jewish theology that unites the sweep of Jewish sacred history with the woof and warp of Jewish religious life. I would encapsulate it as follows: For Judaism, redemption is a historical, not a metaphysical, category. The human mission of the divine covenant is to influence human history so that it marches toward a state of affairs where righteousness and justice prevail, and where human beings are aware of the authority and presence of God on earth. This is achieved not primarily by grace, but through human striving, teaching and, above all, through human moral action. In this way, humans and God are partners in perfecting the world and completing the cosmic creation that God began.

Because history is more effectively influenced by societies than by heroic individuals, the Jewish people is called upon to be a “kingdom of priests,” or, in Isaiah’s terminology, “a light unto the nations,” by teaching these values and being models of holy living. In Judaism, priests are leaders and teachers, not intermediaries. The nation’s task is to bring the Infinite into history and finite human experience. Judaism is therefore not so much a religion of creed as a structured lifestyle of deeds on earth. The covenantal commandments constitute the guidelines for translating this lofty vision into the particular actions of everyday life. As the Talmudic phrase goes, this is the essence of the Jewish religious drama and “all the rest is commentary—now go study.”⁶

If I am correct, then for Jews, “incarnation” does not refer to God Himself, but to the holiness of God’s spirit that individuals can feel unmistakably in the course of their finite and temporal experiences. Holiness is infusing the physical world—the carnal world—with a transcendent dimension. Judaism rejected Plato’s ideal of “*soma sema*” (the soul’s striving to escape the prison-house of the body), Augustine’s hard dualism of flesh and spirit, and the nihilist’s attitude of *contemptus mundi*—rejection of the world. It is no accident that the sign of the Jewish covenant is circumcision, literally a stamping into the flesh, and that the requirement of circumcision became one of the primary dividing points over traditional Judaism and early Christianity. Jewish holiness is the product of a dialectical interaction of the body and the spirit, and cannot do without either.⁷

Of course, in the Bible and Jewish religious life, holiness is achieved by more than ethical social relations. The biblical and rabbinic doctrine seems to be that every major arena of human endeavor must be sanctified—i.e. there is no irreversibly secular domain. Prescriptions for holiness appear also in Lev. 18 & 20 relating to sexuality, Lev. 20 relating to sacrifices and eating meat, Lev. 23 relating sacred times of the calendar, i.e. the Sabbath and the holidays, and Lev. 21 relating to avoiding contact with death. Like land and politics, all of these refer to arenas of human physical experience.

In normative Judaism, sexuality assumes holiness first by helping to alleviate existential loneliness that hinders connectedness to both other people and to the Divine—since a committed love relationship between man and woman is seen as the most concrete intimation of the union between a person and God. Secondarily, it is sanctified as the means of propagation by which God’s covenantal partners continue their responsibilities throughout history⁸. Hence, celibacy is a sin in Jewish law.

Food plays a central role in Jewish religious life. There is virtually no Jewish religious celebration

for which Jewish tradition does not mandate a public festive meal. As a primary human experience, eating cannot escape the religious need for sanctification. Judaism attempts this through the demands of *kashrut* that are designed to condition control over primitive biological impulses. Blessings over food and the entire system of *kashrut* are attempts to set a place for God at the dinner table.⁹

The Sabbath and holidays are also sanctified in ways physical: with intimacy¹⁰, food, wine, music and social relations¹¹. Lastly, death is associated with ritual impurity—the antithesis of holiness—because death represents the termination of the potential to infuse the body with spirit. While still retaining traces of the Image of God¹², in the end a corpse is only a physical entity no longer capable of experiencing the Divine. Hence Judaism always understood death as a tragic event ending the covenantal responsibility of that person to bring God onto the earth.¹³

The concept of holiness that dialectically fuses the physical and the spiritual requires a careful balance that is difficult to achieve. Jewish history is replete with competing spiritual conceptions and with Jews who lost this delicate equilibrium. The Essenes celebrated religious purity that entailed asceticism and abandonment of society, and contemporary ultra-Orthodox quietists reject any Jewish place in naturalistic history.¹⁴ Yet, ultimately, both normative Jewish tradition and the Jewish people have rejected the impulse to withdraw from society and political history as practiced by these marginal groups. Jewish life and law consider Jews who practice isolation or asceticism as sinners who betrayed their covenantal responsibility.¹⁵ Avoiding the problematics of politics, war, wealth, biology, and human sexuality does not eradicate evil from God's world or from human experience. On the contrary, evil becomes a greater reality in history, because withdrawal abandons creation to the unredeemed forces of materialism and hedonism.

III. Exile and Homeland

Living as a small minority in exile between 67 C.E. and 1948 prevented the Jewish people from engaging in the constructive politics of their host societies. Hence Jewish religious life focused inward and Jews sought holiness around the private covenantal experiences of family life, food, holidays and Torah study. To paraphrase an Enlightenment thinker, one could live the covenant at home, but not in the street. The nineteenth century Russian Zionist thinker, Leon Pinsker, was correct in describing rootless Diaspora Jews as “ghosts without a body.” Exile not only detached Jews from the soil, it forced Judaism to leave political and social history—to give up its body. Even today in tolerant post-Enlightenment societies, traditional Jews are nearly exhausting themselves in the attempt to create separate communities that can fight off assimilation into the majority cultures. Tragically, there is often too little time and energy left for issues of social justice and moral progress. This is a distortion of normative covenantal life, and, as such, is one of the natural curses of exile.

If holiness is also achieved by constructing a society based on the Torah values enumerated in Lev. 19, then covenantal partners must have the control to determine their social values. Building a society based on specific values—one that mirrors the biblical dream—requires that Jews be in a position to fashion the laws, institutions and culture of that society. This is only possible when they have the autonomy and political opportunity to live according to their dream. To have the impact on humanity that God and His covenant promise, Jews must be able to set their social and moral norms. Even as a minority in the wonderfully benevolent country of America, the Jewish people, *qua* people, have only minimal ability to shape society and influence culture. True self-determination has less to do with avoiding persecution than with sovereignty and majority influence. As the Bible correctly understood, this has proven impossible in exile. All this is because the covenant is addressed to a people, not to individuals. Only national independence can provide a platform for the full realization of the Bible's covenantal dream.

Yet today even secular political Zionists understand that statehood is only a necessary condition for full redemption, not a sufficient one. Everyone familiar with contemporary Israeli life, the brutalizing Israeli-Arab conflict and the harsh compromises that war demands understands how far the present reality of Jewish statehood is from the covenantal ideal. From a covenantal perspective, the greatest tragedy of the ongoing conflict has been that it has prevented the Jewish people from setting the moral and religious ideals of the covenant as imminent objectives.

The issue for the Bible, therefore, is not about borders, whether the dust of the Land of Israel is holy, or whether the Land has unique metaphysical properties. Some kabbalistic texts and Jewish mystics thought this way, but ultimately these ideas were marginalized by Jewish tradition. The normative rabbinic tradition was more faithful to the biblical ideal and saw the ascription of holiness to dust and walls as dangerous idolatries.¹⁶ Nationhood and land are historical necessities, not spiritual ideals. Return to the Land is a return of Judaism to the body and the Jewish people to the political responsibilities of the covenant. If holiness is about assuming the responsibility for shaping a society where covenantal ideals inform behavior and become the prevalent social norms, then the correct political conditions are indispensable to realizing the spiritual vision. This is why the Land is a constitutive element of the biblical covenant.

This nexus—and the indelible Jewish attachment to Israel—is something Christians often have difficulty understanding, since from the time of Tertullian and Origen in the third century, Christian theology tended to metaphorize the biblical category of the Land and substitute “the body of Christ” for it.¹⁷ Moreover, the Reformation protest against abusive temporal power of the Catholic Church has led to the Protestant conception of religion divorced from state power. This partially explains why some Protestant theologians and churches feel deeply uncomfortable today with the idea of Jewish statehood and Israeli power. But ultimately, the effort to de-nationalize Judaism, while doctrinally understandable, is a form of conversion—an attempt to force Judaism and the Jewish people into a Protestant mold. As such, it represents a theological imperialism that is inconsistent with respect for the Jewish faith, and an obstacle to Jewish-Christian understanding.

IV. Redemption

What will the society look like when the covenantal destiny is achieved? What is the vision of the “end of days,” when holiness suffuses the world and the Jewish mission is fulfilled? Micah describes covenantal fulfillment in stunning fashion:

In the end of days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills. Peoples shall stream onto it. And many nations shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob so that He will teach us His ways and we will walk in His path. For the Torah shall go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”...They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war anymore. But every man shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make him afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken it. Let all people walk, everyone in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever. (4:1-5)

This is the messianic dream of universal recognition of God's authority and obedience to His ways, of peace for all, and of personal and national security. Peace and security are natural concomitants of spiritual success, for respect for God's authority entails relating with reverence to all those made in His holy image.¹⁸ Micah concludes with a startling claim of theological pluralism: “Let all people walk in the name of his god.” There is no mass conversion to one universal religion or church, only recognition and tolerance of each people's right to understand God on its own terms. The world is neither exclusively Jewish, nor Christian, nor Moslem. Jerusalem is a place of

social and religious diversity, not a monolithic Jewish society where everyone calls God by the same name. Jerusalem is a place where Jews and Gentiles coexist in harmony with each other, respecting each other, and worshiping alongside each other in faithfulness to their respective spiritual traditions.

Jerusalem, the Land and, by extension, all the earth is to be a place where Jews, Christians, Moslems, indeed all people, live in faith and blessing. Religion is not a zero-sum game, in which one group attains dignity at the cost of the others. Jews are charged by God to bring about somehow this ideal state of affairs, to be the agents “through whom all of the families of the earth shall be blessed.” And Christians who see themselves as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant also participate in this divine responsibility.

Although statehood has raised some theological problems for Christian thinkers¹⁹, we do well to consider the significance of the State of Israel, particularly in the heart of the Middle East. What role has Israel played thus far in religious and cultural history? All agree that the Holocaust was the prime catalyst for the recent change in Christian theology regarding Jews and Judaism. Yet few historical changes are mono-causal and the undeniable reality of the State of Israel has also influenced Christian thinking about Jews. It has allowed the Jewish people to be taken seriously in the family of nations and helped to equalize relations between Christians and Jews. It has helped level the playing field between Jews and the Vatican, and given the Jewish people a corporate political dimension parallel to the Catholic Church. Evidently both the Catholic Church and Judaism see political facticity as necessary for their religious missions.

Secondly, the old Augustinian doctrine of Jewish negative witness to Christianity insisted that God decreed Jews to remain homeless and abased, as punishment for their rejection of Jesus. But this humiliating doctrine of the Wandering Jew could not be maintained after 1948 when Jews returned to their biblical homeland. The permanence of the State of Israel constitutes a powerful empirical refutation of this thesis that has caused so much Christian contempt and Jewish suffering throughout the ages. Ultimately, after much soul-searching, Christian churches acknowledged the Jewish State’s right to exist and thereby implicitly rejected the old doctrine. Christian recognition of Israel—even when officially restricted to a political level—cannot totally avoid theological consequences.²⁰ Surely the theologian John Pawlikowski is logically correct when he forthrightly claims that “the intertwining of faith and land for Judaism inevitably gives the act of recognition of Israel a theological dimension,” and that “the Jewish sense of land as part of the covenant makes some claims on my faith as well.”²¹ Willy-nilly, such recognition strengthens the idea that the Jewish covenant can no longer be seen as an “old” covenant, but a living one. It implies that Judaism remains a valid path to God for Jews.

To the Moslem world, Israel as a sovereign Jewish state represents the possibility of non-Moslem legitimacy—nay equality—in *Dar Al Islam*. This is new and threatening to traditional Islamic culture. Scholars of Middle East history agree that there has never been a concept of equality for non-Moslems in traditional Arab society.²² Jews and Christians have always been considered second-class residents, “*dhimmis*” who are sometimes protected and sometimes abased, but never equal to Moslems in law or social status. This explains why there is such fierce rejection of Israel by Arabs throughout the Middle East. The conflict is not primarily a territorial dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. Why should an imam in Mecca care who is responsible for the garbage collection of Tel Aviv? To Moslems in Mecca, Teheran and Cairo, Israel represents the end to monolithic Moslem control of the Middle East, the end to the traditional Islamic conception of exclusivist politics and religious superiority in that part of the world.

After the Holocaust, Jews have demanded they not be second-class residents whose fate depends on the benevolence of others. They understood that the only place Jews could be secure and have any chance to realize their age-old dreams was in their own Jewish state. As such, Israel

represents the principle of pluralism in the Middle East. It is the ongoing test of whether a non-Moslem can be equal in that part of the world, whether he need not be subordinate to Moslem sufferance, whether he can take responsibility for his own well-being, and whether he can be free to shape his distinctive identity.

Because traditional Middle East societies regard minorities with suspicion and deny them legal equality, Jews and Christians share a common challenge in region. Can they live with equality and dignity together with the overwhelming majority of Moslems in the region? The central ideological and religious question of the tragic conflict is precisely this: Will the Middle East be a monist world in which only Moslems have legitimacy and respectful place, or will it be the venue for Micah's dream where everyone lives in dignity, security and peace?

As minorities, Christians are suffering today in the Middle East. Most having the means to leave are doing so, primarily because of Islamist intolerance. If Israel makes it in the Middle East, i.e. if the principle of non-Moslem legitimacy and equality is accepted in the region because Israel as a Jewish State is accepted, then Christians too will be more easily accepted and their rights, interests and welfare will be more secure. The battle is not between Islam on one side and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Neither is it between Moslems and Jews, nor between Moslems and Christians. The real physical and spiritual battle is between extremists with a monistic vision and moderates with Micah's pluralistic dream. Israel is the front line of the cultural and moral war that will determine whether the Middle East will be a place of monistic intolerance or pluralistic blessing. That is why the conflict is so great, and why it transcends the Israeli and Palestinian communities to vitally affect all Jews, Christians, Sufi Moslems, Bahais and all minorities—indeed all who cherish the covenant, freedom and human dignity.

As Christians and Jews who believe in messianic redemption, we are obligated to believe in Micah's dream and to work for it to become a reality. We are not allowed to despair and fall prey to a hopelessness born of confining our vision to the brutal politics of the day. Like the biblical Queen Esther in ancient Persia, perhaps God has put Jews and Christians in this tragic situation of unabated violence that breaks so many hearts and kills so many of God's holy images, precisely so we can work for Micah's vision. Somehow we must create the possibility for Jews, Christians and Moslems, Buddhists and Hindus all to call the God of the universe in their own names, and for the peoples of the region to beat their swords into ploughshares and transform their instruments of destruction into vessels of creativity and blessing. That is the challenge of the covenant and, with God's help, one of the spiritual roles that the State of Israel can play in human history.

*All italics appearing in biblical quotes are mine—E.K.

Notes

1. This paper makes the traditional assumption that the content of the Pentateuch represents a coherent whole. It makes no attempt to comment on authorship or possible development of the Bible.
2. See Gen 18:18 and 22:18. For its reference to Isaac, see Gen, 26:4; for Jacob, see Gen. 28:13-14.
3. God calls Israel "My witnesses" (Isa. 43:11-12). The *midrash* is exegetically derived from Gen. 24:2-3. See *Sifre, Ha'azinu* 313 and Hartman pp. 28-30.
4. It is unfortunate that 'Torah' is traditionally translated as "Law," particularly in Christian documents. This is derived from the Septuagint translation of Torah as the Greek, '*nomos*' But Jewish tradition never understood 'Torah' as exclusively legal. A more accurate translation is the more literal 'teaching,' since Jewish Scriptures contain—and have been understood by Jewish tradition to be—a combination of law, ethics and narrative.
5. The Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Mezia* 59b) takes note of this repetition as a way of

emphasizing the commandment's importance. It records that according to one rabbinic opinion the warning appears in the Bible not (merely) 36, but 46, times.

6. Eliezer Berkovits and David Hartman offer the most sophisticated and philosophically interesting expressions of this conception of the covenant. See bibliography.
7. Eliezer Berkovits articulated it philosophically as follows: "The deed of *mitzvah* aims at oneness in life, at a measure of interpenetration between the spiritual and the material, and the transformation of both of these by lending material effectiveness to the spiritual and spiritual directedness to the material and biologically vital. The dichotomy of the spiritual and the material is found everywhere in the world of man. The life of the community, as well as that of the individual, is infected through and through with the conflict between what "matters" but is without value and that which is of value but has no power to assert itself on its own. Wherever the dualism is encountered, it should be overcome." *God, Man and History*, pp. 135-136.
8. The authoritative code of Jewish law, *Shulkhan Aruch*, gives the following explanations for the obligation to marry: 1) "It is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), and 2) procreation. Note the order of importance.
9. Rabbinic tradition likened the dinner table to the Temple altar, i.e. the place where humans connected to God in the ancient world. This is the origin of the Jewish custom to put salt on bread at the beginning of a meal, for salt was used with nearly all the Temple sacrifices. Abraham Joshua Heschel expresses it as follows: Before making a blessing over food, the verse in Psalms applies, "The Heavens are of God and the earth He gave to the sons of man." (Ps. 15:16) After the blessing, God becomes part of the experience and a new verse describes the situation, "The earth and all its fullness belong to God." (Ps. 24:1) See also Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 35a-b.
10. The love theme runs throughout traditional Sabbath rituals, concurrently symbolizing the union of male and female as well as the relationship of a human being with the Divine. This is why many communities read The Song of Songs—called by Rabbi Akiva the "The Holy of Holies"—at the arrival of the Sabbath. Sexual relations on the Sabbath are laudatory, not only to create a positive Sabbath ambience for the love relationship between husband and wife, but also as a reflection of the "intimate visit of the God's presence (the "*Shekhinah*"—literally "the Dwelling") that occurs most acutely on the Sabbath. A famous 13th century Jewish epistle maintained that the conjugal union of man and wife was an intimation of the possible spiritual union between human beings with the *Shekhinah*. The document is appropriately entitled, "The Letter of Holiness."
11. Maimonides rules in his code of Jewish law that if one eats a holiday meal without inviting the poor, the traveler or the orphan as guests, it is only a "meal of the belly"—i.e. a biological experience without any religious value.
12. This is the meaning of the biblical injunction against leaving a human corpse hanging overnight. (Deut. 21:23) The *Midrash* interpreted this verse as indicating that such abuse of the human body was a curse "of God," i.e. people would see the Image of God hanging. What Judaism understood as a metaphor for the purpose of teaching ethical regard for the human body, Christianity obviously appropriated more literally.
13. This is the meaning of the statement in Psalms 115:16, "The dead do not proclaim 'Hallelujah.'"
14. Rejection of empirical history is not limited to ultra-Orthodoxy. The twentieth century philosopher Franz Rosenzweig saw Judaism as being above the flux of history and rejecting nationalism. (See D. Hazony "Eliezer Berkovits, Theologian of Zionism" *Azure* No. 17 (Spring 2004) pp. 97-99.
15. In his code of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides categorizes one who separates from the community as someone who has no portion in the World to Come. (Laws of Repentance 3:6) Regarding asceticism, he rules: "A person may say, 'Since envy, cupidity and ambition are evil qualities that lead to a person's ruin, I will avoid them and seek their contraries.' One following this principle will not eat meat, drink wine, marry, dwell in a beautiful home or wear comely clothing, but will clothe himself in sackcloth and coarse wool

etc. like the priests of the gentiles. This too is the wrong way, not to be followed. Whoever persists in such a course is termed a sinner.” (Laws of Moral Dispositions 3:1)

Maimonides’ statements were probably directed at individual Jews or small Jewish groups who celebrated self-denial and rejected any value to the experience of bodily joy, since meat and wine are traditional Jewish symbols of happiness.

They are also an obvious polemic against parallel Christian ascetic impulses and practices that were more common in medieval times. Marcion (2nd century CE) and the Gnostics taught that Jesus’ teachings were exclusively “the way of the spirit.” This led the rejection of the material world in favor of the purely spiritual life of the risen Jesus. Quite logically, its theological concomitant was the rejection of Jewish Scriptures (The “Old” Testament) with its focus on this “this world,” land, and peoplehood. Marcion and his teachings were later declared to be heresy, and it seems that much of post-medieval Christian history has been a movement away from asceticism toward acceptance of the material world. One indication of this is how Maimonides’ description applies to very few if any contemporary Christians, whether lay or clergy. The old images of “carnal Israel” vs. “spiritual Christianity” are inaccurate caricatures suited only to polemics. Both normative Judaism and Christianity have accepted some integration of the spiritual and the material, although the differences in degree are critical.

16. Some today commit a similar idolatry by speaking of the State of Israel, or its specific political policies as having intrinsic sanctity rather than instrumental religious value.
17. For a full explication of this development, see Wilken, ch. 4. It is eminently logical why Christian theology ultimately was forced to interpret away the condition of physical land in the covenant. Once Christianity universalized the covenant to include all humanity, the necessity of living in a specific (i.e. local) geography was both physically impossible and logically irrelevant. It is no accident that the Noahide covenant, which is the universal covenant in Jewish thought, also had no geographical focus.
18. The conjunction of moral perfection and covenantal fulfillment is prominent also in Maimonides’ description of the Messianic Era: “In that era there will be neither famine, nor war, nor jealousy, nor strife. Blessings will be abundant, and comforts within the reach of all. The one occupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord. Hence Israel will be very wise, knowing what is now concealed and will attain an understanding of the Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written, ‘For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.’ (Is. 11:9)” *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Kings 12:5). As the last statements of his voluminous code, the vision constitutes for Maimonides the climax of both Torah and sacred history. It is significant that Maimonides places the description of the final redemption in the category of Torah law dealing with politics and governance. Note also that, as a rationalist, he emphasizes knowledge as the vehicle of spiritual fulfillment.
19. As indicated earlier, some Protestants consider statehood and trappings of political power—whether emanating from the Vatican or from Israel—as a theological mistake.
20. Vatican statements regarding Israel often insist on limiting recognition to political relations. The statement by Cardinal Agustin Bea is a prime example: “The return of the Jews to their ancient homeland held no religious significance. It was a totally political phenomenon.” [Anthony J. Kenny, *Catholic Jews and the State of Israel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) p. 47] The need for these protestations indicates that Vatican authorities are aware of the theological implications of recognizing the right of the Jewish people to claim their biblical homeland.
21. “The Vatican-Israeli Accords: Their Implications for Catholic Faith and Teaching,” in *A Challenge Long Delayed*, edited by Dr. Eugene Fisher and Rabbi Leon Klenicki (New York: Anti-Defamation League 1996) p. 16.
22. See Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford U. 1993) ch. 2, and *What Went Wrong?* (New York: Oxford U. 2002) ch. 4.

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