

‘WHO IS ISRAEL?’

AS WE BEGIN THIS RETREAT ON THE THEME OF MODERN ISRAEL, I’D LIKE US TO THINK ABOUT THE ROLE ISRAEL PLAYS IN THE FAITH & HERITAGE OF JUDAISM.

FOR ALMOST 2,000 YEARS WE SOMEHOW RAN THE RELIGION WITHOUT A JEWISH STATE, BUT CAN WE BE TRULY JEWISH WITHOUT AN ISRAEL? TRUE, WE HAD BEEN A POWERLESS, DISPOSSESSED PEOPLE, BUT DO WE NEED A STATE TO PRACTICE JUDAISM?

DURING MY SABBATICAL, I’VE BEEN STUDYING THE EARLY THINKERS AND FOUNDERS OF REFORM JUDAISM IN THE 19TH CENTURY, AND IT WAS THEIR CONVICTION THAT ‘JEWISH NATIONALISM’ WAS UNNECESSARY, THAT RESTORATION OF A JEWISH HOMELAND CONFLICTED WITH THE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT OF PROGRESS AND BROTHERHOOD. FOR THE MOST PART FOR 50 YEARS REFORM JUDAISM OPPOSED ESTABLISHING A JEWISH HOMELAND UNTIL THE 1930’S, WHEN THE WORLD CHANGED AND REFORM REVERSED ITSELF. WE DO NEED AN ISRAEL, BUT WE SHOULD ASK, “IS IT ONLY FOR A HAVEN FROM PERSECUTION?”

WE ALL HAVE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS, BUT WHAT DO TRADITIONAL *JEWISH SOURCES* HAVE TO SAY? WHAT DOES THE JEWISH RELIGION—MODERNIST OR TRADITIONAL—TEACH ABOUT THE PLACE OF ISRAEL IN JUDAISM?

THE *BOOK OF ESTHER* REFERS TO OUR PEOPLE AS ‘JEWS.’ IT IS ABOUT THE ONLY TIME WE ARE CALLED ANYTHING OTHER THAN HEBREWS OR ISRAELITES IN THE *TANACH*, THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES. BUT *THE BOOK OF ESTHER* WAS WRITTEN MUCH LATER, AND INDEED WAS ONE OF THE 2 FINAL BOOKS INSERTED INTO THE HEBREW BIBLE. EVERYWHERE ELSE WE ARE FIRST, ‘*HEBREWS*’, THEN, ‘*ISRAEL*’.

THINK ABOUT OUR PRAYERBOOK: GOD IS...THE ‘*GOD OF ISRAEL*’; WE ARE *THE CHILDREN OR PEOPLE OF ISRAEL*. IN THE *TORAH, TANACH, MISHNAH* AND RABBINIC LITERATURE UP TO 150 YEARS AGO, OUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN IS CALLED ONLY ‘*ERETZ YISRAEL, THE LAND OF ISRAEL*’. OUR LANGUAGE OF PRAYER AND SCHOLARSHIP IS *HEBREW*, WHICH PRE-DATED EVEN THE ORIGIN OF ISRAEL AS A NATION OR A PEOPLE. WHEN THE ISRAELITES WENT OUT OF EGYPT, THEY WEREN’T SPEAKING ANCIENT EGYPTIAN AFTER ALL.

YOU KNOW THAT WE IDENTIFY GREECE WITH ‘OLYMPUS’, AND ENGLAND WITH ‘THE CLIFFS OF DOVER’. IN THE SAME WAY, THE LAND OF ISRAEL IS UNDERSTOOD WHEN WE SPEAK ABOUT *TZIYONE*, OR ‘ZION’. *TZIYONE* APPEARS OVER 100 TIMES IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES. FIRST OCCURRING AROUND THE 6TH CENTURY BCE IN THE 2ND BOOK OF SAMUEL 5, IT REFERS TO A MOUNT IN JERUSALEM, AND BY EXTENSION, TO ISRAEL. IT’S ROUGHLY LIKE OUR TALKING ABOUT THE USA AS ‘WASHINGTON.’

THE ORIGIN, THE SOURCE, & CENTER OF OUR FAITH IS THE LAND & NATION OF MODERN ISRAEL, FOR WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, JEWS HAVE FARED IN FEW PLACES WELL OVER TIME, WHEN UNDER THE RULE OF OTHERS.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE ACTUAL TITLE OF EVERY ORDAINED RABBI WHETHER ORTHODOX, CONSERVATIVE OR REFORM IS? IT IS: ‘*RABBI IN ISRAEL*’. THE GOD OF ISRAEL, THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, THE LAND OF ISRAEL, THE *TORAH* / RELIGION OF ISRAEL—ANCIENT OR MODERN—ISRAEL IS WHO WE ARE.

AMEN

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