



***Is the land of Israel central to our Jewish identities?
What does it mean if we live there; what does it mean if
we live elsewhere? How has the mitzvah of aliyah been
understood throughout Jewish intellectual tradition?***

When one is in prayer and recites the Shema, it is a simple declaration of Israel's unique relationship with the Creator. But Israel, *yisrael*, has a dual meaning, referring to the Jewish people and to the land of Israel. Each of these has a special relationship with God and with each other.

This class delves into the relationship between God and the land, the people and the land, the nature of community, and how Jews build community in and outside of Israel. The relationship between the Diaspora and the land of Israel has been a complex one for thousands of years, as evidenced in these texts. This resource gives us an opportunity to share our own understandings of this relationship and even, if we wish, to delve into our decision to live *b'galut*, in the Diaspora, or *b'arets*, in our land.

Text #1: Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, "What Will Become of the Jewish People?"

Now, I want to speak about Jews in the Diaspora. There are basically only two choices. Either we can give up, close shop, and say "we are defeated." Or, we can create a new way, a new hope. If we want to survive, we cannot do it by simply surviving. There are more Jews, of one description or another, living in the United States than anywhere else. They did, all in all, quite well for themselves. But what they did not do was to create a communal future to look forward to. As individuals, some are very successful, perhaps as successful as Jews were in any other place ever in history. As a community, as a people, they are second raters, third-raters or less. One cannot go on living with the knowledge that you have to be a third-rater forever. It cannot be done. You cannot have a people striving and struggling, fighting and working only for that.

So, if people want to go on—if there is a feeling that there is something in it—if the memory of the half-obliterated document still possesses some compelling power, then Jewish life in this country must be rebuilt. People cannot go on living in the past, even if the past was nice - and it wasn't completely so. You see, the *shtetl*, wherever it was, cannot be recreated. There is no need and no use for it.

But—let me just say something full of *chutzpah*—there is a need, a use and even a possibility of making this place something like *Galut Bavel*, the ancient Jewish exile in Babylonia. One can create a second center, comparable, sometimes better than the main center in Israel. To do that, one has to do much more than survive. However, if you cannot do it well—if you cannot rebuild here something that will be worthwhile spiritually or intellectually—then it is not worth doing it at all.

1. Summarize the text. What do you think Rabbi Steinsaltz is trying to communicate?
2. How do we bring elements of the Diaspora into Israel, or elements of our holy land, *eretz hakodesh*, into the Diaspora?
3. Are we prepared to recreate Jewish life at its best? Are we doing that now—what would it mean to do that?

Text #2: Deuteronomy 11:8-14

דברים יא:ח-יד

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לְמַעַן תַּחֲזִקוּ וּבִאתֶם וּירְשֶׁתֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲתֶם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

וּלְמַעַן תִּאֲרִיכוּ יָמִים עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְקֹוֹק לְאַבְתִּיכֶם לֵאמֹר לְהֵם וּלְזֶרְעָם אָרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ: כִּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא כְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִצְאֶתֶם מִשָּׁם אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע אֶת זֶרְעֶךָ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ בְּרִגְלֶךָ כְּגֹן הַיַּרְק:

וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אָרֶץ הַרִים וּבְקַעֲת לְמִטֵּר הַשָּׁמַיִם תִּשְׁתֶּה מֵיָם: אָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֶתָּה תָּמִיד עֵינֵי יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּהּ מִרְשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית שָׁנָה: וְהִיא אִם שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעַבְדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם:

וְנָתַתִּי מִטֵּר אֲרֻצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפַּתְּ דָּגְנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וּיְצַהֲרֶךָ:

- 8 So you are to keep all the commandments that I command you today, in order that you may have the strength to enter and to take possession of the land that you are crossing into to possess,
- 9 in order that you may prolong your days on the soil that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey.
- 10 For the land that you are entering to possess: It is not like the land of Egypt, from which you went out, where you sow your seed and water it with your foot like a garden of greens;
- 11 but the land that you are crossing into to possess is a land of hills and cleft valleys; from the rain of the heavens it drinks water;
- 12 a land whose welfare the Lord your God seeks. Regularly are the eyes of the Lord your God upon it, from the beginning of the year until the after-part of the year.
- 13 Now it shall be if you hearken to my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve God with all your heart and with all your being,
- 14 I will give forth the rain of your land in its due-time, shooting-rain and later-rain, you shall gather in your grain, your new-wine and your shining-oil...

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What kind of land is promised here? Is this a land that requires little from its inhabitants, or a land that requires much? How do you know?
3. What is the relationship here between God and the land? Why, in your opinion?
4. To what extent does this description resemble the Israel that you know today? Explain.
5. God promised this land to the Israelites. What are the implications of this promise for us, today?

Text #3: Midrash Sifre Ekev Parshah 37

“...and give you a desirable land, the heritage of the deer, of the hosts of nations.” (Jeremiah 3:19)

[What is ...] “a desirable land”?: A land that is made of palaces. It is made of palaces of kings and rulers because any king or government who did not purchase a home in Israel would say, “I have achieved nothing.”

Rabbi Yehuda said, Do we mean to say that all of the thirty one rulers in the past had wedged themselves into the land of Israel? Instead, just like in Rome nowadays, every leader and government who does not have a palace in Rome says “I have achieved nothing” [if I do not have this]. So, too any ruler or government who has not purchased a palace in Israel says, “I have achieved nothing...”.

[What is ...] “the heritage of the deer”?: Just as a deer is lighter on its feet than any other domesticated or wild animal, so too, the fruits of Israel come easier than the fruits of other lands.

Another interpretation: Just as when a deer is stripped of its skin it cannot contain its flesh, so, too the land of Israel cannot contain the abundance of her fruit--when Israel is fulfilling the Torah.

Just as a deer is easiest to eat among all of the animals, so too, the fruits of the land of Israel are easier to eat than those of other lands.

Would they be light or would they be fatty, the Torah says, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Fat like milk and sweet like honey... The land of Israel because it is the highest of all lands, it is also the most praiseworthy of all lands, as it is written: “Let us ascend and inherit her...” (Numbers 13:30). “And they ascended and they surveyed the land” (Numbers 13:30). “And they ascended to the Negev...” (Genesis 45:25). “And they ascended from Egypt” (Genesis 45:25).

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What kind of land is promised here? How does it build on the Deuteronomy text?
3. What is Israel, in these rabbis' or writers' eyes?
4. What are the advantages of understanding Israel in this way? What are the disadvantages?
5. Why, do you think, might the rabbis use these physical or animal images to demonstrate the richness of Israel? What is the relationship between the physical and the sacred nature of Israel?
6. How does this understanding of the land of Israel inform the people's relationship with God?
7. How is the rabbis' relationship similar to our present-day relationship with Israel? Is it?

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 110b

The Rabbis taught: He says, "Let us make *aliyah*" and she says, "Let's not." We force her to make *aliyah*. And if she refuses, he may divorce her without paying her *ketubah*. She says, "Let us make *aliyah*." He says, "Let's not." We force him to make *aliyah*, and if he resists, he should divorce her and pay the value of the *ketubah*. ...The rabbis taught: One should always live in the land of Israel, even in a village where mostly gentiles live. No one should live outside the land, even in a city where mostly Jews live. For anyone who lives in the Land of Israel is like a person who has a God and anyone who lives outside the land is like a person who does not have a God, as it is written "To give you the land of Canaan so that I can be your God" (Leviticus 25: 37).

You mean to say that anyone who doesn't live in Israel is without God! Rather you must mean that anyone who lives outside the land is like an idolater. Just as the verse says with David, "For God has expelled me today from annexing the inheritance of the Lord, saying to me, 'Go, and serve other gods.'" Who would ever say to David to go and worship other gods? It must mean, "Anyone who does not live in the Land is tantamount to being an idolater!" (I Samuel 26:19)

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
(What is the relationship between the man and the woman?)
2. What claims are made about the Land of Israel which one might find surprising?
3. List all things for which settling the Land of Israel takes priority.
4. The text discusses living in Jewish communities outside of the land and gentile communities inside the land. Which do the rabbis find preferable? Why, do you think?
5. Think about when and where this text, as a text from the Babylonian Talmud, was written.
What does the text imply mean for its writers and for Jews everywhere at the time?
Why might the rabbis have been thinking about Israel in this way?
How does its context influence your understanding of the text?

Text #5: The Commentary of Tosaphot: Ketubot 110B

He says, “Let’s make *aliyah*.” Nowadays we do not observe this commandment because the roads are dangerous. Rabbeinu Chaim says, “There is no commandment to live in the Land of Israel today because there are many commandments connected to the land which, when transgressed, have harsh punishments and we are not capable of observing them carefully.”

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What reasons are given for why the *mitzvah* of *aliyah* is not being observed? Would any of these apply today?
3. How is “land” understood here? How is this similar to or different from the texts we’ve read?
4. During this time, the great commentator Nachmanides moved to Israel, and suggested that settlement in Israel even during difficult times was imperative, a *mitzvah* on behalf of the community, so that a Jewish presence in the land could always be maintained. What do you make of this?

Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 110B–111A

Rabbi Zera was avoiding Rabbi Yehuda when he wished to enter the land of Israel. For Rabbi Yehuda said, “Anyone who goes from Babylon to Israel transgresses a positive commandment, as it is written, “You will be brought to Babylon, and there you will be until the day of My visit to them, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 27:22).

Rabbi Zera interpreted this verse as referring to the Holy Vessels [that the Babylonians plundered from the Temple.] Rabbi Yehuda actually used another verse, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, until it please” (Song of Songs 2:7).

Rabbi Zera learned from this verse that the people should not go to Israel en masse. [but one may go as an individual.] Rabbi Yehuda learned that individuals may not ascend to Israel from a different verse. “I adjure you O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, until it please” (Song of Songs 3:5). Rabbi Zera used this verse to learn what Rabbi Yossi Bar Rebbe Hanina learned:

There were three oaths that the Holy One exacted from Israel: One, that the people would not go to Israel [without Divine intervention] en masse. Another, that Israel was made to promise that they would not rebel against the nations of the world and that He made the gentile nations promise not to enslave Israel too harshly... Rabbi Levy said there were six oaths given. The three that have already been stated, and three others. One, they should never reveal the end of days. Another, they should not delay the end of days and they should not reveal the secret to the nations of the world. Why does the verse say “with the hosts and the rams of the field”? Rabbi Elazar said, The Holy One said to Israel, if you fulfill the conditions of the oath, all will be well. If not, I will let your flesh go leaderless into the world like the multitudes and the rams of the field.... Rabbi Yehuda said, Anyone who lives in Babylon is like one who lives in Israel, as it is written: “Ho! Escape, O Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon.” (Zecharia 2:11) Abayye says: We have a tradition that Babylon will not be subject to the sufferings that precede the coming of the Messiah... .

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What does the text say about Babylon?
3. What does the text say, implicitly and explicitly, about *aliyah*?
4. How does this text contrast with the texts we have already read?
5. Rashi understands the first oath as being about war, essentially stating that Israel would not take the land by force. What do you think of this reading? What does it imply for the *mitzvah* of *aliyah*?
6. How do you relate to this text? Does it make sense to you?

Text #7: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 111A

Rab Judah stated in the name of Samuel: As it is forbidden to leave the Land of Israel for Babylon so it is forbidden to leave Babylon for other countries. Both Rabbah and R. Joseph said: Even from Pumbeditha [a renowned center for Torah learning] to Be Kubi [a village just outside of Pumbeditha].

A man once moved from Pumbeditha to [settle in] Be Kubi and R. Joseph placed him under the ban.

A man once left Pumbeditha to [take up his abode at] Astunia, [also a village near Pumbeditha] and he died. Said Abaye: 'If this young scholar wanted it, he could still have been alive'.

Rab Judah said: Whoever lives in Babylon is accounted as though he lived in the Land of Israel; for it is said in Scripture, Ho, Zion, escape, you who lives with the daughter of Babylon (Zechariah 2:11).

Abaye stated: We have a tradition that Babel will not witness the sufferings [that will precede the coming] of the Messiah. ..

1. Summarize the text. What are the ideas being communicated?
2. How can this text be reconciled with the idea that Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish people?
3. What kind of center is Babylonia, do you think, according to this text?
What qualities give Babylonia this status?
4. Is there a modern-day Babylonia? If so, why or how is Israel unique?

Hebrew Sources

Text #3:

ספרי פרשת עקב לז

הרי הוא אומר ירמיה ג יט ואתן לך ארץ חמדה נחלת צבי צבאות גוים, ארץ שעשויה חוילאות חוילאות למלכים ולשלטונים, שכל מלך ושלטון שלא קנה בארץ ישראל אומר לא עשיתי כלום.

רבי יהודה אומר, וכי אחד ושלשים מלך שהיו לשעבר כולם היו בארץ ישראל אלא כדרך שעושים ברומי עכשו שכל מלך ושלטון שלא קנה ברומי אומר לא עשיתי כלום כך כל מלך ושלטון שלא קנה פלטירות וחוילאות בארץ ישראל אומר לא עשיתי כלום.

נחלת צבי, מה צבי זה קל ברגליו מכל בהמה וחיה כך פירות ארץ ישראל קלים לבוא מכל פירות ארצות, דבר אחר מה צבי זה כשאתה מפשיטו אין עורו מחזיק את בשרו כך ארץ ישראל אין מחזקת פירותיה בשעה שישראל עושים את התורה, מה צבי זה קל לאכל מכל בהמה וחיה כך פירות ארץ ישראל קלים לאכל מכל הארצות, אי קלים לא יהו שמנים תלמוד לומר (דברים יא ט) ארץ זבת חלב ודבש, שמנים כחלב ומתוקים כדבש וכן הוא אומר (ישעיה ה:א) אשירה נא לידידי שירת דודי לכרמו כרם היה לידידי בקרן בן שמן, מה שור זה אין בו גבוה מקרניו כך ארץ ישראל גבוהה מכל הארצות או מה שור זה אין בו פסולת מקרניו כך ארץ ישראל פסולה מכל הארצות תלמוד לומר בקרן בן שמן, שמנה היא ארץ ישראל, ללמדך שגבוה מחבירו משובח מחבירו, ארץ ישראל לפי שגבוהה מכל משובחת מכל שנאמר (במדבר יג ל) עלה נעלה וירשנו אותה, (שם / במדבר / שם כא) ויעלו ויתורו את הארץ, (שם / במדבר / שם כב) ויעלו בנגב (בראשית מה כה) ויעלו ממצרים.

בית המקדש שגבוה מכל משובח מכל שנאמר (דברים יז ח) וקמת ועלית אל המקום, ואומר ישעיה ב ג והלכו עמים רבים ואמרו לכו ונעלה אל הר בית ה', ואומר (ירמיה לא ה) כי יש יום קראו נוצרים וגו'

Text #4:

תלמוד בבלי כתובות ק"ב:

ת"ר: הוא אומר לעלות, והיא אומרת שלא לעלות - כופין אותה לעלות, ואם לאו - תצא בלא כתובה, היא אומרת לעלות, והוא אומר שלא לעלות - כופין אותו לעלות, ואם לאו - יוציא ויתן כתובה. היא אומרת לצאת, והוא אומר שלא לצאת - כופין אותה שלא לצאת, ואם לאו - תצא בלא כתובה; הוא אומר לצאת, והיא אומרת שלא לצאת - כופין אותו שלא לצאת, ואם לאו - יוציא ויתן כתובה...ת"ר: לעולם ידור אדם בא"י אפ"י בעיר שרובה עובדי כוכבים, ואל ידור בחו"ל ואפילו בעיר שרובה ישראל, שכל הדר בארץ ישראל - דומה כמי שיש לו אלוה, וכל הדר בחוצה לארץ - דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה, שנא': ויקרא כ"ה לתת לכם את ארץ כנען להיות לכם לאלהים, וכל שאינו דר בארץ אין לו אלוה? אלא לומר לך: כל הדר בחו"ל - כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים

Text #5:

תוספות כתובות ק"ב:

הוא אומר לעלות כו' - אינו נוהג בזמן הזה דאיכא סכנת דרכים והיה אומר רבינו חיים דעכשיו אינו מצוה לדור בא"י כי יש כמה מצות התלויות בארץ וכמה עונשין דאין אנו יכולין ליזהר בהם ולעמוד עליהם.

Text #6 and 7:

כתובות קיא:א

ר' זירא הוה קמשתמיט מיניה דרב יהודה, דבעא למיסק לארץ ישראל, דאמר רב יהודה: כל העולה מבבל לארץ ישראל עובר בעשה, שנאמר: ירמיהו כ"ז בבלה יובאו ושמה יהיו עד יום פקדי אותם נאם ה'. ורבי זירא? ההוא בכלי שרת כתיב. ורב יהודה? כתיב קרא אחרינא: שיר השירים ב' השבעתי אתכם בנות ירושלים בצבאות או באילות השדה וגו'. ורבי זירא? ההוא שלא יעלו ישראל בחומה. ורב יהודה? השבעתי אחרינא כתיב. ורבי זירא? ההוא מיבעי ליה לכדרבי יוסי ברבי חנינא, דאמר: ג' שבועות הללו למה? אחת, שלא יעלו ישראל בחומה; ואחת, שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את ישראל שלא ימרדו באומות העולם; ואחת, שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את העובדי כוכבים שלא ישתעבדו בהן בישראל יותר מדאי. ורב יהודה? שיר השירים ב' אם תעירו ואם תעוררו כתיב. ורבי זירא? מיבעי ליה לכדרבי לוי, דאמר: שש שבועות הללו למה? תלתא - הני דאמרן, אינך - שלא יגלו את הקץ, ושלא ירחקו את הקץ, ושלא יגלו הסוד לעובדי כוכבים. שיר השירים ב' בצבאות או באילות השדה - אמר רבי אלעזר, אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל: אם אתם מקיימין את השבועה מוטב, ואם לאו - אני מתיר את בשרכם כצבאות וכאילות השדה... אמר רב יהודה: כל הדר בבבל - כאילו דר בארץ ישראל, שנאמר: זכריה ב' הוי ציון המלטי יושבת בת בבל. אמר אביי, נקטינן: בבל לא חזיא חבלי דמשיח...