

# Dividing the Land of Israel Into Two States Is a Moral Imperative

The concept of the Jewish homeland has dominated the discourse for millennia, but now we need to reach definitive conclusions.

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There is no more problematic concept in regard to Jewish identity than that of homeland (moledet). Yet, a primal and natural connection to a homeland is a cornerstone on which every national identity is constructed. The connection to territory overrides in importance both shared national language, shared religion and, certainly, a shared historical context. Without a primal connection to a homeland - which is often compared to the primal maternal bond - national identity is shaky and hollow.

But Jewish national identity both amazed and disturbed the world by its lengthy survival, despite a fundamental and core weakness of the concept of homeland which it bears; the more so, because the complex Jewish attitude toward homeland continues, to some degree, to nourish anti-Semitic enmity.

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"Go forth from your native land [moledet] and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." This, the first sentence spoken to the first Jew, was adopted by many Jews throughout Jewish history, whether as a theological imperative or as an existential and ideological possibility. Indeed, Abraham left not only his homeland and his father's house; he also left the new land which was vouchsafed him and went down to Egypt; and even though he finally returned to the Land of Israel, his grandson Jacob and all his offspring also went to Egypt and did not return to their native land to the end of their days.

Hence, the Jewish people was not forged in its homeland, nor was the Torah received in the homeland but in the desert, an interim region between the diaspora and the designated homeland. This is exceptional: there are very few nations whose physical and spiritual identity was not forged in their homeland. After the destruction of the First Temple, the exiles in Babylon sang with intense emotion, "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." However, when after only 40 years the king of Persia called on them to return to their land and rebuild the devastated Temple, only some of them agreed to return to the Land of Israel, and before returning hurled angry words at their brethren who remained voluntarily in exile.

During the 600 years of the Second Temple period, more than half the Jewish people started to wander across the ancient world, enfeebling the element of the physical connection to the Land of Israel. Although the Jewish national identity and religion did not forgo the element of a homeland, it rendered the concrete homeland virtual.

Hence, the Jews also played down the value and importance of the homeland element in other nations, whose countries looked to them like a chain of inns and hotels, in which the Jews, polite guests, passed from one to the other, whether by volition or by coercion.

The Romans did not exile the Jews from the Land of Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple. Every historian of the Second Temple period will confirm that. And for 1,500 years after the disintegration of the Roman Empire, no Roman or other foes were positioned on the borders of the Land of Israel to prevent the return of the Jews to their land. The fraudulent myth of the Jews' exile by the Romans, which is deeply implanted in the arguments for the historical right to the land, is not even backed up in Jewish liturgy, which for generations reiterated, "Because of our sins we went into exile from our land," and not "we were exiled from our land."

Indeed, the approximately two million Jews (the conjectured population ) who lived in the Land of Israel at the time were not loaded onto Roman ships and forcibly exiled. Rather, they gradually forsook their homeland (particularly after the failure of the Shimon Bar Kochba revolt ) and joined the large Jewish dispersion across the length and breadth of the ancient world.

Through the doctrine of Yavneh and its sages, the virtual homeland increasingly took root in the Jewish identity. The halakha, or Jewish religious law, which made do with only ten Jews for a prayer quorum, made possible the most astonishing national dispersal in human history. It was not only a historical dispersal but active and dynamic, and remains so to this day - from Afghanistan, Iran, Bukhara and Uzbekistan through Romania, Turkey, Iraq and as far as Yemen and North Africa, the entire Mediterranean Basin, to Russia with its peoples and satellites, Eastern Europe and westward. And, of course, upon the discovery of the American continent, the Jews, too, hurried to cross the Atlantic and dispersed across the New World, north and south, as far as the Land of Fire. Nor were remote South Africa, Australia and New Zealand left out by the Jews.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, when only 5,000 of the world's 2.5 million Jews resided in the Land of Israel (according to the Encyclopedia Hebraica ), some 80 percent of the members of the Jewish people have changed their country of residence. Horrifically, some of the victims of the Holocaust were not murdered in their countries of residence but were taken by force to be exterminated in a non-homeland: death camps void of national character.

The "virtual homeland," in the cultivation of which Jews have excelled throughout their history, generally was looked at askance, to put it mildly, by the other nations. After all, it is understandable that people do not like to have their home considered a permanent guest house for strangers, even if they are polite and peace loving, and highly efficient and productive, as the communities of Jews generally were in all the lands of their dispersal in the past and present. Accordingly, when the secular nationalist identity of these nations grew stronger, and the sense of homeland became a critical element in them, in many places the theological reservations of the past turned into concrete hatred. The "loyalists of the virtual homeland" were compelled to try to transform their countries of residence into true homelands in terms of their

identity, whether by assimilation of one kind or another, or - if there was no other choice - by making the virtual homeland a concrete homeland.

In novels and poems, in Gordonian philosophies about a renewed bond with the tilling of the soil, in Brennerite moral ideologies about complete responsibility for reality, in Herzlian utopias and in Jabotinsky-like threats - "If you do not liquidate the diaspora, the diaspora will liquidate you" - the various and diverse fathers of Zionism tried to tempt the Jews at the beginning of the 20th century to rehabilitate the concept of the homeland, which had become so debilitated over the centuries.

But was there available territory to serve as a homeland? The Russians would not yield sovereignty in Birobidjan, nor would the Argentines in the tracts offered by Baron Hirsch. Uganda was the fruit of a delusion by a British official in the Colonial Office, who never asked the African inhabitants themselves whether they were willing to convert their homeland into a Jewish state; not to mention the fact that probably no Jew would have set foot there. Only in the Land of Israel was it possible to persuade the Jews - and not easily - to transform the virtual homeland into a real one.

However, the Land of Israel was already then the homeland of the Arab inhabitants, and it makes no difference whether at the inception of Zionism the Palestinians defined themselves as a separate nation or as part of the larger Arab nation. The marshes and wastes of Palestine were part of the identity of its inhabitants, just as the desolate Negev is part of the identity of the Israelis, who will not give up a single boulder-strewn hill there. Could the Jews have retained, by remote control, a historic right to the Land of Israel during the hundreds of years when they were absent from it? Is that even possible? The only moral right to transform the virtual Jewish homeland into a concrete homeland in the Land of Israel stemmed solely from the distress of a nation which had been condemned to death. Indeed, in practice this old-new homeland saved hundreds of thousands of European Jews who arrived in it after the Balfour Declaration, in a period in which the gates of America and other countries were closed to them.

Accordingly, because a homeland is not only territory but a primal element of personal and national identity, the division of the Land of Israel into two states is not only the sole political solution, it is also a moral imperative. Those who nibble at the territory of the Palestinians, as the State of Israel is doing now in the territories, are obliged to know that they are plundering and infringing the very essence of the inhabitants' identity - and who better than we know, from Jewish history, how precious the national and religious identity was to the Jews and how much they were willing to sacrifice for its sake.

At the same time, the identity of the Palestinians' homeland is almost the opposite of the identity of our homeland, and in a certain sense it too requires examination. As compared to a nation that switched homelands like a frequent flier, for many Palestinians the homeland is sometimes reduced to village and house, which is why every uprooting from them foments tragedy and crisis. The Palestinians in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip or in the West Bank are not many kilometers away from the homes and villages from which they fled or were expelled in the 1948 war, even though they are still resident in the Palestinian homeland. Their feeling is that they did not only go into exile from village and house but from the homeland itself, and so for

64 years they have continued to live in the disgraceful and crippling conditions of refugee camps without the desire or ability to rehabilitate themselves in their homeland. The right of return to the homeland, which is legitimate, became the right of return to the house in Israel, which is impossible and unnecessary.

In this period of political despair, which is spilling over into the new year, is it not worth trying to clarify old concepts and thereby look for a new breakthrough?