

Israel: People Over Land
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I understand why my friend wrote that Facebook post, but that doesn't mean I like it. "Where do the Palestinians get that we took over their land?" he asked. "Last I checked, archeologists haven't found Palestinian pottery or scrolls dating back hundreds of years; but they have found Hebrew texts and scrolls."

My friend is reacting to a despicable lie. They are saying that Israel is colonial, meaning that Jews in our homeland are comparable to British in North America and India, Conquistadors in Latin America, and Belgians in Congo. It's simply not true.

Some relevant history: The Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70, thrusting many of our people into exile. Then, sixty-five years later, our rabbinic sages backed an ill-advised revolt, led by a man named Bar Kochba. The result? Roman armies slaughtered the rebellious Jews and began a persecution that would continue unabated until, well, today. The sages' response to the massacre was to conclude that they should not again take up arms to reconquer the Land. Instead, some would live there as a minority, while all would pray, multiple times each day, that God would restore us to freedom and sovereignty in our ancestral homeland.

In the nineteenth century, Zionists picked up where those prayers left off, devising a new and modern way for the Jewish people to regain sovereignty and freedom in our homeland. They would encourage Jewish immigration to Palestine, as it was then universally known, returning to our native land, reinvigorating the Jewish spirit and working toward a refuge for Jews everywhere.

But here's the deal: Our people has never been alone in our Promised Land. No sooner than Abraham and Sarah arrive there do we read, "The Canaanites were then in the land."ⁱ God promises it to their descendants, not to Abraham and Sarah themselves.ⁱⁱ

When Sarah dies, though, Abraham needs a cemetery. Torah tells us, "Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the landowning citizens, the Hittites, and he said to them, 'If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron...Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns...Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Abraham is the model of *anavah*, humility. Those of us who have learned Mussar from Alan Morinis know a mantra for humility: "No more than my place,

no less than my space.” Abraham does not approach the Hittites with a claim of divine right to the Promised Land—that is, he does not take a place that is not yet rightfully his. Instead, he calls himself “a resident alien among” them.^{iv} Still, he does not shrink from his responsibility, and what he may even see as his right, to purchase land there. The Hittites offer him a burial ground for free,^v but Abraham won’t take it. He doesn’t even negotiate a discounted purchase price.^{vi}

This purchase is finalized in public, at the town gate,^{vii} an ancient version of a closing at a title company. By the Middle Ages, our sages were pointing to this transaction as proof that the entire land belongs to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah forever.^{viii}

So what about my friend’s Facebook post? His facts are facts. No archeologist or Torah reader will find evidence of ancient Palestinians. There was, however, an ancient people called Philistines, who lived where Gaza is now. By the time the Romans came along, the Philistines were long gone. The Romans resurrected their name, calling their colony Syria Palestina, primarily as an insult to Judeans, emphasizing that the land was no longer theirs. That territory, with imprecise borders that often included modern Syria and Jordan, continued to be called Palestine, as it was ruled across the centuries by a succession of colonial powers, never by the local population.

Like Abraham and Sarah, when the modern Zionists came to the Land, they found other people there. And like Abraham, they sought to purchase land, now in accordance with Ottoman law and European real estate practices familiar to them. The sellers were often absentee landlords. The local population, often displaced, began to adopt an identity connected to the name of the land. They are Palestinians.

The place where Abraham bought that burial ground is now in the West Bank city of Hebron. The site is holy to both Jews and Muslims, who both revere Abraham as their forefather. Israel has occupied Hebron since its victory in the Six-Day War. When Jews returned there after that 1967 war, they found people already living there once again, and these people were and are Palestinians, a real people with verifiable roots in the Land—for all we know, descended from the Canaanites that Abraham and Sarah first encountered there or the Hittites from whom Abraham made that initial land purchase.

There should be no question: The Jewish people has an ancestral claim to the Land of Israel. We have been connected to that Land from the mythic days of Sarah and Abraham to the present. We never abandoned that bond with our homeland, nor did we ever leave the land or cede it to others of our own free will.

There should also be no question: The Jewish people is not alone in treasuring an ancestral claim to the Land known as Israel and as Palestine. There has always been a local indigenous population, alongside equally indigenous Jews, throughout the reigns of countless colonial powers, from Assyrians and Babylonians to Ottomans and the British Crown.

Today, the Israel Defense Force pursues a mission on which the Jewish people must not compromise. Israel must destroy Hamas, a genocidal terrorist organization. Its goal is to destroy the State of Israel and to murder all Jews everywhere.

American backing is critical to this war effort, not only through direct military support but also through diplomatic efforts to keep waffling nations from turning against Israel. Yesterday, Thomas Friedman wrote a caution in this regard: “[President] Biden can sustainably generate the support Israel needs only if Israel is ready to engage in some kind of a wartime diplomatic initiative directed at Palestinians in the West Bank—and hopefully in a post-Hamas Gaza—that indicates Israel will discuss some kind of two-state solutions if Palestinians can get their political houses unified and in order.”^{ix}

Our people has a moral right to sovereignty and security in the Land of Israel. However, Jewish sovereignty and security there have never required that we be alone in the Land. Nor do Israel’s safety and wellbeing necessitate that Israel hold dominion over every square inch of ancient Israel—indeed, until 1967, we never did, except perhaps for a period of about a century, three thousand years ago.

Under the right conditions, which have not existed previously, and which will be hard to achieve, the price of peace and security may be that Jews will not be sovereign in the whole Land of Israel, perhaps not even over that cave that Abraham is said to have bought from Ephron the Hittite. Let us all pray with faith: The people of Israel can thrive in the Jewish State, whose borders need not include Gaza or the entire West Bank. The State of Israel must live. The people of Israel shall live. And, if we can live with Abraham’s humility alongside others who are equally indigenous there, the people of Israel will thrive, in peace.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 12:6.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 12:7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 23:7-9.

^{iv} Genesis 23:4.

^v Genesis 23:6, 11, 15.

^{vi} Leviticus 23:15-16.

^{vii} Genesis 23:14.

^{viii} Chizkuni to Genesis 23:20.

^{ix} Thomas L. Friedman, "I Have Never Been to This Israel Before," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2023.