



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

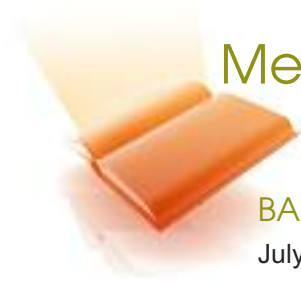
BAMIDBAR > Pinchas

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 12, 2014

Pinchas

**Does Israel Belong
to the Jews?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why is Israel so important to the Jews? Why do we insist that it is ours by right?

But is it? Does Israel belong to the Jews?

In answering that question, this sermon will offer a new approach to Israel – an approach that is thousands of years old, an approach that is radical and completely essential. This new and radical, eternal and essential approach originates in the Torah, in the words of this week’s reading, *Parshat Pinchas*.

It is less than two weeks since the destruction of three of our Holy Temples – Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali. And in three days from now, is the 17th of Tammuz, a fast day that marks the beginning of the saddest period of the Jewish calendar, when we mourn the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples that stood in Jerusalem.

We rebuild these Temples by embracing our legacy and our inheritance, our inherent connection with the heart and soul of Jewish people which is the Land of Israel. As demonstrated as well by the 12th-13th of Tammuz, when the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe was liberated from prison 87 years ago (1927), celebrating the victory of Judaism and Torah against its oppressors.

This Land wasn’t merely *given* to the Jewish People. This Land *is* the Jewish People.

Israel does not *belong* to the Jews; Israel *is* the Jews.

DOES ISRAEL BELONG TO THE JEWS?

1. Honorable Mention (Joke)

A lawyer was reading out the will of a wealthy man to the assembled heirs:

“To my daughter Jessica, who looked after me in sickness and kept the business going, I leave the yacht, the business and \$1 million.”

“To you, my loving wife Rose, who stood by me in rough times, as well as good, I leave the house and \$2 million.”

“And, to my cousin Dan, who hated me, argued with me, and thought that I would never mention him in my will – well, you are wrong. Hello Dan!”

2. In the Wake of Tragedy

It’s good to laugh, else we’d cry.

We stand now in the wake of tragedy. And we must learn from it. Allowing ourselves to continue on after a tragedy without learning anything might be even more tragic than the tragedy itself. We must take the destruction of life and try to understand life even better. We must take the heartbreaking events to fix all the hearts of the world. We must ... lest it happen again.

It is less than two weeks since the destruction of three of our Holy Temples – Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali (may God avenge their blood). And in three days from now, is the 17th of Tammuz, a fast day that marks the beginning of the saddest period of the Jewish calendar, when we mourn the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples that stood in Jerusalem.

Inevitably, invariably, these tragic events – both recent and historic – force us to ask honest questions and to look for even more honest answers. And here, with the destruction of the Temples in Israel – both the temples of flesh and blood and those of brick and mortar – the ultimate question arises:

Does Israel belong to the Jews?

I never get political, and I won't start now. Rabbis are not politicians; rabbis are here to convey the Torah perspective on reality. So is it the rabbi's job – and challenge – to convey the Torah perspective on Israel.

What better place to understand the Land of Israel than by reading the very book that defines it as a "Holy Land," and describes and documents its parameters?

3. The Soul of Israel

Perhaps if we understood the Jews' relationship with the Land, we could come to understand our purpose in the world. Perhaps if we came to know the soul of Israel as the Torah describes it, we could also begin to cry over the worst tragedy of its Temples' destruction, and our responsibility to do everything in our power to build them back up again.

One of the big problems with discussing Israel is the myriad of opinions expressed about the land and the countless pontificating pundits and talking heads espousing these different points of view. All of these different takes on the Holy Land – political, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, military, cultural, agricultural – are all good and nice, but they all do one very detrimental thing: they all approach Israel from the bottom up, not the top down.

So let's take the opposite approach. Let's try to abandon the many subjective lenses of humanity and see Israel through the one objective lens of God.

Who better to ask than God what this Holy Land is all about? And what better place to look for God's answer than in God's Holy Book, the Torah?

(Granted that the chutzpah of a Jew extends far enough to disagree with God Himself about the best vision for the Holy Land, but at least we will have God's ideal clearly stated. Then we can make our choices.)

Fortunately, God did tell us His vision for the Holy Land of Israel, and it's not about green lines, roadmaps, two state solutions, settlers, the UN, sanctions or boycotts. It's about inherent values.

So let's look in the Torah and see what the Torah says. After all, it is the Torah and the Torah alone that calls it the Holy Land, so why not look at our primary source?

4. Legacy

As Divine Providence would have it, this week's Torah reading answers our question: Does Israel belong to the Jews?

As the Jews traverse the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land of Israel, God instructs Moses on the practical administrative process of divvying up the Land once they arrive. After all, this will be valuable real estate and there must be clear instruction on which tribe should dwell where.

If we were paying attention to the Torah verses we just read, one constant should have jumped – and that is the idea of an inheritance, of legacy, of heritage, or *nachala* in Hebrew.

You shall apportion the Land among these as an inheritance (b'nachala), in accordance with the number of names. To the large [tribe] you shall give a larger inheritance (nachalato) and to a smaller tribe you shall give a smaller inheritance (nachalato), each person shall be given an inheritance (nachalato) according to his number. Only through lot shall the Land be apportioned; they shall inherit (yinachalu) it according to the names of their fathers' tribes. The inheritance (nachalato) shall be apportioned between the numerous and the few, according to lot.¹

¹ Numbers 26:53-56.

No less than six times is the word “inheritance” (*nachala* or its derivative) used in these four verses alone. This is obviously a very essential element of the Land of Israel.

5. Inheritance Law

How are we to understand the Torah’s view of inheritance?²

According to Jewish law, which is sourced in this week’s portion, when a next-of-kin inherits something, the heir is not a *new* entity *acquiring* a *new* something; but rather a *replacement* taking the same exact place as the one from whom he or she inherits. As the verse says it clearly, *Instead of your forefathers will be your sons; you shall appoint them as princes throughout the land.*³ Legacy is not an entity passing onto another entity; legacy is a succession of one entity, one continuum.

Why is this important? Well, when you are given a gift or make a purchase, you *acquire* a new item that was not yours before. But when you *inherit* something, you are but an *extension* of your predecessor.

In other words: because the next-of-kin replaces the kin who came before, the next-of-kin automatically possesses that which his kin possessed. The inheritor stands in the place of the person he is inheriting from and becomes the very essence of the person he is inheriting from. And, therefore, he has automatic ownership of the property.

It may seem like a fine point, but it is an essential one. The inheritance is not the transference of ownership from one entity to another. It is the natural perpetuation of one single entity, *Instead of your forefathers will be your sons.*

Says the Torah: the Jewish people’s connection to the Holy Land is an inheritance, a single eternal continuum. The Holy Land was, is and will always be theirs.

² The Ragatchover Gaon discusses this in various places in his Tzafnas Paneach,

³ Psalms 45:17.

And whose legacy are we continuing? Why, that of God Himself!

The land of Israel is called *Nachalat Hashem*, the “Legacy of God.”⁴

*[This is] a land that the Lord, your God, looks after. Constantly are the eyes of the Lord your God upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.*⁵

6. Three Levels of Connecting with God

Perhaps we can better understand the Jews’ connection to the Holy Land, by first understanding a verse we recite every morning in the prologue to the *Shachrit* prayer service that describes three different levels of our connection with God. By understanding our connection with God we can understand our connection with the Holy Land.

Every morning, before beginning the *Shachrit* service, we say: *How fortunate are we! How good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage!*⁶

How good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage. These three terms describe three different levels of our relationship with God – portion, lot, heritage.

The first level of connection is, *our portion*. A *portion* denotes that the connection with God is apportioned and proportional to our actions. It is a connection with God that is earned, that is contingent on our actions (or lack thereof), and is individually subjective. Regarding this level of connection, some of us have greater portions, some have smaller; some feel more connected, some less; some would call themselves religious, some would not. It is a connection that is earned. This is the first level of connection.

⁴ See II Samuel 26:19 and Rashi ad loc. See Laws of Kings, 5:12.

⁵ Deuteronomy 11:12.

⁶ See also Rambam, Seder Hatfilah chapter 1.

The second level of connection is *our lot*. A *lot* denotes a gift from above. When we cast lots, we are subjecting ourselves to a force outside of us. If the lots fall a certain way, then this is a gift that was unearned but simply given. Part of our relationship with God is simply given to us from on high, independent of our actions or beliefs. Some of us have been born into certain families or lifestyles or beliefs, and some of us have been born into others. Our *lot*, the gift from on high that has been given to us is the second level of our connection with God.

While these two levels are swell, they are incomplete on one very fundamental level: they are *additions* to who we are, they aren't *who* we are.

Enter a much deeper level of connection, an essential, inherent connection to Judaism. It is who we are; it is our legacy, our inheritance, our *nachala*.

The third level, where our relationship with God is inherent, is our legacy, our heritage, our inherent selves. It isn't even a *part* of us; it simply *is* us.

7. Three Levels of Connecting with Israel

If you notice, the verses in our portion that describe the Holy Land and its connection to the Jewish people also use these three terms – *apportion*, *lot*, and *inheritance*. And thus, the same three levels of connection are true for our connection with the Land of Israel

The first level in the Jew's relationship with Israel is *apportioned*: to the larger tribe a larger portion, to the smaller tribe a smaller portion. This means that the connection of the Jew to the land is subjective and unique to every individual. Some people have a very big connection to Israel; some Jews have a very small connection to Israel. Some Jews are right-wing; some Jews are left-wing, and some Jews have clipped their wings altogether.

The second level of connection with Israel is like casting *lots* (and this is why the geographical distribution of the land was done through lots):

It was completely gifted from on high. The Land of Israel was a gift to the Jewish people regardless of their human contribution or lack thereof, regardless of affiliation, tribe size, or commitment level.

These two levels of a Jew's connection with Israel are very nice, but they contain one fundamental weakness. They are either *given* to the Jew or *earned* by the Jew, like a gift or a transaction. Both are *acquired*, not *inherent*.

Enter now the third level, the Holy Land of Israel as an *inheritance*, a heritage, a legacy of the Jews. As with our relationship to God, here too, there is a level that is inherent and this is it.

This week's portion teaches us something new and radical, timeless and essential: Inheriting the Land of Israel did not begin in 1948, or even in the year 48. Israel is *Nachalat Hashem*, the Legacy of God. The Creator of the Universe said that this legacy shall be the legacy of the Jewish people – God did not *give* us the Holy Land of Israel as a *new* entity sometime in the history of the world; God simply made us inheritors to His Holy Land. God made us part of His holy legacy.

8. Inheritance is Inherent

There is an argument to be made that, if God *gifted* us the Holy Land, God could also take it away; there is an argument to be made that if we *earned* our part in the Holy Land we could also lose it if we didn't deserve it. But a heritage, a legacy, an inheritance can never be lost because an inheritance is inherent – an inheritance is simply continuing on what was before and what will forever be.

Perhaps the world does not understand it. So we have to tell the world. To those that would call us “occupiers” of a land, or “oppressors,” we say this:

The Land of Israel is inherent to the Jewish people the way Judaism is inherent to the Jewish people. Just like a human being's life is not something acquired from outside, is not optional, is not negotiable,

and is not interchangeable, so too, our holy inheritance is not acquired from outside (not even from God, and certainly not from the UN), is not optional, is not negotiable, and is not interchangeable. Israel is our birthright – our legacy and inheritance, and as such, is a continuation of one entity.

And when we are aware of this fact, we live like it and the Holy Temples can be rebuilt.

9. And the Land Knows It Too (Optional)

What some find surprising is that the Land knows it too.

The Romans thought that they could separate the Jews from the Land. After the Great Revolt against Roman occupation and the nearly-successful Bar Kochba uprising which was put down only after Rome sent half of the empire's army to Israel, the Romans said "enough." They decided to forever erase Jewish connection to the Land.

They leveled Jerusalem,⁷ rebuilt it on the Roman model, and re-named it Aelia Capitolina, but the name lasted only through the time of Roman occupation. The Land of Israel was re-named Palestine – after the extinct Philistines, some of the worst enemies of the Jews in ancient times – and this name survived in Christian writings.

But whatever it was called, during the time the Jews were just about (although never completely) gone, the Land seemingly mourned.

Mark Twain who visited Israel in 1867 described it like this in *Innocents Abroad*:

We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds – a silent, mournful expanse ... A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely ...

⁷ Did anyone here ever visit the tunnels under the old city of Jerusalem? There you can see the lengths the Romans went to chipping away at the foundation of the Temple, in their desperate attempt to eradicate any memory of the Temple's existence.

[but] we never saw a human being on the whole route. We pressed on toward the goal of our crusade, renowned Jerusalem. The further we went the hotter the sun got and the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became ... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem ... Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless. I would not desire to live here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land ... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes.

But when the Jews began to return to the Land, it began to bloom again. Not only did the “desert bloom,” but in a relatively short time the once barren land was producing a surplus! This surplus was then exported to other, far more fertile countries like the United States. And all this was in fulfillment of prophecy, in fulfillment of the very word of God:

But you, O mountains of Israel, shall yield your produce and bear your fruit for My people Israel, for their return is near. For I will care for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be filled and sown. I will settle a large population on you, the whole House of Israel; the towns will be resettled, and the ruined sites rebuilt.⁸

All this has happened and it has happened because Israel is our inheritance, it is ours, it is us!

10. Final Mitzvah

The final positive mitzvah that Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, listed in his enumeration of the 613 mitzvahs⁹ reads:

To render judgment regarding inheritances as it states: *“If a person dies without having a son...”*

⁸ Ezekiel 36:8-11.

⁹ Numbers 27:8.

Basing it on the verse in our Torah reading, Maimonides concludes his entire *Mishnah Torah* with this mitzvah. We know that, in Torah scholarship, the conclusion of something encapsulates the entire entity. Why is this specific mitzvah, more than other, chosen by Maimonides to encapsulate all the Torah's commandments?

After understanding what inheritance represents, we understand that the mitzvah of inheritance touches upon the very core of the Jewish people and our connection with God. Every single one of the 613 mitzvahs that are in the Torah is a reflection of that intrinsic inheritance, not as something imposed upon us but as our essential selves.

Why is this idea so important for both Jews and the whole world at large to know? For one very simple reason:

Israel, for the Jew, is not optional. The world must know – but even more importantly, the Jew must know – that Israel is not some optional piece of real estate that we can either occupy or not. It is not up the Jewish people, or to anybody. God simply made the Jews inheritors to God's legacy and all we have to do is live up to that legacy.

God and God alone created the idea of peace, local peace and world peace. God and God alone told us that when the Jews fulfill that which their inheritance demands of them, then all of the Holy Land will be at peace, as will the entire world.

The Land of Israel is the earthly, geographic manifestation of why we, the Jewish people, exist – to be perpetuators, continuums, inherent enactors of God's legacy ... to refine ourselves and the world with virtue, justice and charity. This is the point of every single mitzvah, to demonstrate to ourselves and to the world the inherent soul essence of our purpose and being. It is God's legacy and ours.

11. Why I Married You (Joke)

Married for many years, Leopold had been ignored by his wife, Martha, for some time, so eventually he confronted her with what he perceived as the problem.

“Come on Martha, admit it,” he ranted. “You only married me because \$150 million was left to me by grandfather, didn’t you?”

“You really are silly, Leopold,” retorted Martha loudly. “I couldn’t care less who left you the money.”

I couldn’t care less who left you the money... This really boils it down to the core point, doesn’t it? Who left you the land...?

12. Conclusion: The Interconnection

The Mechilta¹⁰ says:

All [the children of] Israel who are called nachala [will come] to the Land that is called nachala and they will build the Temple that is called nachala by the merit of the Torah that is called nachala.

It is all interconnected:

There is a Holy God who made us a Holy People with a specific holy purpose to be lamplighters unto the world. He gave us the Holy Torah to instruct us how to achieve this, and he provides a Holy Land as the manifestation of this idea. This is all part of the same divine legacy – and if you negate one element you negate it all.

There is an idea here of perpetuity, of eternity. The same way the Torah that we just read from is the same exact Torah that our fathers and grandfathers and forefathers read from. It is not some new entity, just as the Land of Israel is not some new entity. It is same exact Land of Israel that our fathers and grandfathers and forefathers nurtured and cherished.

Perhaps, if we were really getting literal, Israel does not *belong* to the Jews. Israel *is* the Jews. Indeed, Israel is the name of both the land and the people. And it is not an option to separate the people from who and what and why they are.

¹⁰ On Exodus 15:17.

Where the Jews are is *what* the Jews are. *Where* the Jews are is *why* the Jews are. And *where* the Jews are is *who* the Jews are.

We are inheritors of the divine ideal that this world is meant to achieve. It is incumbent upon us to live according to this ideal. When we do so, and only when we do so, true peace, the divine ideal, shall reign upon the whole Land and upon the entire world.

This is how we rebuild the Temples of our murdered youth, and this is how ultimately the Third Temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt speedily in our days.

This is especially underscored in the liberation of 12th-13th of Tammuz, when the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe was freed from prison 87 years ago (1927), celebrating the victory of Judaism and Torah against its oppressors.

Shema Yisrael, Hear O Israel:

We must embrace the legacy of *Am Yisrael*, *Ahavat Yisrael*, and *Eretz Yisrael*, given to us by *Elokai Yisrael*. We must embrace the legacy of the Nation of Israel, the Love of Israel, and the Land of Israel as it was given to us by the God of Israel.

This is Israel and this how it shall always be.¹¹

Shabbat Shalom!

¹¹ This sermon is based on Likkutei Sichot vol. 28, p. 176ff.