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THE EARTH IS GOD'S: HOLINESS & LAND

Jewish tradition speaks at great length about the sanctity of the Earth and its produce. However, while the Biblical notion of holiness emphasizes the Land (the Land of Israel), rabbinic writings expand that notion to include all land, the whole Earth. While the Rabbis do not deny the particular holiness of Eretz Yisrael, their writings make the sanctification of all Earth incumbent upon Jews as a matter of religious duty.

The Sanctity of Soil

On the one hand, the Tanakh recognizes the Earth in general as possessing religious meaning:

The earth is Adonai's and all that it holds,
the world and its inhabitants.
For God founded it upon the ocean,
set it on the nether-stream.
How many are the things you have made, Adonai;
You have made them all with wisdom;
the earth is full of your creations.

The prominence of the Creation narrative itself focuses attention on the importance of the earth, to the extent that the term for earth itself, *adamah*, lends its name to the first earthling, *adam*. While rarely conceding the intrinsic holiness of a particular spot, the Torah even records the sanctity of a site outside of the Land of Israel: Moses, standing before the burning bush on Horeb, receives the command to "remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. Prior to any encounter, the Land itself is holy, the soil is a means of communion with the Creator. God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, therefore all lands are touched by God's sanctity. Perhaps this appreciation of the entire planet as the creation of the loving God contributes to the venerable Israelite tradition extolling the wilderness as a place of holiness and of purity. As the source of all places, God's sanctity permeates every place.

Rabbinic writings, in part, continue this emphasis on the sanctity of the whole Earth. For example, the central organizing category which distinguishes which type of blessing over food to recite is whether the item came from the soil: is it a type of *p'ri* (fruit)? Other characteristics seem not to matter: "Over something which does not grow in or from the earth, one says *sh'hakol*. Once the food is identified as a type of

p'ri, then further distinctions arise. Does the food emerge from the earth directly (boray p'ri ha-adamah), or does it grow on a vine (boray p'ri ha-gafen) or on a tree (boray p'ri ha-etz)?

There is no intrinsic reason for the Rabbis to distinguish between the nuances of various agricultural products while lumping together fish, meat, poultry, and dairy products. Why not a separate berakhah for everything that comes from the sea, or originates from a mountain, or grows in the summer? By establishing the categories of berakhot the way they did, the rabbis lent significance to the soil as a whole. What emerges from the ground, all ground, is uniquely sanctified, and the earth is recognized as a sacred and sustaining presence for humans.

“But some soil is more sanctified than others”

Yet there remains a dichotomy at the core of the tradition's grasp of the sanctity of soil. While all the earth is sacred, there is one particular part of it in which inheres a special degree of holiness. For example, while the Tanakh claims that Israel can observe the laws anywhere, it simultaneously teaches that there is an uncleanness which permeates the nations of the world beyond the borders of the Land of Israel. Thus, Hosea speaks of the Israelites who "shall eat unclean food in Assyria," (Hosea 9:3. See also Ezekiel 4:13) and Amos of the "unclean soil" to which Israel will be banished. (Amos 7:17. See also Isaiah 52:11) The Land of Israel is clearly the true focus of the Tanakh's passion for land.

Repeatedly, the Torah describes the Land of Israel as "a good land," one whose bounty springs from God's beneficence, rather than from any merit or labor on Israel's part. As Harry Olinisky points out, the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael overrides the sanctity of all other places; it is only pre-conquest "that a site outside the Promised Land can be described as holy." Only in the Land may sacrifices be offered to God, and only there is food considered ritually clean. The Land itself is a reward held out to Jews in the Tanakh: observe the mitzvot, God promises, and you will continue to dwell in the Land. One may understand the distinction of the land of Israel as but an aspect and a consequence of God's role as creator of all. Though God "gave" the Land to the people Israel, God retains sovereignty over it as over all creation. As it says in Leviticus: "The Land [of Israel] must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me." Leviticus makes clear that the ultimate owner of the Land of Israel is God, and that the Jewish people have rights of usufruct, but only for use consistent with God's ultimate interests.

A series of agricultural laws: peah--provision for the poor by leaving the corners of the fields--orlah,--abstention from the fruits of new trees--kilayim, terumot, and bikkurim -- tithes to the Temple and its clergy-- provide evidence of God's ownership of the Land of Israel. Undergirding all the requirements is an assertion that the human farmer is entitled only to "interest," whereas the ultimate proprietor of the "principal," Eretz Yisrael, is God alone.

In the words of the Talmud, "God acquired possession of the world and apportioned it to humankind, but God always remains the master of the world." The Torah begins, starting with Creation, with the assumption that all the Earth is holy and then condenses the consecration of land into a particular place, Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbinic Revolution

Reversing the Biblical thesis, Rabbinic law and legend begins with the centrality of Eretz Yisrael, and through innovation and interpretation establishes the sanctity of the entire world, or at least any place inhabited by Am Yisrael.

In the words of Mishnah Kelim, "The Land of Israel is holier than all lands." Fully one-third of the Mishnah is devoted to the agricultural laws of tithing -- far beyond any proportional length provided by Scripture -- and tithing laws were obligatory only inside the borders of the Land. (The exceptions are kilayim, orlah and, according to Rabbi Eliezer, eating barley before the omer.) The purity system, too, was fully applicable only within the Land; consequently, the notion of the impurity of the other lands, which has roots in the Tanakh, continued into rabbinic thought as well.

The Mishnah was written while most of the People Israel were in the Land of Israel, and so largely assumes the coincidence of those two concentrations of holiness. However, there were significant Jewish populations in Syria, Egypt, and Bavel as well during that time. How did this diaspora change the notion of a single Holy Land?

While the ideal remained Am Yisrael B'Eretz Yisrael, the rabbis kept pace with the facts of the post-Biblical world. Gentiles living in the Land were exempt from the requirement of shevi'it (refraining from agricultural work during the seventh year), hallah (offering a tithe of dough to the kohanim), and terumah (tithing produce for the kohanim). Jews outside of the Land, as has been mentioned, were also exempt from most of the agricultural laws. For example, in a dispute between two Tannaim (writers of the Mishnah), over whether or not produce exported from the Land of Israel requires taking hallah, the more conservative Rabbi Eliezer insists that it does. This view implies a single source of holiness emanating from Zion. Rabbi Akiva, however, conceives of multiple origins of holiness, and rules that such produce is exempt. For Rabbi Akiva, "The entire world potentially is sacred space. Different areas are subject to different standards, different rules. People in the Land and outside the Land alike have their own special roles to play." In the words of Richard S. Sarason, "Mishnah's Rabbis clearly wish to do justice to both principles -- both Holy Land and Holy People -- without fully embracing the one over the other."

Broadening the notion of the sanctity of other lands exercised a profound effect on rabbinic Judaism, making holiness "portable." Jews could bring their laws, or at least most of them, wherever they went. And therefore, Jews would make any land they lived in holy. "They shall be carried to Bavel, and there they shall be, until the day that I remember them, says the Lord." Rabbi Yehudah, commenting on this Scriptural passage, goes so far as to equate living in Bavel with living in Israel because to remain in Bavel is to fulfill a holy imperative.

This view implies that the rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras wished to align Jewish religion to the reality of Jewish settlement beyond the borders of Israel. Without ever abandoning their commitment to the mitzvah of yishuv Ha-Aretz (dwelling in the Land), the Sages transfer their ideal from living on the land to observing the law. Whereas the Torah esteems living on the land as a reward for pious observance, the rabbis invert that estimation, valuing living on the land because it allows for greater observance. Rather than embodying the goal, the land is now the means: Rabbi Simlai expounded, "Why did Moses, Our Rabbi, yearn to enter the Land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruit or satisfy himself from its bounty?...[T]hus spoke Moses, 'Many commandments were commanded to Israel which can be fulfilled only in the Land of Israel. I wish to enter the Land so they may all be fulfilled by me.'" The implications of this Copernican revolution are staggering. While maintaining the centrality of the Land, since certain mitzvot could only be performed there, the re-valuation of the Land's meaning now placed the weight of Jewish piety on the observance of deeds which could be performed anywhere. As opposed to making the Land the treasure at the end of the hunt, the Rabbis made the hunt for piety itself the treasure, and the Land a sacred tool for finding one's way.

The liturgy of the calendar reflects this shift. Authority over the calendar--long a source of contention between the sages of Israel and those of Bavel -- was finally taken by the Ge'onim (the leaders of Babylonian Jewry), and Bavel's seasonal cycles, not those of Palestine, were the ones that were marked.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple and the rise of the local synagogue, rabbinic Judaism adopted a provisional attitude of non-localized holiness: a willingness to roam the world until the messianic age restored the nexus between Land and People. In the words of Jacob Neusner:

What Mishnah does by representing this cult, laying out its measurements, describing its rite, and specifying its rules, is to permit Israel, in the words of the Mishnah, to experience - anywhere and anytime - that cosmic center of the world described by the Mishnah: cosmic center in words made utopia.

Holiness, previously found only within the Land of Israel, became portable. Israel, the holy people, could encounter holiness anywhere and everywhere. The entire Earth offered an encounter with God and godliness.

The Earth is the Lord's: Blessings For Food

A revisit of rabbinic blessings for food reveals the effort to recognize the sanctity of the entire world and yet to maintain the special status of the Land of Israel. The biblical instruction to praise God for food specifies that this obligation applies only within the Land of Israel itself: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land...a land where you may eat food without stint...When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which God has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:7-10) The Land possesses a special holiness, and the landedness of the Jews rightly elicits a

unique gratitude. (It is interesting to note, however, that there are no Biblical exemplars who implement this instruction)

The Rabbis, however, assume that blessings are appropriate both in and out of the Land. They place no limitation on the location of the meal or the source of the produce to be consumed. "Our Rabbis taught: It is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without a berakhah." Whereas the Torah prescribes gratitude to God because God is sovereign of Israel, the rabbis extend that response to the entire Earth.

However, characteristic of their ability to mediate a dual agenda, the rabbis nevertheless reinforce the notion of kedushat Ha-Aretz. They insert particular berakhot in the birkat ha-mazon (the Grace After Meals) and the berakhah ekhat m'in shalosh, (the concise summary of the Grace After Meals) both of which distinguish between produce characteristic of the Land and all other produce. Yet they again contradict the notion of one "Holy Land" because the actual source of the grains, fruit, or vegetables is irrelevant; what counts is that they are a type reminiscent of Eretz Yisrael.

Responsibility for our "place"

After examining Biblical and early Rabbinic attitudes toward land and its sanctity, we are now in a position to address issues concerning land from a Jewish standpoint. Our tradition becomes a guide.

We begin by noting the shift from the biblical assertion that a place-- Eretz Yisrael -- is intrinsically holy, and therefore a reward for good living, to the rabbinic inversion that a place --any place-- is made holy by the fidelity and piety of its inhabitants. In fact, land can be "soiled," can react with revulsion to the greed, rebelliousness, or violence of humanity. Well known are the many passages warning that the price of spurning the mitzvot is expulsion from the Land. W.D. Davies wrote, "That observance and non-observance of the commandments have geographic, territorial, and cosmic consequences points to the truth that ecology is indissoluble from morality, land and law being mutually dependent, and that a people is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of its 'place'. In short, human relationship to the earth, specifically that between Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael is one of covenant, of brit.

As Jews, our loyalty begins with Eretz Yisrael. But we are not only Jews. As human beings, we also owe fealty and love to the entire planet, as well as to that particular corner of it on which we make our home. The same kind of claim that the Land of Israel makes on our Jewish commitments, the world claims as well.

The early rabbis established precedents for broadening the notion of holiness to include not only Eretz Yisrael, but also the rest of the world. Through focusing the berakhot for food on perot and their subcategories, by adding liturgical petitions on behalf of the weather outside of the land of Israel, by providing for multiple models of land-sanctity, the Mishnah and the Talmud establish a claim for the holiness of the whole earth, without relinquishing a special Jewish estimation for Israel itself.

The path of the Bible and the early rabbinic tradition is one of expanding concentric circles, decentralizing the notion of holiness into a provisional portability that permits a relationship with the sacred anywhere and anytime. That schema sanctifies all the earth, summoning us, as Jews and as humans, to enter into a relationship of love and piety with our beleaguered planet. It is incumbent upon us to make of this earth a place where God's presence can comfortably dwell, so that the whole world is a mishkan.

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