

Descendants of Abraham

Genesis 15:1-6, 17-21

This coming Wednesday in Jerusalem, the long-stalled peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians will resume once again. Secretary of State John Kerry hosted an initial gathering at the State Department two weeks ago, with Tzipi Livni, the Israeli Justice minister and chief negotiator, meeting with her Palestinian counterpart, Saeb Erakat, for a couple of days, accomplishing their only objective—to agree to resume talks in an attempt to arrive at a two-state solution. They gave themselves nine months to do it!

Nine months is either remarkably hopeful or ridiculously naive. For many skeptics, it seems self-defeating—an improbable timeline to resolve a political quagmire that has existed for over half a century, with a historical memory that holds even longer. The relative lack of global interest in this new attempt to solve one of the great political conundrums of our time attests to the widespread skepticism that exists, including among Israelis and Palestinians, who have given up on the prospects for a mutually agreeable peace. Like Sisyphus, the Middle East peace process has promised more than it can deliver; any formal agreement would require such monumental philosophical and strategic changes among all interested parties that resolution seems as likely as a proverbial return to Eden.

The two-state proposal, based on the 1967 borders, isn't the biggest hurdle to overcome; the framework is already in place. Rather, it's what to do with Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements in the West Bank on Palestinian territory (still being constructed to this day) and, especially, the Occupation. How does one achieve two

autonomous states with secure borders, when many within Israel insist on not bargaining away their “promised land” and the Hamas leaders in Gaza militantly refuse to recognize the right of Israel to even exist? Can there be a meaningful peace achieved when Israelis are threatened by enemies and Palestinians feel their basic rights to exist and prosper are ignored by the world’s great powers—international standards for human rights that are enforced elsewhere, but are seemingly glossed over and negotiated away when it comes to the Palestinians fight for freedom?

Even the Wednesday start-up date for these talks is ironic, if not problematic. August 14 is the anniversary of the 1907 adoption of “Hatikva” as the official Zionist hymn, as well as the founding of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in 1929 (now known as the Jewish Agency for Israel)—that being, the principal organ of Zionism, which has championed Jewish settlement in Palestine and Transjordan. “Hatikva” now serves as Israel’s national anthem, reflecting this political aspiration:

As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart, with eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion, then our hope—the two-thousand-year-old hope—will not be lost: to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

There’s no doubt that freedom and security are on the minds of every Israeli, young to old, but at what expense does it come to Palestinians?

Underlying all of this is the nationalist quest to make Israel a Jewish state, a sentiment that runs deeply among Jews from Haifa to Tel Aviv. This, of course, is merely a mirror image of what the Palestinian Authority reiterated last week in the desire to keep their

land free of Jews—even though twenty percent of the population in Israel is Arab, and nearly three quarters of a million Jewish settlers live in the occupied territories of the West Bank. How do those separatist ambitions get satisfied fairly and justly without uprooting those who claim the land is theirs to possess?

Hanin Zoabi, a Palestinian citizen of Israel and a member of the Knesset put it this way:

For us, as Palestinian citizens of Israel, we cannot recognize Israel as a Jewish state. My homeland as a Palestinian is not just the West Bank, but Haifa, Jaffa, Lod, Ashkelon, Nazareth. To define Israel as a Jewish state is political ethnic cleansing. We have a binational reality in Israel, with 18% of the population Palestinians. An entity that reflects this must be a state for all its citizens, not a Jewish state.¹

Similarly, Dani Dayan, who represents West Bank Jewish settlers, claims that any negotiated agreement still doesn't address the key issues and mutual investment necessary for lasting peaceful relations:

There is a better alternative: an ambitious and comprehensive programme to dramatically improve security, freedom of movement, economic prosperity and day-to-day conditions for Palestinians and Israelis. This should focus on joint large-scale industrial projects, including the renovation of refugee camps, removal of free-movement impediments, a potential dismantlement of the security fence and a focus on mutual respect and human dignity. ²

Yet, one has to wonder, is it even possible for Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, to live together in the same land without borders? Who knows?

We do know much of this conflict has been over land and the rightful possession of it. The land is important not only for economic development and security purposes, it also has tremendous symbolic

¹ Quoted in Harriet Sherwood, "Do Israelis and Palestinians think time is right for peace?" *The Observer*, Saturday, August 3, 2013.

² Ibid.

value as ancestral land for Palestinians and for religious claims in Judaism. The religious belief that fuels Zionism isn't merely within Orthodox Judaism; an equally strong zeal exists within the Christian community, particularly here in the U.S. As much as Jewish Zionism has a more practical basis in creating a safe and secure homeland for Jews, among certain parts of the Christian community, the establishment of the state of Israel is perceived as a sign of the "End Times," a precursor to Christ's return to save the righteous and judge the world. Christian Zionism is prominent in the religious Right and plays a larger role in U.S. support for Israel than many realize.

As you know, I'm not a fan of "End Times" eschatology; for me it's based on a misuse of Scripture and functions more like a superstitious guessing game than an attempt at serious theology. Scripture verses are taken at face value and associated with current events like clues to an unfolding mystery—as if a prophetic riddle, much like using Tarot cards to predict the future. Stories from the patriarchs to the prophets, from the Gospels to the oracles of Revelation, become a blueprint for contemporary politics, instead of being understood within their historical context. For me, that is just plain crazy-making. It's not like I don't know what I'm talking about; my grandfather's Scofield Bible is marked with all of his excited commentary from seventy years ago when he was preaching this stuff in Free-Will Baptist churches throughout New England!

What is commonly overlooked by Zionists is that this ancient biblical land is deemed "holy" only by the memories and the narratives that are held as sacred—not by its geography or by any other birthright of history (which for Israel would have only lasted a

few centuries out of the thousands of years civilization has existed in Palestine). Unfortunately, far too many times sacred stories have been misapplied and misinterpreted often leading to bad politics and prophecies.

Our lectionary text today from Genesis is one such passage that fuels the zeal in Zionism. It's part of the Abraham sagas—primordial tales that once were passed down from generation to generation as oral tradition, eventually standardized in written form, marking the origins of Israel's identity and place in the ancient world. It reads much like the mythical chronicle of a single life, as if to say that there once was a man named Abram, who lived thousands of years ago in a far away place in ancient Mesopotamia. Through his life, many nations came into being—most significantly, the people of Israel—once God took hold of his life.

Archaeologists and historians are all over the place in their judgments of how historically accurate the biblical stories are. It's often difficult to know what's symbolic and allegorical and what isn't. Interestingly, recent genome studies actually trace a common male-Y chromosome among Ashkenazi and Sephardim Jewish populations back thousands of years, perhaps even as far back as to the times of the Exodus, though it's impossible to do this with absolute certainty, especially to the period of history when the Patriarchs may have existed. So the debate is alive and well. Nevertheless, if not genetic and familial, there has always been at least a religious sense to the relationship with Abraham for Jews down through the ages as the ancestor of their monotheistic faith.

For that reason, this story has value and meaning for the sake of identity. As it goes, when the Lord came to Abram in a vision and promised this childless couple, Abram and Sarai, not only offspring, but descendants more numerous than the stars in the night sky, it was the blessing of an endless future. Children, especially to the ancients, were a sign of great blessing, since they promised a future; they kept the family line alive and the meaning and value to a father's and mother's life. With that promise given to Abram, came a similar one where his descendants would not be destined to nomadic life wandering the earth as Bedouins, but would settle in a fertile land and enjoy lasting prosperity. In other words, it was a vision intended to underscore and illustrate the primary promise to Abram that he and his wife would not remain childless—their identity would be secure in a region. This land their descendants would eventually possess would range from the Nile river of Egypt all the way to the Euphrates, including the lands of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, etc. all the way to the land of the Jebusites, which would stretch the entirety of the Fertile Crescent!

Two things, though, are important to note that aren't necessarily evident if you take this verse on its face value. For one thing, some of the tribes listed may not have actually existed until later in history. So, this description of the expanse of territory, then, may be anachronistic for the stories of the Patriarchs. It doesn't fit logically into the historical timeline!

Actually, this happens quite frequently in the Bible. Why? Because the stories as we have them were recorded much later than the periods they speak of and have references based on what was

known then. It's the stories of history written from the point of view of the writer's current world. The stories in Genesis often reflect that.

However, aside from archaeological evidence, textually something else is going on as well. For, if you notice, the promise given to Abram was before he had a child of his own for an heir. And, of course, his first child was not Isaac, but rather Ishmael. Ishmael was born to Hagar, Sarai's concubine, who delivered Abraham's firstborn son. Though, again, it's impossible to determine the accuracy of the gene pool, commonly Arabs have associated themselves with Ishmael and, since their earliest times, Muslims have viewed themselves religiously as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, much like Jews do through Isaac.

So what do we have? It appears this passage in Genesis 15 ends up being, in effect, a promise that doesn't assign Palestine specifically to Jews, but instead the entire Fertile Crescent to all the descendants of Abraham, which would include Jews, Arabs, and, in effect, Muslims! This not only describes the history of this region, it also eliminates the presumption and religious mandate that for one people alone the stories of Abraham specify territory exclusive to them. Two chapters later in Genesis 17, where Canaan (which included Palestine) was promised specifically to those descendants of Abraham who were circumcised, one must factor in that it wasn't Israelites alone who practiced this "defining" rite; circumcision was practiced in Egypt and in other pre-Israelite tribes. Scholars believe ancient Israel inherited the practice from earlier Semitic tribes who lived in the land of Canaan.

In other words, even circumcision doesn't set anyone apart from others! This puts into question the divine claim granted to one specific people, which is to say, a unique racial, political, cultural, or religious claim to the land of Palestine based on the Genesis stories does not stand the test of time or study for any of the descendants of Abraham, Jew and Arab alike. If anything, a moral mandate from God's covenant with Abraham would be that all descendants of this patriarch live peaceably side-by-side as mutual and equal cohabitants of the Fertile Crescent!

As I see it, Zionism as a religious concept doesn't have biblical justification. So the time has come to take religion (and the Bible) off the table when mapping out borders in the Middle East and negotiating difficult politics in our time. It's time to address the problems as they are: of diverse nations of people who cling to the sacredness of their ancient stories, but who realize they must cohabitate and share the land in which they were set.

That may begin to take shape even this week. Or it may not. Time will tell. But what must happen is this: it's time for all the descendants of Abraham to make good on this primordial promise and make their life in this land a genuine blessing for all who dwell there. For that will represent the biblical faith of Abraham—that God would make what was once impossible, finally possible.

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