

Sacred Boundaries
Parashat *Va-Yetze*
Cambridge, 13 November 2010

I'd like to speak to you today on the concept of holiness in space. What makes a specific location sacred? What about an entire land: can crossing a boundary line mean going *mi-kodesh la-hol*, from the realm of the sacred into the everyday, the profane?

The narrative at the very beginning of *Va-Yetze* is clearly one of transition across boundary lines; it occurs at the critical moment when Jacob is about to leave the land that eventually would be considered “the holy land” and called in his honour—Eretz Yisra’el—although we will need to wait until next week until the name Israel is bestowed upon him. Most of the parashah is a narrative occurring outside the land – but the opening verses find Jacob in a liminal, border-line situation, ready to depart into what would be for him a new world.

Indeed one of the Midrashic comments expresses precisely this transitional moment. Characteristically, it focuses on a surprising formulation regarding Jacob’s dream of the ladder linking heaven and earth: *ve-hinei mal’akhei elohim olim ve-yordim bo*, “the angels of God are ascending and descending upon it” (Gen. 12). Since we assume that angels ordinarily belong in the heavens, we would expect that first they would descend and then ascend. No, says the Midrash: these are angels who accompany and protect human beings here on earth. Just as the Prime Minister or the President of the US may have one security attachment with jurisdiction in their own country and another one for when they travel abroad, so there are angels limited to Eretz Yisrael, and they were returning to heaven as Jacob prepared to leave its borders, while another group was descending in order to accompany him *hutz la-aretz*, outside the land.

This theme of the relationship between the land of Israel and the world outside continues in the following verses. In the dream God addresses Jacob for the very first time in the Biblical narrative, introducing Himself as the God of his grandfather and his father, and then making several promises. First, *Ha-aretz asher atah shokhev aleha lekha etnenah u-le-zarekha*, “the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your offspring” (Gen. 28:13). Many consider this to be an important part of the Jewish claim to Eretz Yisrael: the promise to Abraham included his son Ishmael, progenitor of the Muslim Arabs; the promise to

Isaac included his son Esau, progenitor of the Romans and Christians. It is the promise to Jacob and his offspring that is distinctive to the Jews.

The promise continues, *Ve-hayah zarakha ka-afar ha-aretz*, “your offspring shall be as the dust of *ha-aretz*” (Gen. 28:14). A strange blessing: Why “like the dust”, where elsewhere God promises, “like the stars of the heavens” and “like the sand on the shores of the sea”? Here *ha-aretz* seems to refer not back to “the land”, a territory with boundaries, as in the previous verse, but to something more encompassing: “the earth”. The continuation of the passage seems to be pointing beyond the land that Jacob had known: *ufaratzta yamah ve-kedmah, tzafonah ve-negbah*: “you shall spread out to the west and the east, to the north and the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and your offspring” (Gen. 28:14). This articulates a universalistic dimension: the entire earth outside the special Land and the peoples living throughout the world, all are within the influence of Jacob and his descendants.

The final promise is that God will be with Jacob wherever he goes, never abandoning him, until he returns to the land of his birth, now the land of his ancestors and his future offspring. Unlike the angelic security detachment, God’s jurisdiction is not limited to a specific land, so that it ends when crossing the border; it extends throughout the world; the divine is accessible outside the land of Israel. The 16th-century Italian commentator Obadiah Sforno broadened to a generalized message, God will not abandon the Jewish people in their exile.

But in addition to the contrast between *ha-aretz* and *hutz la-aretz*, the land and outside the land, there is another category of sacred space in our passage. Upon awakening, Jacob concludes that this limited spot near the border line between homeland and foreign territory has special holiness: it is Beit El, the House of God, the place where Jacob first encountered the divine. Therefore he erects a pillar there, and pledges that he will build a more important and lasting shrine upon his return.

So here we have the juxtaposition of three categories of territory: a specific location where Jacob found God for the first time, the land that would become the possession of his descendants, and the earth with all its various inhabitants: *kol mishpahot ha-adamah*.

Needless to say, the interaction among these three categories is very much alive today. Are there specific sites within the Land of Israel—or outside it—that are especially holy because God is more likely

to be accessible there, as Jacob asserts? Or especially holy for a different reason? On Thursday, as I was thinking about this sermon, I received an “Urgent” e-mail from a senior scholar of Jewish liturgy, complaining about a Unesco decision to refer to the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron as a mosque; the text he forwarded described the site as “the second holiest site in Judaism,” “the cradle of Jewish history and the focal point of Jewish identity”. Somehow, the *yetzer ha-ra* got the best of me, and I wrote back to my colleague,

How did tombs get to be holy sites in Judaism, let alone "the second holiest site"? I thought that graves were a place of impurity, and that it was the Christians who built churches over tombs and buried their saints inside churches.

Is Treblinka, the site of the ashes of some 800,000 Jews, a “holy place”. Might not any vestige of holiness for Jews in the Tomb of the Patriarchs have been permanently contaminated by Baruch Goldstein, who murdered 29 Muslim worshippers in the mosque on the site on Purim in February 1994?

I think that we would all agree that there is something uniquely special about Jerusalem. But there are many Jews, both those who live there and those abroad, who are deeply disturbed by the fact that there are Arab sections of Jerusalem, and that part of Jerusalem might some day come under Palestinian sovereignty as the capital of a Palestinian state; I received another e-mail on this issue two days ago. These people are committed to trying to purchase real estate in Arab-dominated neighbourhoods such as Sheikh Jarrah, in order to make sure that there will be no contiguous component of Jerusalem with direct access to the West Bank that could be separated from the rest for the purpose of a two-state solution.

Is the holiness of Jerusalem so important that it should trump the principle of territorial compromise for the sake of a lasting peace? One vision of the future of Jerusalem is that “Many peoples shall go up and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord. . . that He may instruct us in His ways and we may walk in His paths’” (Isa. 2:3). Another vision is, “Put on your robes of majesty, Jerusalem, holy city, for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall never enter you again” (Isa. 52:1). Which is our vision?

In addition to this idea of a uniquely holy site, a special “house of God”, the relationship between the land of Israel and the Diaspora is

crucial to the dynamic of our biblical passage in which Jacob moves from one to the other. A century ago there was a deep polarization within the Jewish communities. The incipient Zionist movement argued that Jewish life in the Diaspora was hopeless, that all the efforts made by Jews to fit into their surrounding societies, to be accepted by their neighbours, to demonstrate their patriotism, had failed. Jews were either assimilating and intermarrying to the point of losing their identity, or falling victim to unexpectedly potent expressions of antisemitism—in Germany, in France, in the Czarist Russian Empire. Therefore the only hope for Jewish life was to abandon the Diaspora and return to the ancestral homeland, as Jacob does at the end of our parashah.

At the other extreme were those, including most leaders of Progressive Jewish communities, who thought of Jewish national identity in a backwater region of the Middle East as an anachronism, a part of our ancient history that we had long ago transcended. They believed that the Diaspora was not a punishment but an opportunity to fulfil the true mission of our people:

- to teach the universality of the one God and the resulting brotherhood of all human beings throughout the world;
- to model for humanity the challenges of living in accordance with the highest standards of ethical monotheism.

The Zionists wanted to be like all other nations, abandoning our unique historical destiny as a people chosen by God for a special mission: to lead the world toward a messianic age of universal justice and peace.

Both of these positions turned out to be exaggerated and naïve. All but the most extreme Israeli Zionists today recognize that there are thriving Jewish communities in the Diaspora, that despite disturbing demographic statistics, Jewish life in these communities may be as secure as it is in Israel, that the interaction and mutual support of Diaspora and Israeli Jews is critical to the continued thriving of both communities. And the great majority of Diaspora Jews recognize the advantages for Jews to live in an environment

- where Jewish culture, the Hebrew language, the traditional religious calendar is the norm rather than the preoccupation of a tiny minority of the population,
- where traditional Jewish values must be tested by the exigencies of the real world rather than spouted in theory,
- where Jews of so many different backgrounds can dwell together and build a democratic state, a modern society and a flourishing economy while remaining rooted in historical traditions.

It is this balance between Israel and Diaspora, holy land and the world beyond its boundaries, that is reflected in our parashah. Jacob encounters God when he is ready to move beyond the borders of his native land for the world outside. There he finds family, he falls in love, he acquires wealth, he sires a new generation. But he also remembers his home and the desire to return: to the land where his grandparents and father are buried, to the site where he first experienced a deeper dimension in life. May that promise he received be with us as well, whatever borders we cross in our lives: “I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” (Gen. 28:15).