

Burial Sites and Holiness: A Sermon on Hayyei Sarah
Liberal Jewish Synagogue
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As some of you know, the last time I spoke in public [Gala dinner, 16 November], I was scripted to begin, “Your Royal Highness, Your Grace, Rabbis and other Reverend Clergy, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen.” It is something of a relief to begin today by saying simply, *Morai ve-Rabbotai*, Dear Friends.

The first time I spoke in public in my new office as Principal of the Leo Baeck College was on the past 2 July, at the LBC Ordination ceremonies, in this synagogue, from this Bimah. Just as that day has a special place in my memory and consciousness, so does this synagogue, to which I returned some ten days later for the Rabbi David Goldstein Memorial Lecture. Whenever I come back here, I feel as if I am coming to an environment where I feel very much at home.

I would like to discuss with you today a topic related to the concept of holiness. Despite the importance of this concept for Jewish spirituality and thought, you may be surprised to learn (as I was in checking it out the other day), that the noun forms *kodesh*, *kedushah*, *mikdash*, and the adjectival forms *kadosh* or *kedoshim*, never occur in the book of Genesis, and the verb *le-kaddesh* appears only once, at the beginning of chapter 2. There, of course, it applies to *time*—*one day of the week singled out and sanctified by God as Shabbat*, what Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, called “our cathedral in time.” In addition to certain days, we think of certain *books* as holy (our Sacred Scriptures), we think of certain *acts* as holy (the *mitzvot*), and we think of certain *people* as holy (the term for martyrs in Hebrew is *kedoshim*, those who have sanctified God’s name. But what about sanctity in *space*, geographical holiness of a *place*, the idea that there can be a holy land, a holy city, a holy building?

What is it that makes a particular piece of territory or real estate sacred, holy? One might imagine that it is because there is greater access to God on that site, as Jacob seemed to conclude upon awakening from his dream (Gen. 28:16–17). But of course this raises a fundamental theological problem: at least since the Babylonian Exile, Jews have insisted that God is accessible in any place where Jews might be. Perhaps then a site is holy because of a great event happened there? That works for Christianity (think of the Church of the Nativity, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Cenaculum (site of the Last Supper), the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). But if that were the criterion for us, our most sacred sites would be the Sea of Reeds, Mount Sinai, Jericho—places that have absolutely no special status in Jewish law or sensibility. How does holiness extend to an entire land, stopping at its borders? Obviously these are complicated questions that could be explored at great length. I propose to explore one aspect of this question, triggered by our *parashah*.

We read a little while ago that when Sarah died, Abraham decided that he needed a burial place for his family in their new location. After discussions and negotiations a certain Ephron, a Hittite who lived in Hebron, Abraham purchases the cave of Machpelah, and the Torah tells us (Gen 23:19): *Then Abraham buried his wife*

Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. Abraham himself would be buried there, as would Isaac his son and Rebekkah his wife, and Jacob and Leah as well. In his comment on the verse I have just cited, the 12th-century Spanish commentator Abraham ibn Ezra wrote, “This chapter was written in order to inform us of the superiority of the land of Israel over all other lands, for the living and for the dead.”

How can a land be considered to be superior not just for the living, but also for the dead? I would like to unpack this statement about the purpose of our Torah chapter by taking you on a brief journey investigating an intriguing theme in Jewish life and thought, showing the dynamic development of a particular tradition. Abraham and Isaac both died in the land of Canaan. But Jacob, you will recall, died in Egypt. When he was on his death bed, he made his son Joseph swear to do a *hesed shel emet*, a “true act of kindness”: *not* to bury him in Egypt, but to bring him to the ancestral burial place in Hebron (47:29-30) – a request repeated in his final words. This insistence by Jacob is taken up in the Midrash of Bereshit Rabbah (chap. 96), which introduces a crucial concept of rabbinic Judaism: “Why were all the Patriarchs so anxious and so desirous for burial in Eretz Yisrael? Said R. Eleazar, “There is a deep reason for it.” A subsequent authority explain this by citing the verse from Psalms 116:9: “I shall walk before the Eternal in the lands of the living.” What did that mean? Yet another rabbi unpacks the meaning of that verse: “Why did the Patriarchs long for burial in Eretz Yisrael? Because the dead of Eretz Yisrael will be the first to be resurrected in the days of the Messiah and to enjoy the Messianic age.” Assuming that Jacob knew of these doctrines of the Messianic age and the resurrection of the dead, the sages attributed to him the desire for burial in the Land of Israel so that when the Messiah came he would not need to remain in his grave a moment more than necessary.

Now Jacob, of course, lived a good part of his life in Eretz Yisrael; that was his home; that was where his parents and grandparents were buried. It made sense for him to want his body to be brought back there for burial even without any reference to resurrection. But what about those who never lived in the Land of Israel, who spent their entire lives in the Diaspora? Did the precedent of Jacob apply to them? That issue is dramatized in a fascinating vignette that continues the discussion in the Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 96). “Rabbi [Judah ha-Nasi] (who lived around the year 200) and R. Eliezer were once walking by the gates outside of Tiberias, when they saw the coffin of a corpse which had been brought from outside the Land to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Judah responds very negatively to this sight: “What has this man availedx by coming to be buried in Eretz Yisrael when he lived and died outside the Land? I apply to him the verse (Jeremiah 2:7), *ve-nahalati samtem le-to’evah* , “You made My possession abhorrent”—in your lifetime; *va-tavo’u va-tetam’u et artsi*, “And you came and defiled My land”—in your deaths. One can hardly imagine a stronger condemnation of this practice: a Jew who decides to live in the Diaspora and arranges for his body to be brought for burial in the Land of Israel is defiling God’s land.

Yet his companion, R. Eliezer, finds a justification for this practice. He replies, “Yet, since he will be buried in Eretz Yisrael, God will forgive him [for the sin that Rabbi Judah condemns], for it is written (Deut. 32:43): *ve-kipper admato amo* , which he reads in a totally new way, out of context and wrenching the grammar and

the syntax, to mean “His land shall make atonement for His people.” This doctrine asserts that the land and soil of Israel is so potent, so holy, that it can atone for the sins of a lifetime spent voluntarily in exile if a person is buried in it. Yet on the other hand, it concedes that the land is not strong enough to attract Jews during their lives, that there are Jews who will choose to live in the Diaspora and seek out the land *only* for its gravesites.

This did not resolve the issue, however. Ambivalence continued for centuries, and we find many medieval Jewish philosophers and mystics—including a strong passage in the Zohar (Terumah 141b), citing just the original condemnation of bringing a body for burial in the Land of Israel, without citing the response that defends the practice. These thinkers insist that burial in the Land of Israel provides absolutely no benefit except for one who has gone to live there. Yet, of course, the practice continued, and continues to our own time.

A further step. In a parallel version of this text (Pesikta Rabbati 1.6), E. Eliezer ben Pedat says, “As soon as they are buried in the Land of Israel, *or even a handful of soil of the Land of Israel is placed upon them*, it will make atonement for them, as it is said, *ve-hipper admato amo*, “His land will make atonement for His people.” In context the meaning seems clear: R. Eliezer is saying that if a Jew is buried in Eretz Yisrael, as soon as the first shove-full of soil is thrown upon the body, the atonement will be made. But in subsequent centuries, this statement was used to justify a new practice that R. Eliezer probably never dreamed of: placing a handful of soil from the holy Land in a grave of the Diaspora, in the expectation that this would provide atonement.

I’m not sure when the earliest evidence for this practice can be dated (though it is interesting to note that we find it attested in St. Augustine’s classic *City of God* (22:8), from the early 5th century). But the same dynamic we have seen is extended by this new practice. On one hand, the power of soil from the Holy Land is apparently now considered so great that it can bring atonement not only in its proper place, but anywhere in the world. On the other hand, the practice reflects the reality of Jewish communities so far removed that both living and burial in the Land of Israel is unfeasible for all but a tiny minority.

One final point. In the reports by Jewish travellers who visit the Land of Israel beginning in the 12th century, we begin to find something new: itineraries and accounts that reveal very little interest in the communities of Jews actually living in Jerusalem or other cities, but rather the desire to visit the tombs of great figures from the past—first of the Patriarchs, then of lesser figures from the Bible, then the Talmudic sages, then later figures—to prostrate themselves on the graves and pray there. Where does this idea come from? Unlike in Christianity, where churches were built over graves and saints were buried in the churches (think of St Paul’s), for Jews the grave is a site of *tum’ah*, impurity, so that there is never burial in a synagogue, or even immediately adjacent to a synagogue, but only outside and away from the Jewish living space. How does the grave of a holy person become for these travellers a destination for pilgrimage, a place of holiness? Is this an internal Jewish development, or does it reflect the influence of Christianity, or perhaps of Islam?

One thing is clear. The concept underlying this practice facilitates the development of a new sacred geography of the Holy Land. The classical model, set out in the Mishnah (Kelim, chap. 1), is of concentric circles, starting with the borders of Eretz Yisrael, then moving to Jerusalem, the Temple Mount, the court of the Jewish people, the court of the Kohanim, and finally the Holy of Holies. Now, with this new conception of the tomb of a holy person as a potential site of holiness, we have the possibility of rival sacred places outside of Jerusalem. Hebron, with its Cave of Machpelah, becomes a “holy city” in its own right, and then Tiberias and Safed standing along these two because of their gravesites, producing the concept of Four Holy Cities.

In addition, this novel and in some ways non-Jewish idea of the holiness of the burial place has led to radical conclusions exemplified in one trend and one dramatic event of the past few decades. First: As you know, traditionally, while the Temple was in existence, the holidays were times that attracted Jewish pilgrims to the holy city of Jerusalem. In recent years, a totally paradoxical practice has developed— inconceivable throughout most of Jewish history until very recently—of Orthodox Jews living in Jerusalem, chartering plans to go on a pilgrimage at the time of the High Holy Days away from Jerusalem, away from the land of Israel, to the city of Uman in Ukraine. Why? In order to be able to pray at the gravesite of the Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav.

That is an example of a strange recent development in Jewish practice. The second radical conclusion led to a more tragic result, rooted in our parashah. You may recall that on Purim, February 25, 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who had immigrated to Israel from Brooklyn and was living in the West Bank settlement of Kiriat Arba near Hebron, entered a room in the Cave of the Patriarchs that had for many generations been used as a mosque, for the Muslims venerated the biblical Patriarchs as prophets. Without warning or explanation, he opened fire with an automatic weapon, killing 29 Muslim worshippers and wounding 150, before he himself was beaten to death.

What lay behind such a horrific act? Apparently two thoughts. First, that the burial place of the Patriarchs was a site of extraordinary holiness, perhaps second only to Jerusalem. And second, the presence of Muslims worshipping at that site was not consistent with the holiness, but a source of contamination that could not be tolerated. Here is a disturbing example of how a sense of common sacred geography—a site that both Jews and Muslims consider to be holy—can serve to divide as well as to unite.

I hope I may have succeeded in convincing you that this idea of holiness in space, the atoning power of burial in the Land of Israel, the belief that some soil is more sacred than other soil, is a fascinating if complicated business. At the end it reflects a tension that is central to traditional Jewish consciousness. Most of us have a deeply-rooted feeling that there is indeed something unique and special about Eretz Yisrael, about Jerusalem, about the burial places of the Patriarchs. And yet at the same time, we believe that—at least potentially—wherever we are can be *admat kodesh*, holy ground; that—in the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Earth’s crowned with heaven, and every common bush afire with God,/ But only he who sees takes off his shoes.” But that idea of God’s omnipresence is a very different idea, with its own fascinating history: perhaps a topic for another sermon.