

## **The Relationship of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel**

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When anti-Israel rhetoric increases, one inevitably comes across new attempts to minimize the Jewish connection with the Land of Israel and impugn thereby the very existence of a Jewish state. Paradoxically this sometimes comes from certain Christian quarters, when one would have thought that anyone with even a cursory familiarity with the Hebrew Bible (that Christians refer to as the Old Testament) would be familiar with the bond between the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the Promised Land. Yet even where this historical relationship is acknowledged, it is often argued that this bond was something of the distant past and bears no relevance let alone justification for the contemporary context.

However, contrary to anti-Zionist propaganda, the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland did not begin just a half a century ago, following the Holocaust, nor even a hundred years ago with the advent of modern Zionism. For the past almost twenty centuries, ever since their expulsion from Palestine by the Romans (70 C.E.), Jews have striven continuously to reestablish their bond with the Land of Israel, although the foes of the Jewish people did their best to obliterate the Jewish connection with the Land. Indeed, the Romans introduced the name Palestina in order precisely to erase the usage of the name Judea, just as they renamed Jerusalem, Aelia Capitolina.

Spiritually, the Jewish people never left the Land. Even in exile, Jews the world over turned to Jerusalem in prayer as they continue to do today. These daily prayers and grace after meals which Jews have recited over the centuries are replete with references to the restoration of and return to Zion. The solemn service for the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, concludes with the words "Next year in Jerusalem." At the end of their day of fasting and communion with God, Jews the world over throughout the generations, reaffirmed their hope for a "return" to their Homeland, not at some indefinite date in the remote future, but "next year." This affirmation was similarly made at the conclusion of the Passover meal.

Indeed the liturgy and religious observances of Judaism are closely bound up with the physical aspects of the Land of Israel – the produce of its soil and the course of its seasons. On the Feast of Tabernacles, the festival of the harvest ingathering, which comes at the start of the “rainy season” in Israel, Jews wherever they may dwell, recite prayers for rain. On Passover, when the “dry season” begins in the Holy Land, Jews from Alaska to Australia beseech God to bless the Land of Israel with life-giving morning dew.

It is accordingly evident to anyone with a cursory knowledge of the Jewish religion, that the attachment of the Jewish people to their ancestral land has transcended both time and space.

But if all this is so, the opponents of the Jewish State demand, why did the Jews stay away from Palestine for so many centuries? While it is certainly true that many chose to remain in exile; the neglect of the land by successive conquests over the ages and the hazards of travel, made repatriation a precarious option. Nevertheless, as late as the seventh century of the Common Era – six centuries after the conquest of the country by Rome – there were in Palestine a sufficient number of Jews to give material help to the invading Persian armies. Even after the conquest of the country by Arab tribes some two decades later, the Jews of the Holy Land remained strong enough to be a factor of significance during the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The mere recorded historical fact of the Crusaders’ slaughter of the Jews of Jaffa, Ashkelon, Caesarea and Jerusalem, is ample proof that there was a substantial Jewish presence in Palestine theretofore.

Throughout the centuries, each persecution and expulsion in the Diaspora brought a new influx of Jews to the Holy Land. The Spanish exile of 1492 was followed by a wave of repatriation to the Land of Israel, and in fact, by an attempt to establish an independent Jewish entity in the Galilee in the sixteenth century. This “state” was to be ruled by Don Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos and Cyclades. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, great popular messianic movements involving entire Jewish communities in the European Diaspora, sent masses of Jews on their way to the land of their fathers. There have even existed some settlements in the Galilee where Jewish families lived uninterruptedly for two millennia, such as the village of Pekiin, tracing their origins back to the first century of the Christian era.

Anti-Israel propagandists suggest that during the whole period of Jewish exile, there was some kind of continuous local non-Jewish rule. This of course could not be further from the truth.

The first exile by the Babylonians lasted only half a century and was followed by a period of Israelite autonomy under Persian and then Greco-Syrian rule, until the Maccabean revolt in 165 B.C.E. Jewish independence was subsequently reestablished and maintained until the Roman conquest, destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E. and subsequent exile of the majority of the Jewish population. However thereafter, the Holy Land was subject to continuous foreign conquests.

Byzantine rule came to an end in 638 with the Arab invasion of Palestine. The rule of the Caliphates however, came to an end in 1071, followed by Turkish Seljuk rule. The Crusader conquest in 1099 was followed by Ayyubid rule in 1187, Mameluke (Albanian) rule in 1260, and Ottoman conquest in 1516. The Turks ruled for the lengthy period of exactly four hundred years and were replaced by the British in 1918 until the establishment of the State of Israel.

Thus, since the end of Jewish Hasmonian rule, during the whole period of recorded history, Palestine was never ruled by the local inhabitants.

At the beginning of the British Mandate there were in the whole of Palestine 557,000 Arabs (both Moslems and Christians) and 84,000 Jews. Only 30% (some 186,000) of these Arabs lived in the area which is now the State of Israel. The Arab population increased rapidly during the Mandatory period, in direct relationship to the increase of Jewish population. Palestine, which was an area of Arab emigration prior to 1922, suddenly became a locale for Arab immigration. The principal cause was the Jewish settlement which improved the general conditions (e.g. Moslem infant mortality which was 19.6% in 1922 declined to 14% by 1939). Between 1922 and 1939 the resident non-Jewish population of Palestine increased by 75.2%. During the inter-war period there was an increase of 375,000 in the Jewish population in Palestine and 380,000 in the non-Jewish population in Palestine. Moreover, the Arab increase was greatest wherever Jewish development was most marked. Thus, in Haifa the Arab community

increased by 216%, in Jaffa by 134%, and in Jerusalem by 97%. All these were within the area of Jewish development. On the other hand, where there was no Jewish settlement, in Nablus, for example, the Arab increase was only 42%; Jenin 40%, Hebron 40%, Bethlehem 32%, Beit Jalah 23%.

The following statistics regarding the faith communities in Jerusalem from the middle of the nineteenth century, demonstrate the preponderance of the Jewish population in the city already well before the rise of modern Zionism as well as thereafter.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Jews</b>	<b>Moslems</b>	<b>Christians</b>	<b>Source</b>
1844	7,120	5,000	3,390	Encyclopedia Britannica
1896	28,112	8,560	8,748	Calendar of Palestine
1905	40,000	7,000	13,000	Encyclopedia Britannica
1922	33,971	13,413	14,699	Chambers Encyclopedia
1939	80,850	27,000	26,000	Colliers Encyclopedia
1944	97,000	29,000	31,000	Chambers Encyclopedia
1948	100,000	40,000	25,000	Z. Vilnay, Jerusalem – The Old City, 1962
1967	195,700	54,963	12,646	Israel Central Bureau of Statistics

It is interesting to see that the Christians constituted even a larger group than the Muslims in most of the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

Among some of the most unfounded claims of Israel's enemies that have recently been made, is the assertion that at the end of the nineteenth century Palestinian Arabs lived in 90% of the land. However anyone who knows anything about geography knows that even in the most densely populated areas, human beings do not occupy ninety percent of land. More pertinent, however, is a reading of Mark Twain's account of his visit to the Holy Land that makes it clear how little of the land was actually populated at all. Moreover, Jewish purchase of arable land was limited by the major owners of such, who were overwhelmingly absentee Arab landlords who leased the land to local peasants. Not for nothing therefore, were most kibbutzim built on drained swamp land and desert and Israel's largest city was erected on the sand dunes north of Jaffa! Notable are the statistics provided by the Christian

journalist Terrence Prittie, who in his book on the Israel-Arab conflict (p. 120) writes that in all of Palestine in 1945 there were just over 1.1 million Arabs, roughly 650,000 of them in areas that subsequently became part of Israel.

Nevertheless, the evident and overwhelming unique Jewish historical attachment to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, does not mean that the attachment of Palestinian Arabs to this land should be ignored. Precisely because two peoples do live in and are attached to the land, we need to find the way to enable both the local Arab and Jewish populations to enjoy national self determination with dignity and security. Sadly we could have already been there in 1947. As a result of the Arab refusal to accept the United Nations proposed partition that would have allowed two states to live alongside each other and instead the launching of all-out war against Israel; the local Arab Palestinians bore the brunt of the conflict. Indeed perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Palestinian people has been their leadership and that of the Arab world, which time and again has encouraged fantasies of destroying Israel and has rejected the opportunities for compromise.

Those anti-Israel propagandists who seek to deny the continuous bond and relationship between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, only play into this delusion which just encourages the violence that has boomeranged on the Palestinian population and continues to prevent them from seeking the compromise that can provide them and their children with a decent future of dignity, sustenance and security.