

**Rabbi Rosen replies to an enquiry about the Divine promise
of Eretz Yisrael to the Jewish People and relations with Arabs in the land today**

Q: I was involved in a conversation in the Old City recently with a group of Muslim friends who had to deal with an American Jewish woman client who rather antagonistically insisted that as Muslims they were not part of the promise to Abraham - that they are guests here on sufferance as long as they behave. My friends thought the reference in the Torah indicates that the promise of the land was made to all the descendants of Abraham and so did I; but all I could find was Gen 17 and that wasn't enough, it is too ambiguous and I wonder if there are texts that fully explain the promise?

A: Indeed Genesis 17:7-9 is explicit regarding the Divine promise to "Abraham's seed" as a whole, and this was before Isaac was born! In fact, the promise is already in 12:7. However, the division of Abraham's inheritance and Yishmael's secondary role as Sarah demands 21:10, is confirmed in verse 13. This is the basis for the exclusive claim to the Land of Israel which however is explicitly confirmed with Isaac in Genesis 26:3 (and though Genesis 21:14 confirms the Divine promise to Yishmael, it is without any precise geographic designation.)

However all this is for me immaterial. Judaism is a halachic way of life; and in this regard our practical concern is not with Divine promises, but with Divine commands; and the commandment is to love the "other (stranger)" as ourselves and to abide by "one law for the home born and the other (stranger)" (Leviticus 24:22); to recognize that every person is created in the Divine Image (Gen. 5:1,2. See Ben Azzai in Genesis Rabbah)) and that any act of disrespect to another is an act of disrespect to God (Rabbi Tanhuma in the same passage in Genesis Rabbah.) That Jewish woman evidently transgressed these precepts and that is a sin against the Creator as well. Bottom line, Divine Promises do not excuse us from our religious obligations to respect others, their attachments, identity and legitimate political aspirations. (One might also note that both Chief Rabbis A.I. Kuk and Herzog confirmed that Muslims and even Christians are "gerim toshavim", respected non-Jewish residents who are to be afforded full civil rights in a Jewish polity.)

Finally let me point out that the Divine promise of inheritance of the land is not made in any political terms; so there is no mandate in these promises for Jewish political sovereignty as such. (There is of course a concept of the monarchy of the House of David – in keeping with the permit for monarchy in Deuteronomy - but it is an unacceptable stretch for the vast majority of Jewish authorities to ascribe that authority to the State of Israel !)

As a believing Jew, I do see the return of the Jewish People to the Land in our times as fulfilment of the eternal Divine promise in this regard; but again from a Jewish religious perspective, political decisions and certainly social structures and behaviour must always be in accordance with Jewish ethical teaching.

Q. All this is very helpful for me, and that final distinction is critical for my friends and me too: "the Divine promise of inheritance of the land is not made in any political terms; so there is no mandate in these promises for Jewish political sovereignty as such", because they want to be able to have a civilized and informed conversation with their Jewish customers without it turning into either a bible study session or a political tv debate. I was there the other day when a well-known Jewish personality brought in an American supporter to hear a Muslim view of things. My Arab friend Yassir is very mild mannered and avoids politics whenever possible and his son was deferentially following his father's lead. The woman was baiting them with her 'ownership according to the text' claims. Yassir didn't want to engage on that level (and couldn't really) and spoke of where he was born (Emek Refaim) in late 1947, and how he sees co-existence as a vision as it was in the years before his birth (he was born in one of the houses that his grandfather built, the other was rented to a Jewish doctor and his family)..... The woman 'forgot' to say goodbye when she left. Afterwards I also said that the promise is part of a command to take care of the land and the inhabitants therein, else it will spit you out. Was that wishful mis-remembering on my part? Have I added "the inhabitants therein"? I can't find it in the text....

A. You are indeed right that the children of Israel are told (Leviticus 18:19) that failure to observe the Divine commandments (most specifically in relation to immoral and idolatrous practices) will cause the land to spew them out (i.e. the ability of the people to live in the land is conditional on its behaviour.) And in as much as the vast majority of the mitzvot concern our behaviour towards one another; and as that includes non-Jews (and in particular Muslims about whom there is rabbinic unanimity that they are monotheists and not idolaters) as well as Jews; your point is even stronger.

Perhaps even more pertinent is the promise and warning that keeping the Divine commandments is what guarantees that "you shall live securely in the land"(Leviticus 25:18) as this is made specifically in the context of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, which concern both the care for the land and for the vulnerable - including "the stranger"(the non-idolatrous "other") specifically!