



Table Talk: Quotes and Questions for Family Discussions

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The Holiness of Israel: When reading the following sources, reflect on what makes Israel holy. Is there holiness to the land itself? Is the holiness related to the mitzvot performed there? Are the relatively mundane activities done in Israel imbued with holiness as well?

Ketubot 110b

The Sages taught: A person should always reside in Eretz Yisrael, even in a city that is mostly populated by gentiles, and he should not reside outside of Eretz Yisrael, even in a city that is mostly populated by Jews. The reason is that anyone who resides in Eretz Yisrael is considered as one who has a God, and anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael is considered as one who does not have a God. As it is stated: “To give to you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (Leviticus 25:38). The Gemara expresses surprise: And can it really be said that anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael has no God? Rather, this comes to tell you that anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael is considered as though he is engaged in idol worship.

Ramban (1194–1270), Vayikra 18:25

The Sages stated in the Sifri: “[If your hearts lead you astray and you serve and bow to other gods] and you will quickly be banished [from the good land that God gives you]” (Devarim 11:17): Even though I [God] am exiling you from the Land of Israel, you should still perform mitzvot so that when you return they will not be new and unfamiliar to you. An analogy: a man is upset with his wife and sends her to her father’s house. He says to her: “Keep wearing your jewelry, so that when you return they will not be new and unfamiliar to you.”

Rabbi Moshe Alpert

Describing the first Israeli elections to the Knesset in 1949 (quoted in Vered Kellner, *“Longings and Disappointments: A Voter in Exile in New York”*)

At 5:35 AM we woke up, my wife, my brother Reb Shimon Leib and my brother-in-law Reb Natanel Solduchil. And after we drank coffee we put on Shabbat clothing in honor of this great and holy day, because ‘This is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be happy on it.’ After 2,000 or more years of exile, you could say that from the six days of Creation until this day, we have not merited to see a day like this, that we are holding elections in a Jewish state. Shehechyanu! Blessed is the One that kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this day! So we went to the voting station near Chabashim Street with our identity cards in hand. With great and mighty joy we walked the short way there, and the entire way I walked like it was Simchat Torah and I was circling with a Torah scroll, because I was holding the identity card of our new Jewish State in my hand. ... Then the holiest moment of my life arrived. The moment that neither my father nor my grandfather had the privilege to experience in their lifetimes. Only me, in my time, in my lifetime, did I merit to experience such a holy and pure moment as this. ...What joy for me and my portion!

Israel’s Role in the World: How does Israel relate to the Jewish people’s mission to the world? What does Israel represent to the world? In what ways is Israel living up to this responsibility? In which areas can she improve?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), Bereishit 48:3–4

The Jewish nation is to represent agriculture as well as commerce, militarism as well as culture and learning. The Jewish people will be a nation of farmers, a nation of businessmen, a nation of soldiers and a nation of science.

Thereby, as a model nation, to establish the truth that the one great personal and national task which God revealed in His Torah is not dependent on any particular kind of talent or character trait, but that the whole of humanity in all its shades of diversity can equally find its calling in one common spiritual and moral mission and outlook in life.

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904)

Old New Land (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 248

The spell of the Sabbath was over the Holy City, now freed from the filth, noise and vile odors that had so often revolted devout pilgrims of all creeds when, after long and trying journeys, they reached their goal. In the old days they had to endure many disgusting sights before they could reach their shrines. All was different now. ... the lanes and the streets were beautifully paved and cared for. ... Moslem, Jewish, and Christian welfare institutions, hospitals, clinics stood side by side. In the middle of a great square was the splendid Peace Palace, where international congresses of peace-lovers and scientists were held, for Jerusalem was now a home for all the best strivings of the human spirit: for Faith, Love, Knowledge.

Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952)

Address at the opening session of Israeli Constituent Assembly, February 15, 1949

Today we stand on the threshold of a new era. We leave the dawn light of provisional authority and enter the full sunshine of ordinary democratic life. ... Let us not be over arrogant if we say that this is a great day in the history of the world. In this hear a message of hope and good cheer goes forth from this place in the Sacred City to all oppressed people and to all who are struggling for freedom and equality.

The Fulfillment of Prophecies : Do you see the State of Israel as the fulfillment of the Torah's prophecies? If yes, which prophecies have been fulfilled and which have yet to be fulfilled? Do you see God's hand in the founding of Israel and in your personal life?

Yirmiyahu, 31: 16–17

Restrain your voice from weeping,
Your eyes from shedding tears;
For there is reward for your labor...
And there is hope for your future—
Your children shall return to their land.

Tehillim, 126

When the Lord brought back the captivity of Ziyyon,
we were like men in a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
and our tongue with singing:
then they said among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them.
The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.
Bring back our captivity, O Lord, like the streams in the Negev.
They who sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He who goes weeping on his way, bearing a bag of seed,
shall come back with a joyful shout, carrying his sheaves.

Golda Meir (1898–1978)

My Life (New York: Dell Publishing, 1975), pp. 250–251

Sometimes I used to go to Lydda and watch the planes from Aden touch down, marveling at the endurance and faith of their exhausted passengers. “Had you ever seen a plane before?” I asked one bearded old man. “No,” he answered. “But weren’t you very frightened flying?” I persisted. “No,” he said again, very firmly. “It is all written in the Bible, in Isaiah, “They shall mount up with wings of eagles.” And standing there on the airfield, he recited the entire passage to me, his face lit with the joy of a fulfilled prophecy — and of the journey's end.

Michael Oren

Six Days of War (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 307

[Commander] Motta [Gur] sat on the ground and gazed at the walled city. It was a bright, cool morning, and the sun was on his back. The gold and silver domes of the Temple Mount glowed before him. He closed his eyes, as if in prayer. He was about to enter the Jewish pantheon, along with King David, who'd conquered Jerusalem and in turned it into his capital; Judah the Maccabee, who'd purified the Temple after its desecration by the Hellenists; Bar Kochba, who'd thrown himself against Rome and lost the Jews' last desperate battle for Jerusalem. Then came the centuries of enforced separation, landscape transformed into memory. And now the landscape was reemerging from dream, shimmering back into tangible reach.

The Inherent Connection between Israel and the Jewish People: How is the Jewish people's relationship to Israel different to their connection to other lands they have lived in throughout history? Is this connection a spiritual, historical, or social one? What connection do you feel most strongly when you are in Israel?

Rashi (1040–1105), Bereishit 1:1

In the beginning (Genesis 1:1): Said Rabbi Isaac: It was not necessary to begin here. Rather the Torah should have started with “This month is to you,” (Exodus 12:2) which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded, (since the main purpose of the Torah is its commandments). Why did God commence with “In the beginning?” Because of (the verse) “The strength of His works He related to His people, to give them the inheritance of the nations” (Psalm 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan,” the people of Israel can reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When God wished, He gave it to them, and when God wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.”

Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook (1865–1935)

Orot, Lights from Darkness, Land of Israel, Chapter 1

The land of Israel is not an external thing, an external national acquisition, a means to the goal of general unity and strengthening of the physical or even spiritual. The land of Israel is an intrinsic section of the nation, attached to it with a living bond, entwined with its existence in internal uniqueness.

It is therefore impossible to explain the uniqueness of the sanctity of the Land of Israel, to actualize the depths of love for her, in any humanly rational way. It is only through the divine spirit which is on the nation as a whole, through the natural spiritual nature which exists in the soul of Israel, which spreads out through contemplating the Land of Israel as an external value which serves only the purpose of uniting the nation, even for the sake of enabling the Jewish idea in exile, guarding its form, strengthening faith and reverence and strengthening practical mitzvot in their proper form, does not produce durable fruit. This foundation is rotten, compared to the sacred strength of the Land of Israel. True strengthening of the Jewish idea in exile will only come via deep embedding in the Land of Israel; via yearning for the Land of Israel, [the Jewish idea] will continually receive all of its independent traits.

Anticipating of redemption is the force which maintains Jewry in exile, and the Judaism of the Land of Israel is the redemption itself...

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020)

Future Tense (New York: Schocken Books, 2012) pp. 46–47

In Israel, Jewish life is a community of fate. There, Jews, from the most secular to the most pious, suffer equally

from war and terror, and benefit equally from prosperity and peace. Judaism, in Israel, is a presence you breathe, not just a religion you practise. In Israel as nowhere else, Jewishness is part of the public domain, in the language, the landscape, the calendar. There you can stand amid the ruins and relics of towns that were living communities in the time of the Bible and feel the full, astonishing sweep of time across which the Jewish people wrestled with its fate as Jacob once wrestled with the angel. And there you become conscious, in the faces you see and the accents you hear, of the astonishing diversity of Jews from every country and culture, brought together in the great ingathering as once, in Ezekiel’s vision, the dismembered fragments of a broken people joined together and came to life again. That is why, for Diaspora Jews, spending time in Israel is an essential and transformative experience of Jewish peoplehood and why Birthright, the American programme aimed at sending all young Jews to Israel, is so successful. At the same time, it is equally important that young Israelis spend time in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. There they discover what it is to live Judaism as a covenant of faith, something many of them have never fully experienced before.

Longing for Israel: Throughout the centuries Jews have longed to return to Israel. Which elements of the following poems speak to you the most? How is our longing for Israel present in our prayer services? What is the value of continuing to long for Israel even after we have regained her?

R’ Yehuda HaLevi (1075–1141)

“My Heart is the East,” Translated from the Hebrew by A.Z. Foreman

My heart is in the east, and the rest of me at the edge of the west.

How can I taste the food I eat? How can it give me pleasure?
How can I keep my promise now, or fulfill the vows I’ve made

While Zion remains in the Cross’s reign, and I in Arab chains?

With pleasure I would leave behind all the good things of Spain,

If only I could gaze on the dust of our ruined Holy Place.

Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934),

“To the Bird,” Translated from the Hebrew by Jonathan A. Lipnick

Greetings to you, kind bird, upon your return
From the hot lands back to my window

Back to your pleasing voice, My soul perishes
In the winter when you leave.

Sing, tell me, my beautiful bird,
About the wonders of the distant land.
Is it full of evils and hardships also
There in the hot beautiful land?

Will you bring me regards from my brothers in Zion, From
my brothers far and near?
O happy they are! Do they know
How I suffer, O suffer, from grief? ...

Tell me, my bird, the secret of all secrets
And what did they whisper of their prey?
Did they offer comfort or hope for days
When its fruit like the Lebanon will roar?

And my brothers the workers who sow with tears,
Have they harvested the omer with joy?
O that I had wings to fly to the land
Where the almond and date-palm blossom!
What shall I tell you, good bird?
What do you expect to hear from my mouth?
From this cold corner of the earth you will not hear songs,
Only dirges and sighs and wailing.

Shall I tell you about the hardships
Which are known in the land of the living?
O who will count the number of passing sorrows,
The approaching and raging troubles?

Fly, my bird, to your mountain, your desert
You are happy for you have left my tent.
Were you to live with me, O wing of song,
You too would cry bitter tears at my fate.

But weeping and tears will bring no cure
These cannot heal my wounds.
My eyes have grown dim, a sack filled with tears
My heart has been struck like a weed.

Now the tears and the bruises have stopped
But the end of my sorrow has not yet come.
Greetings my dear bird upon your return
Oh please cry aloud for joy!

Rachel "HaMeshoreret" Bluwstein (1890–1931), "Perhaps," Palestine-Israel Journal, Vol. 3 Nos. 3 and 4 (1996).

Perhaps it was never so.
Perhaps
I never woke early and went to the fields
To labor in the sweat of my brow

Nor in the long blazing days
Of harvest
On top of the wagon laden with sheaves,
Made my voice ring with song
Nor bathed myself clean in the calm
Blue water
Of my Kinneret. O, my Kinneret,
Were you there or did I only dream?

Israel as a Refuge: What was life like before we had Israel to turn to in times of persecution? How has Israel protected Jews throughout the world? How has this protection influenced our psyches?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993)

Kol Dodi Dofek (translated by David Z. Gordon, 2006) Six Knocks

Eight years ago, in the midst of a night of the terrors of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald; in a night of gas chambers and crematoria; in a night of total divine self-concealment; in a night ruled by the devil of doubt and destruction who sought to sweep the Lover from her own tent into the Catholic Church; in a night of continuous searching for the Beloved — on that very night the Beloved appeared. The Almighty, who was hiding in His splendid sanctum, suddenly appeared and began to beckon at the tent of the Lover, who tossed and turned on her bed beset by convulsions and the agonies of hell. Because of the beating and knocking at the door of the mournful Lover, the State of Israel was born. How many times did the Beloved knock on the door of the Lover?

Dr. Erica Brown,

Blue and White Not Red, October 15, 2015

So what would the Middle East look like if there were no Israel? What would our Jewish Diaspora community do were there no refuge in times of despair? Think of the fate of Jews from Yemen and Syria, Russia and Ethiopia, France and the Ukraine — to name but a few. They found a friend in Israel when they could no longer live in comfort or safety where they were. Israel does not say to Jews in need worldwide, "It's complicated." Instead, the message is, "Welcome Home." It's time for us to think about what loyalty means, even a complicated loyalty — if that's what it must be for some. It must fundamentally involve our love, our allegiance, our pride, our support and our willingness to put aside differences when the country is in pain. Blue, white and red cannot forever be the colors of a flag stained in blood.