



Little Books of Big Questions
Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

Paul, like many other students I've met in recent years, has been traumatised by the attacks on Israel on campus. Could it really be that the country he knows so well and loves so deeply is the same Israel that is accused of so many sins? He found himself torn and confused.

Why is Israel so important to us?

Judaism – twice as old as Christianity, three times as old as Islam – was the call to Abraham's descendants to create a society of freedom, justice and compassion under the sovereignty of God. A society involves a land, a home, somewhere where the 'children of Israel' form the majority, and can thus create a culture, an economy, a political system in accordance with their values. That land was, and is, Israel.

The Jewish connection to Israel is older by far than that of any other civilisation to a place. It goes back four thousand years to the first recorded syllables of Jewish time, God's command to Abraham: 'Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you' (Exodus 12: 1). Seven times God promised Abraham the land, and repeated that promise to Isaac and Jacob. If any nation on earth has a right to any land – a right based on history, attachment, long association – then the Jewish people has a right to Israel.

But surely that right lapsed long ago, when Jews were exiled?

Jews never left Israel voluntarily. They never relinquished their rights. They returned whenever they could: in the days of Moses, then again after the Babylonian exile, then again in generation after generation. Judah Halevi went there in the twelfth century. So did Maimonides and his family, though they found it impossible to stay. Nachmanides went there in 1265. There was a large community there in the sixteenth century. There are places, especially in Galilee, where they never left at all. My great-grandfather, Rabbi Arye Leib Frumkin, went to Israel in 1871; his father had settled there twenty years earlier.

But that is our story. Surely not everyone saw it the same way.

Those with a sense of history long ago recognised the injustice of denying Jews their ancestral home. In 1799, Napoleon at the start of his Middle East campaign called on Jews to return (the campaign failed before there was a chance to act on this proposal). So did many British thinkers in the nineteenth century, among them Lord Palmerston, Lord Shaftsbury and the novelist George Eliot (in her novel, *Daniel Deronda*).

The Balfour Declaration in 1917, ratified in 1920 by the League of Nations, was an attempt to rectify the single most sustained crime against humanity: the denial of Jewry's right to its land and its subsequent unparalleled history of suffering. Winston Churchill never wavered from this view. There were Arab leaders who understood this too. In 1919, King Faisal wrote to the American-Jewish judge Felix Frankfurter: 'We Arabs, especially the educated among us, look with the deepest sympathy on the Zionist movement . . . The Jewish movement is national and not imperialist. Our movement [Arab nationalism] is national and not imperialist . . . Indeed I think that neither can be a real success without the other.'

Isn't that, though, exactly what people accuse Israel of being now, an imperialist state?

The idea that Jews came to Israel as outsiders or imperialists is among the most perverse of modern myths. They were the land's original inhabitants: they have the same relationship to the land as native Americans to America, Aborigines to Australia and Maoris to New Zealand. They were ousted by imperialists. They are the *only* rulers of the land in the past three thousand years who neither sought nor created an empire. In fact, no other people, no other power, has ever created an independent state there. When it was not a Jewish state, Israel was merely an administrative unit of empires: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Christian and Muslim empires between the fourth century and the Ottoman Empire which lasted until the First World War. The existence of Israel, in ancient times and today, is a sustained protest *against* empires and imperialism.

But do we really need a Jewish state?

There must be some place on earth where Jews can defend themselves, where they have a home in the sense given by the poet Robert Frost as 'the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in'. Every nation has the right to rule itself and create a society and culture in accordance with its own values. That right, to national self-determination, is among the most basic in politics. Today there are 82 Christian nations and 56 Muslim ones, but only one Jewish one: in a country smaller than the Kruger National Park, one quarter of one per cent of the land mass of the Arab world.

But what about the Palestinians? Surely they too have a right to a state of their own?

They do. Jews long ago recognised this. There were various plans for the partition of the land into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, in the 1920s and 1930s. Jews accepted them; the Arabs rejected them. In 1947, the United Nations voted for partition. Again, Jews accepted, the Arabs refused. David Ben Gurion reiterated the call for peace as a central part of Israel's Declaration of Independence in May 1948. Israel's neighbours – Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – responded by attacking it on all fronts.

The offer was renewed in 1967 after the Six Day War. The response of the Arab League, meeting in Khartoum in September 1967, was the famous *Three No's*: no to peace, no to negotiations, no to the recognition of the State of Israel. The call was repeated many times by Golda Meir and always decisively rejected.

The boldest offer was made by Ehud Barak at Taba in 2001. It offered the Palestinians a state in the whole of Gaza and 97 per cent of the West Bank, with border compensations for the other 3 per cent, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The story is told in detail in Dennis Ross' *The Missing Peace* (Ross was the chief US negotiator). Many members of the Palestinian team wanted to accept. The Saudi ambassador at the time, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, said, 'If Arafat does not accept what is available now, it won't be a tragedy, it will be a crime.'

Tragically the Palestinians have been betrayed by those who claimed to be their supporters. They were betrayed in 1948 by the Arab states who promised them that if they left now they would return soon, all Jews having been expelled. They were betrayed by the Arab nations to which they fled, who refused to grant them citizenship, in marked contrast to Israel and its treatment of Jewish refugees from Arab (and other) lands.

They were betrayed by countries that encouraged them to pursue violence instead of peace, bringing poverty to an entire population which, under Israeli rule from 1967 to 1987, had achieved unprecedented levels of affluence and economic growth. They are betrayed today by those who encourage impossible expectations – Palestinian rule over the whole of Israel – thus condemning yet another generation to violence, poverty and despair.

The Egyptians, who ruled Gaza between 1949 and 1967, could have created a Palestinian state, but did not. The Jordanians, who ruled the West Bank during the same years, could have created a Palestinian state, but did not. Instead, Egypt persecuted its Islamist intellectuals, sentencing many to death. The Jordanians expelled the Palestinians in 1971, after killing almost ten thousand of them in 1970 in the massacre known as 'Black September'. The only country that has ever offered the Palestinians a state is Israel.

What then should be our response to those who criticise Israel?

Criticism of Israel is a legitimate part of democratic politics and free speech. Many of Israel's most acute critics are Israelis. No nation is perfect; no nation can be perfect; a good society is one that makes space for, and listens to, constructive criticism. That is something with which we must live. The Hebrew Bible is the most self-critical document in religious or national history.

What we must challenge are the blatant falsehoods: that Israel is the aggressor, that it has not sought peace; above all the idea that it has no right to exist. Equally we must challenge the false paradigm that the Israel-Palestinian relationship is a zero-sum game in which one side loses and the other wins. It is not. From peace, both sides gain. From war, violence and terror, both sides lose.

The call on both sides must be for peace: peace for Israel, peace for the Palestinians. You cannot have one without the other. The choice is not between supporting Israel or supporting the Palestinians, but between peace or violence. Peace is sacred, violence a desecration. Too many lives have been lost, too much blood has been shed. Eventually both sides must recognise the other's right to be – and if not now, when?

For further reading

On the formative ideas of Zionism, see Arthur Hertzberg (ed.), **The Zionist Idea**. Good histories include David Vital, **The Origins of Zionism**; Martin Gilbert, **Israel**; and Conor Cruise O'Brien, **The Siege**. Key documents can be found in Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin (eds.), **The Israel-Arab Reader**. On early non-Jewish support for a Jewish state, see Barbara Tuchman, **Bible and Sword**.