



A Jewish Perspective on Israel, Covenant, and the Land

Various thoughtful Christians have written Thoughtful Christian studies on the Middle East, including the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. This study is written by a thoughtful Jew who has lived in Israel. We encourage participants to listen respectfully and carefully as the writer shares how many Jews understand the issues in an effort to engage one another and seek peace with justice for all.

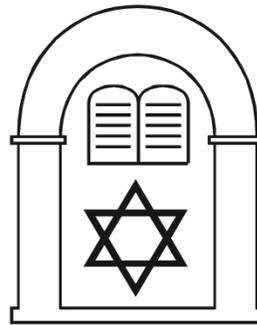
Introduction

I am often reminded of an interchange from a gathering in Buenos Aires, when one of the cardinals in attendance exclaimed in exasperation, “Why is it that when we talk theology, you talk politics?” In encounters between Christians and Jews, we have not yet bridged a theological divide that, I believe, is grounded in our quite different takes on the nature of covenant. It is that divide I seek to address.

Encountering the Other

We are entering the third generation of Christian-Jewish encounter. The first generation moved us from hostility to contrition, from the absence of relationship to first encounters. It dealt with Christian anti-Jewish polemics, liturgy, and scriptural interpretation and the real-world anti-Semitism culminating in the Shoah, the Nazi Holocaust. The second generation sought out that which we share: Jesus as a Jew, Christianity and Judaism as fraternal heirs of the same biblical parent, and some Jewish self-reflection on the need to rethink Christianity within Judaism.

Now, as we enter the third generation, we are aware that we are not twins. Jews and Christians are not on a universalist pathway to union. We must be able to safely highlight our distinctiveness and try to understand each other, not through the lenses of our own traditions, but through a renewed effort to hear each other “*ba’asher hu sham*” (Gen. 21:17)—a biblical relational principle that we must listen like the angel who heard



One is born a Jew and, no matter what level of sin or attempt to abandon Judaism, one remains a Jew forever.

Ishmael’s cry where he—*Ishmael*—was positioned, one where we do not impose one framework on the other, but listen deeply from the place where the other speaks.

The Jewish tradition of covenant is carnal, embodied, earthly, and earthy. It resides in the body, in sexual transmission. It is a physical inheritance. On the whole, one does not become a Jew, one does not accept Judaism into one’s heart. One is born a Jew and, no matter what level of sin or attempt to abandon Judaism, one remains a Jew forever. As the Rabbis of the Talmud explain, “Israel—no matter how much we sin—is still and remains Israel.”¹ Judaism severely limits conversion; once allowed to convert, that person is not “grafted” on to Judaism, but already stands at Sinai with the Jewish brothers and sisters. This covenant of body and history often exasperates many Christians who encounter contemporary Judaism. The Christian revolution is that one can voluntarily leave one’s family, leave one’s conditions, reject one’s religion, and accept Christ. It is volitional, an act of love that brings grace. There is no compulsion. One is not born a Christian, one becomes a Christian and renews that faith throughout

one's life. In an America that values free-will choices and human autonomy, a covenant that is not voluntary seems anachronistic, a relic of past authoritarian societies. Christianity seems far more naturally American than does Judaism.

The Carnal Covenant of the Body

The Bible introduces the unique covenant between Israel and God in Genesis 12. If we go forth with God, so to speak, then we are promised protection, greatness, and land. We also are to be a blessing to the world. The promise is given to Abram and Sarai and the line of descent through Jacob. It is a covenant within the family, transmitted through sex, through the body, that includes circumcision and land. There are costs to an embodied covenant that we will discuss, but we can deepen our relationship if we speak and listen with openness.

One operating principle of the Jewish covenant which I use here is that the Jewish covenant does not ask us to leave our bodies to encounter God, but that we must meet God through our bodies, in our bodies, by a blessing recited before we eat a piece of fruit, by blessing the orifices, arteries, and veins of the body that amazingly open and close at the right moments, allowing us to live. We do not meditate away our body to transcend the physical, but rather use our bodies in every way to infuse the material, the carnal, the whole physical world, with God's presence. Covenant expects that of us.

Ours is a covenant in the family, so that we are heirs, the children of Israel, and maintain a profound sense of familial relationship rather than shared faith. Circumcision of the son on the eighth day is a covenant into this family, of this family. Following the destruction of the Temple and exile, one could have imagined a shift in the rabbinic understanding of such a physical act. Christianity does that—spiritualizing circumcision, relying on Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. Jews go in the opposite direction. Circumcision is highlighted as the covenantal act par excellence. It makes my earthly body part of the house of Israel, a child of Abraham and Sarah. To the Jewish ceremony of ritual circumcision is added a line from Ezekiel 16:6, "By this blood will you live,"² which is part of the encounter between God and Israel—but the blood of Ezekiel is birth blood, menstrual blood, and the blood of intercourse that ends virginity. It seems that the rabbis make an effort to reject a spiri-

tualization of circumcision and actually embed it more deeply in the carnal, the sexual. Jewish males enter the covenant within the family, the home, through the most intense relationship, linking sex and seed to covenant. Women are covenanted in intercourse, in bringing into the world Jewish children. Yes, this is complicated but, as we well understand, all religious communities have their complications and paradoxes.

Even today, ritual circumcision is seen as a central covenantal action in its most intimate way, to make Jewish males more capable of being partners with God, of preparing them for sacred service. Cutting the foreskin, embedded memories of genetic transmission through intercourse, menstrual blood, birth—have all been carried from Bible to rabbinic Judaism and into contemporary Jewish life.

Why the preoccupation with family over faith? The biblical narratives are replete with sexual machinations trumping hoary traditions within the family setting: Sarah sending off Hagar and Ishmael, Rebecca creating a whole episode of deceit, Rachel and Leah bargaining over who will sleep with Jacob, Tamar and Ruth—themselves forbidden—ensuring Davidic messianic progeny through seduction, Esther bartering her body to save the Jewish people. Threats of fratricide, selling a brother into slavery, warring wives and sisters all are essential, so it seems, to ensure that the covenant remains alive. Yet here is the rub: As a Jew reading the Bible, I would say that the covenant is alive not in spite of, but because of and directly through family—even if these families seem dysfunctional. And today's Jewish community remains passionately committed to a community of genetic relationship rather than a community of faith. A Jewish atheist is not an oxymoron. Belief is no prerequisite to a Jewish identity; birth into a Jewish family is what makes us Jewish and, both in law and in popular view, there is no exit. As I said in the beginning, even the convert becomes physically adopted as the child of the original Jewish family of Abraham and Sarah.

The Covenant of the Land

And that brings us to land. The biblical view we inherited weds the covenant to "landedness." We left the land with the tears witnessed in Lamentations and Psalms, and wandered in exile. In some sense, of course, the remarkable edifice of rabbinic Judaism flourished off the land. It often seems so hard for our Christian friends

to understand why we now would revert to the tribalism, to the nationalism, and to a limiting, physical connection to dirt, to soil. Again, we do not spiritualize the graphic and physical dimension of our love of the land of Israel. In Protestant liturgy, the Psalms are recited as comfort and consolation. Listen to them through Jewish ears, the words of an exiled, traumatized people trudging back to the homes and fields torn from them by conquering forces:

A Song of Ascents sung when God brought back the remnant of Israel

We were in a dream, our mouths filled with joyous laughter and our tongues elation . . . We were so happy.
God brought back this remnant like water flowing in the desert,
Sowing in pain, we now reap a harvest of joy. (Ps. 126)

And from Psalm 118:

The forlorn discarded stones now become the cornerstone,
Esteemed and held high beyond our wild imaginings.

In Jewish literature extending well into the twentieth century, overwhelmingly written by landless rabbis who never set foot in Israel, the preoccupation with the laws concerning planting and harvest, tithing and geography, may seem strange. Here are medieval Jews living on the Rhine River, on the steppes of Russia, in North Africa, arguing about how to redeem the Land of Israel, to plant wheat, to reap the harvest, and to ensure its sacredness. Jews descend from those who lost touch with reality, people who rejected their real condition in the Diaspora for the fantasy of return to the Land of Israel. But in my lifetime, following the Shoah (the Holocaust) in which my family was murdered, how can I not see the return of my people to its land as, in some fashion, redemptive? When as a young boy living on an agricultural school in Israel, I cleaned the chicken coop—and there is nothing more disgusting than cleaning a chicken coop—I felt that I was at the altar of the Temple performing *avodah*—sacred service. And when I stood guard on the Jordanian border, I was the heir of Joshua and David and Deborah (well aware that Mounts Gilad and Tabor were close by and the Jordan river flowed below me). The Jewish people have chosen to defer *Yerushalayim shel malah*—the ethereal, spiritualized heavenly Jerusalem—for the stones and dirt and conflict of today’s earthly Jerusalem



As a very small people, the responsible assumption of power is what Jews and Judaism must learn.

and State of Israel. To understand Jews is to realize that the covenant of land is alive and well. It is at the core of Jewish covenantal self-understanding.

Yes, I understand the complexities and dangers of such a worldly covenantal Jewish inheritance. Each of us is dreadfully aware of the combustive union of God, religious passion, power, and land—we are witness to its volcanic horror at this very minute in the Holy Land and know that, at its extreme, covenantal fulfillment of the land can lead us into catastrophe, as the rabbis record it did in both the first revolt against Rome in 70 CE and during the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 CE.

I understand that Protestant churches have spent decades repenting the sins of colonialism and imperialist ambition. Many Christian churches have transformed from a triumphant church obligated to bring Christ’s message and redemption—by force and conquest if necessary—to a religious community that rejects violence and war and forced conversion. It is a great accomplishment.

So it must be strange to hear Jews, who for centuries were the subjects of assault, value the assumption of power, the desire to control the lives of people through nationhood. But you see, we have tried powerlessness for almost two millennia, and powerlessness has failed us. Rather, as a very small people, the responsible assumption of power is what Jews and Judaism must learn. The State of Israel reflects this extraordinary possibility, fraught with all the typical realities of corruption and discrimination and failed policies, of the assumption once again of power, the ability to affect our own destiny in a material, physical way—building roads and establishing institutions and struggling with national identity. From our perspective, Christians, even the most critical Christians, still control much of the world.

It is as natural to Christianity as breathing in and out. So those Christians who reject nationalism can do so from the powerful position of those who control the world. You can reject American actions in Iraq because, when all is said and done, you are a prophetic voice speaking to your own faith community, to Christian presidents and Cabinet officers, generals and diplomats. You can reject power exactly because you have it, so that you can speak of a higher plane of being, of transcendent faith.

For Jews, rejecting Israel because of its failures is a luxury we cannot afford. This is still new, this experiment in a Jewish state, in Jewish power. I repeat what the Rabbinis proclaimed about being Jewish: "Israel, even when it sins, remains Israel."³ And I am her son.

Embodied, Carnal Theology

In terms of covenantal fulfillment, it is the manifestation of God's love to let us show that Judaism can function not only in the ghettos and shtetls of Europe or in suburban United States, but also in building a just Jewish society, a light unto the nations. For many of us, the reestablishment of a Jewish commonwealth in the Land of Israel is an unfolding, a next stage, where Jews must take our experience of suffering and subjugation, of discrimination and Auschwitz, to model a nation that cares for the widow and orphan and, especially, the stranger in our midst, for we ourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt. That we have failed to live up to the dream is a sobering and deeply painful reality. I spend each day fighting for peace, for the right of Palestinians and Israelis to live with security and justice, for a democratic Palestine living in harmony with the State of Israel. I have advocated in Washington and Jerusalem and Ramallah for basic human and civil rights for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The suffering and pain is real and continues at this very moment. But it does not cause me to despair. It causes me to work harder to fulfill my Jewish obligation and that of my people to transform the conditions of life in the Holy Land as well as here at home, for America, too, the America built by Christian pioneers, is not yet the sacred society we seek.

Jews are not alone in that obligation. We share with Christians a piece of the covenant, even if we come to

it from different paths: to be a holy people, to care for the widow, and orphan and stranger, to be a covenanted people. We are the children of prophets who must challenge the complacencies of our fellow citizens so that the world is transformed for goodness.

Yet the paths, while joyfully intersecting, are different. The Jewish focus on this world, embodied, carnal, positioned in land and family relationship, means that when I talk theology it may sound strange, because covenantal theology for us is sociology and demographics, it is geography, water and soil conservation, it is politics and economics. Contemporary covenantal Jewish theology must include dialogue over military strategy and the just use of power. Jewish theology is seldom pietistic, monastic, meditative, or self-abnegating. So when I present Jewish belief, and I begin to explain politics in Israel or the exact placement of the security wall or demographic trends, know that I am speaking the theology of extended family, my home, and the Holy Land that I love.

Each year, Jews around the world celebrate Passover, our annual reminder that God abhors slavery and that our covenant obligates us to affirm once again that we are partners with God in bringing more freedom into the world. And we end our Passover Seder with the words "Next year in Jerusalem," which also affirms our confidence that the covenant between God and Israel is still alive and that God's love is real. This is a fitting way to fulfill the covenantal promises God made to me and my ancestors, to my family, to Abraham and Sarah, and to those who trudged out of Egypt to be a sacred nation of priests searching for a place to call home.

About the Writer

David Elcott is the Taub Professor in Practice of Public Service and Leadership at the Wagner School of New York University and the former national director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee.

Endnotes

1. b. *Sanhedrin* 44a
2. All Bible references are the author's translation.
3. b. *Sanhedrin* 44a