

The Land of Israel

1. The yearning for the land of Israel never left the Jewish people.

1.1 In other Words, the land of Israel was always a place in the minds of the Jews where national potential would one day be fulfilled.

2. But, as a practical reality, this did not begin to happen in a significant way until the birth of modern Zionism, not as a religious movement, but as a political movement. The national fulfillment did not take place until late in the 19th century.

3. The re-birth of Israel is an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. Never before in the history of mankind has a people gone into exile, been dispersed and enslaved, and then many years later become a nation.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

1. Before we discuss the Jews' return to their homeland, let us look back at history and review briefly what happened in the land of Israel after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70.

2. Jerusalem was leveled, rebuilt on the Roman model, and re-named Aeolia Capitolina translated "Capitol of Asia." The land of Israel was later re-named Palestine (after the extinct Philistines, one of the worst enemies of the Jews from ancient times). From c. A.D. 70 to c. A. D. 95, Jews were barred from the land.

3. The Byzantine Empire (the Constantinople-based Christian version of the Roman Empire) continued the earlier policy of barring entrance of Jews for some 500 years. Jews were not allowed into Jerusalem until the Muslims conquered the Byzantines in 638 B.C.

4. Once the Muslims took over the land of Israel, they held it with the brief exception of the period of the Crusades. The Turkish Ottoman Empire held power: from 1518 to 1917. Yet, during all this time, the Muslims generally treated the Holy Land as a backwater province.

4.1 There was no attempt to make Jerusalem, which was quite run-down, an important capital city and only a few Muslim dynasties attempted to improve the land. Similarly, only limited building went on in the rest of the land, which was barren and un-populated.

5. Mark Twain who visited Israel in 1867 described it like this in his book *Innocents Abroad*:

“We traversed some miles of desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds - a silent, mournful expanse... A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely... We never saw a human being on the whole route. We pressed on toward the goal of our crusade, the renowned Jerusalem.

“The further we went the hotter the sun got and the more rocky and barren, repulsive and dreary the landscape became ... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bounds the approaches to Jerusalem ... Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless. I would not desire to live here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes.”

6. Absent thus far in this paper is any mention of Palestinians. That is because they lived variously in places like Jordan, Tunisia and Gaza. No Palestinians attempted to rescue the barren, mournful, dreary and lifeless land until Jews from Eastern Europe and Spain returned as refugees. Various payments for the land were made to various absent land owners. Many of the land owners resided in Continental Europe and Great Britain. More information concerning who a few of the principle landlords were will be discussed later.

EARLY MIGRATIONS

1. Jews started to migrate to Israel following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Jews in Spain and known today as Sephardic Jews. Spain was infamous for its persecutions of its Jewish population.

2. In the 16th century, large numbers of Jews migrated to the northern city of Safed which soon became the home of the largest Jewish population in Israel.

3. In the mid-1700s a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov by the name of Gershon Kitover started the first Hassidic community in Israel. (Hasidic Jews are a Jewish religious group founded in Poland). The Hasidic Jews were responsible for the growth of a large Jewish community in the early 19th century.

4. Between 1808 and 1812 three groups of disciples numbering about 500 people, came to the land of Israel. Their arrival revived the presence of Ashkenazi Jewry in Jerusalem (Ashkenazi Jews are Jews who immigrate from Eastern Europe).

4.1 Jerusalem for over 100 years had been mainly Sephardi and the Sephardi had a huge impact on the customs and religious practices of the religious community in and around Jerusalem.

4.2 By 1880, there were about 40,000 Jews, living in the land of Israel among some 400,000 Muslims. One of the major figures of this time period was Moses Montefiore (1784 to 1887). Montefiore was the first Jew to be knighted in Britain.

4.3 Sir Montefiore had made his fortune during the Napoleonic Wars. Montefiore used carrier pigeons to communicate market information.

4.3.1 For example, he knew about the victory at Waterloo before anyone else; using his pigeons he made a fortune in the English stock market relying upon “insider pigeon trading information.”

4.4 With his fortune made by age 40, Montefiore embarked on a career in philanthropy, becoming a tireless worker and financial benefactor for the Jewish community of Israel.

4.5 Montefiore built the first settlement outside the walls of the Old City, called “Yemin Moshe” in 1858.

5. Besides Montefiore, another extremely important personality in this period of time was Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845 to 1934).

Rothschild was a man who more than anyone else, financially made the re-settlement of Jews in the land of Israel possible.

6. During his lifetime he spent 70 million francs of his own money on various agricultural settlements (Rosh Pina, Zichron Yacov, Pardes Hannah to name but a few) and business enterprises such as the Carmel Winery.

7. So important and generous was Rothschild that he was nicknamed *HaNadiv HaYaduah*, “The Famous Contributor.” He made it possible for thousands of Jews to return to the land.

EARLY POLITICAL ZIONISM

1. We did not see political Zionism until late in the 19th century as a reaction to the intolerable persecution of the Jews of Russia.

2. The early political Zionists, being largely secular did not feel a special yearning for Israel rooted in tradition or religion.
3. Instead they felt that the land of Israel was the only place where Jews could create a national identity, regain their pride and productivity, and hopefully escape the horrible anti-Semitism, of Czarist Russia.
4. One of the main organizations involved in early political Zionism was Hibbat Zion “the love of Zion” founded in 1870. (Its members were called Hovevei Zion, “lovers of Zion.”)
5. A major personality among the Hovevi Zion was Judah Leob Pinsker (1821-1891). A Polish doctor, Pinsker started out as one of the *Maskilim*, a group which wanted their fellow Jews to drop Judaism and merge with Russian culture in the hope that if Jews were socially accepted, then Russian anti-Semitism would disappear.
6. But after the pogroms following the assassination of Czar Alexander in 1881, he and many other of the *Maskilim* came to the conclusion that their efforts were futile and anti-Semitism was never going to disappear.
7. He came to believe the only solution was for Jews to live in their own national homeland. Pinsker published his ideas in a pamphlet called “Auto-Emancipation.” In it he penned these memorable words:

“We must reconcile ourselves to the idea that the other nations, by reason of their inherent natural antagonism, will forever reject us.”

FIRST ALIYAH

1. In 1882, another important organization was formed in Russia. It was called *Bilu*, an acronym of the opening words from a verse in Isa 2:5: *Beit Yaacov lechu Venelech* meaning, “House of Jacob, come, let us go...

2. Bilu was very active in the early settlement movement, what came to be called the “First *Aliyah*”—the first large migration of Jews from Russia and Romania to the Land of Israel.

3. *Aliyah* means “ascent.” To migrate to Israel—to make *aliyah* —means to come from a low place and to “go up.” (In antiquity the term *Aliyah* referred to a trip to Jerusalem to visit the Temple, usually during one of the pilgrim festivals.

4. The year 1882 marked the first such *aliyah*, when Jews began to arrive in the land of Israel in droves—some 30,000 Jews came in two waves between 1882-1891 and founded 28 new settlements.

5. Hundreds of thousands of acres were purchased by these early Zionists from absentee Arab landowners who lived elsewhere.

6. The majority of the lands purchased were in areas that were neglected and considered “un-developable.

7. Amazingly, and with much effort, these early settlers made the barren land bloom again. Like President Trump they also drained the swamps.

8. What drove many of these early immigrants was an idealism that was captured by Zev Dugnov, a member of Bilu:

“My final purpose is to take possession of Palestine and to restore to the Jews the political independence for which they have now been denied for two thousand years. Don’t laugh. It is not a mirage. It does not matter if that splendid day will come in 50-years’ time or more. A period of 50 years is no more than a moment of time for such an undertaking.”

9. In fact, it would take 66 years. Meanwhile, Jews would continue to come, reclaim the land and build a strong political movement demanding international and national independence..