

About 10 chapters before our Torah readings today and tomorrow, we began the story of the first of our patriarchs and matriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, Avram and Sarai. As the story begins, we read:

Adonai said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. [Gen. 12:1]

לְדָלֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ

And the rhythm of that verse leads directly to tomorrow’s Torah reading, when we will read:

Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you. [Gen 22:1]

קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ

Our tradition teaches that the place where Abraham took Isaac was the mountain known as Mount Zion, the place where the Temple was destined to be built. In our literature, Zion is a beloved place. Zion is the ultimate aliyah, the spiritually highest place on earth. The longing to connect with Zion, to make pilgrimage to Zion, to restore Zion to the beauty of its highest state of development, is baked into our sacred literature from the beginning. Zion may refer to one particular mountaintop, but in our tradition it represents the city of Jerusalem and the totality of the land that God promised Abram, and that later generations of his family have lived continuously for at least 3000 years.

Although at two points in the history of our people we lost sovereignty over the land and significant portions of our people were taken into exile elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, at no point in Jewish history did we ever forget or give up the notion that Zion is our land, our homeland, our ancestral native land.

The United Nations and Amnesty International largely share an accepted description of what it means to be an indigenous people. Listen to their definition, and think about the Jewish people:

- First and most important, the people identify themselves as indigenous to a particular place.
- Second, they share an ancestral link with those who inhabited a country or region before it was colonized or before other peoples became dominant.
- They have a strong link to particular territories and the surrounding natural resources.
- They have distinct social, economic or political systems, which they are resolved to maintain and reproduce.
- They have a distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- They resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.
- Finally, they are politically and socially marginalized.

Can you seriously say that this description of indigenous peoples does not describe Jews and our relationship to the land of Israel? Of course it does!

Our most ancient literature connects us to the place known as Israel. Throughout Jewish history, Jews identified themselves as the people Israel from the land of Israel. Based on archeological evidence, the Jewish people became a self-identified people while they were in the land of Israel.

Dr. Gabi Barkay is a well-known Israeli archaeologist who discovered two small silver scroll amulets containing Birkat Kohanim from the 7th century BCE with the earliest quotation from the Torah. He is also the co-founder of the Temple Mount Sifting Project in Jerusalem which has spent 19 years sifting through almost 4,600 tons of dirt illegally removed from the Temple Mount by the Moslem Waqf and dumped in the Kidron Valley. Dr. Barkay and a large team of volunteers have discovered more than 600,000 artifacts from all periods of Jerusalem's history. He has established, without question, a Jewish history dating back thousands of years, in Jerusalem.

Our ancestors lived in this land for at least 1000 years according to archeological and historical records, or for more than 1500 years according to Biblical records. During that time, some portion of them was taken into exile, and others, foreigners, were resettled in Northern Israel. Those newcomers assimilated and absorbed many Israelite religious practices, which indicated that Israelite culture remained dominant in the land even in periods of exile. No other self-identified people has a written record connecting themselves to this particular piece of land for as long as the Jewish people.

Over centuries of being away from our land and living among other peoples, over centuries of people around the world choosing to join the Jewish community, there remain distinct DNA links between Jews from communities around the world. Even during thousands of years when the majority of the Jewish people did not live in the land of Israel, we continued to pray in the direction of the land, using the language of the land, for the return to the land of Israel.

The literature that grew out of our original time in the land of Israel remains our central set of sacred texts that guide Jewish life and culture. We have maintained social and economic systems directed by Torah and its two and a half millennia old culture. We have maintained the Sabbath, the institution of tzedakah, free loan societies based on Exodus and Deuteronomy, and our holiday cycle based on the harvests of the land of Israel. The modern State of Israel incorporates some of the values of Biblical and Rabbinic law into its political system.

The Torah contains laws and instructions regarding the land, such as Sabbatical laws, that only apply to the land of Israel. Sukkot traditions like the lulav and etrog are rooted in the unique set of climate zones of Israel. Prayers for rain in Jewish communities around the world are connected to the climate of Israel. We have preserved and resurrected the ancient Judaeen language of Hebrew, a distinct language, which describes our culture and beliefs, and which once again flourishes in the land of Israel.

Despite centuries of persecution by others wanting to break down the Jewish community and assimilate the people into their system, Jews held onto their way of life as a distinctive people and community even though doing so resulted in their ongoing social marginalization.

To treat the modern State of Israel as an example of western imperial colonization is historically and factually incorrect. Most of the early population of Israel moved to Israel from neighboring countries elsewhere in the Middle East, not from Europe. And in Europe, the Shoah was a stark reminder that in the 1930's and 40's, Jews were not considered native white Europeans. Jews were always held to be outsiders. And everywhere we went, Jew considered ourselves outsiders, except in the land of Israel.

At the recent conference in Washington, DC, two Native American leaders – Chief Joseph and Ambassador Dr. Laralyn RiverWind – spoke about they felt a deep affinity with the Jewish people because both are “indigenous people.”

“As First Nations people, we see your story as a story of hope and a story of healing. You have, through the resilience of your people, been an inspiration. You love life, you have recovered from generations of trauma, and you're an example to our people that we can still embrace and love life and grasp for healing through the trauma and through the problems and the difficulties that life brings.”<sup>1</sup>

I want us to reclaim ourselves as indigenous to the land of Israel. We are not the descendants of colonizers, we are the descendants of a proud Israelite people. I want to challenge you to lean into some of the signs and practices of our indigenous status, such as properly accented Israeli Hebrew. During my Sabbatical earlier this summer, I saw other congregations, small and large, modifying Ashkenazi melodies to our prayers so as to accent the words properly. It's not easy for most of us, who grew up singing Ashkenazi accented melodies. But I want us as a congregation to align ourselves with Hebrew as a living language.

I want you, not matter how much or how little Hebrew you know, to commit to improving your Hebrew vocabulary, conversational or prayerbook. It is your native language.

I think each of us should be thinking about, planning for, and saving for a trip to Israel sometime in our future. And if it is not in your future, set aside some funds to help your children or grandchildren connect with Israel. Grand Rapids has not traveled to Israel as a community in about seven years. Is it time to think about another community trip?

Consider investing directly in Israel through Israel Bonds. You get competitive interest on your investment, and you literally “bond” yourself and your family with our brothers and sisters in Israel.

Drink Israeli wine, donate to organizations that support Israel, join Mercaz and Masorti, our Conservative Movement organizations for and in Israel, get your news from Israel from Israeli sources such as [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com), <https://www.jpost.com/>, <https://www.haaretz.com/>, and <https://www.ynetnews.com/category/3083>.

My friends, let us reaffirm our hope, our faith, our connection and our commitment to this land of our ancestors, the land of our family, our land, the land of Israel.

And at this time of deep and ongoing pain in Israel, I'll conclude with a prayer which has become an anthem of the religious spirit in Israel and around the world:

אֲחִינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַנְּתוּנִים בְּצָרָה וּבְשִׁבְיָהּ, הָעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בָּיִם וּבֵין בַּיְבֻשָׁה, הַמְּקוּם יְרִיחַם  
עֲלֵיהֶם, וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לְרוּחָהּ, וּמֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹרָהּ, וּמִשְׁעָבוּד לְגְאֻלָּהּ, הַשְׁתָּא בְּעַגְלָא וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב.  
וּנְאֻמַר אַמֵּן.

Our family, the whole house of Israel, who are in distress, or in captivity — who stand in a narrow strip of land next to the sea — may the Omnipresent have mercy on them and take them out from narrowness to expanse, and from darkness to light, and from oppression to redemption, now, swiftly, soon!

And let us say, Amen.

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1. <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/396577>