**THE IMPORTANCE OF ISRAEL IN JUDAISM**

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| The Land of Israel Quick Facts | • Israel is the land promised to Abraham in the Bible• Israel is central to the Jewish religion• Zionism is a political movement to establish a Jewish homeland• Israel is a democratic country• Israel is home to more than 1/3 of the world's Jews• 20% of Israel's citizens are not Jewish (Muslim, Christian etc.) |

### The Promised Land

The history of the Jewish people begins with Abraham, and the story of Abraham begins when God tells him to leave his homeland, promising Abraham and his descendants a new home in the land of Canaan. (Gen. 12). This is the land now known as Israel, named after Abraham's grandson, whose descendants are the Jewish people. The land is often referred to as the Promised Land because of G-d's repeated promise (Gen. 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8) to give the land to the descendants of Abraham.

The land is described repeatedly in the Torah as a good land and "a land flowing with milk and honey" (e.g., Ex. 3:8). This description may not seem to fit well with the desert images we see on the nightly news, but let's keep in mind that the land was repeatedly abused by conquerors who were determined to make the land uninhabitable for the Jews. In the few decades since the Jewish people regained control of the land, we have seen a tremendous improvement in its agriculture. Israeli agriculture today has a very high yield.

Jews have lived in this land continuously from the time of its original conquest by Joshua more than 3200 years ago until the present day, though Jews were not always in political control of the land, and Jews were not always the majority of the land's population.

The land of Israel is central to Judaism. A substantial portion of Jewish law is tied to the land of Israel, and can only be performed there. Some rabbis have declared that it is a mitzvah (commandment) to take possession of Israel and to live in it (relying on Num. 33:53). The Talmud indicates that the land itself is so holy that merely walking in it can gain you a place in the World to Come. Prayers for a return to Israel and Jerusalem are included in daily prayers as well as many holiday observances and special events.

Living outside of Israel is viewed as an unnatural state for a Jew. The world outside of Israel is often referred to as "galut," which is usually translated as "diaspora" (dispersion), but a more literal translation would be "exile" or "captivity." When we live outside of Israel, we are living in exile from our land.

Jews were exiled from the land of Israel by the Romans in 135 [C.E.](http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/ce.htm), after they defeated the Jews in a three-year war, and Jews did not have any control over the land again until 1948 C.E.

### Zionism and the Formation of the State of Israel

The [Jewish people](http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/people.htm) never gave up hope that we would someday return to our home in Israel.

But for a long time, this desire for our homeland was merely a vague hope without any concrete plans to achieve it. In the late 1800s, Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann founded Zionism, a political movement dedicated to the creation of a Jewish state. They saw a state of Israel as a necessary refuge for Jewish victims of oppression, especially in Russia, where pogroms were decimating the Jewish population.

The name "Zionism" comes from the word "Zion," which was the name of a stronghold in Jerusalem. Over time, the term "Zion" came to be applied to Jerusalem in general, and later to the Jewish idea of utopia. Zionism was not a religious movement; it was a primarily political. After World War I, Palestine was assigned to the United Kingdom as a mandated territory by the newly-formed League of Nations. However, the Arabs living in Palestine vigorously opposed Jewish immigration into the territory and the idea of a Jewish homeland. There were many riots in the territory, and the British came to believe that the conflicting claims were irreconcilable. In 1937, the British recommended partition of the territory.

The Holocaust brought the need for a Jewish homeland into sharp focus for both Jews and for the rest of the world. The Jews who tried to flee Nazi Germany were often turned back due to immigration limitations at the borders of every country, including the United States, Britain and Palestine. Many of those who were sent back to Germany ended up in death camps where they were systematically murdered.

The British were unable to come up with a solution that would satisfy either Arabs or Jews, so in 1947, they handed the problem to the newly-founded United Nations, which developed a partition plan dividing Palestine into Jewish and Arab portions. The plan was ratified in November 1947. The mandate expired on May 14, 1948 and British troops pulled out of Palestine. The Jews of Palestine promptly declared the creation of the State of Israel, which was recognized by several Western countries immediately.

However, the surrounding Arab nations did not recognize the validity of Israel and invaded, claiming that they were filling a vacuum created by the termination of the mandate and the absence of any legal authority to replace it. The Arabs fought a year-long war to drive the Jews out. Miraculously, the new state of Israel won this war, as well as every subsequent Arab-Israeli war, gaining territory every time the Arabs attacked them.

### Israel Today

Today, approximately five million Jews, more than a third of the world's Jewish population, live in the land of Israel. Jews make up more than eighty percent of the population of the land, and Jews are in political control of the land, though non-Jews who become citizens of Israel have the same legal rights as Jewish citizens of Israel. In fact, there are a few Arab members of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament).

Most Jews today support the existence of the state of Israel, though not necessarily all of the policies of its government (as one would expect in any democracy). There are a small number of secular Jews who are anti-Zionist. There is also a very small group of right-wing Orthodox Jews who object to the existence of the state of Israel, maintaining that it is a sin for us to create a Jewish state when the messiah has not yet come. However, this viewpoint does not reflect the mainstream opinion of Orthodoxy. Most Orthodox Jews support the existence of the state of Israel as a homeland, even though it is not the theological state of Israel that will be brought about by the messiah.

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