S
ince the beginning of time, humans have had a problem with land. The first dilemma, of course, was the very mystery of land. That is, how did land itself, the ground we walk on, come into being? All relationship with and attitude toward the land would flow from this answer. The Torah addresses that problem with its opening line: God created the heavens and the earth.

That being the case, we can then conclude that God owns the land. All human claims to the land, therefore, are grounded in this basic knowledge. God first owned the land. It did not originally belong to us. Therefore, we must justify somehow any subsequent claim to use or ownership we may profess. But, how do we do that? What are our rights to the land? How are they earned? How conferred? How secured?

In addition we need to ask, even after justifying a claim to the land, what is the status of the land? Does this land/all land have a spiritual dimension? Or is it just a prop of life, a platform on which human history is played out? Can we do anything we want with it? Is it possible to lose our claim to land? If so, how? In which case what happens to the land? Does all land have the same meaning, or are some places different, holier, than others?

These questions about the status of land underlie the world’s most pressing issues: political, economical and spiritual. They affect questions of property ownership and economic distribution of resources, environmental injustice, geopolitical warfare, resource and waste management,
environmental ethics, and so on. And while Judaism is richly steeped in conversations on these subjects, with laws stipulating the proper use and distribution of land rights, the welfare of animals, appreciation of nature as witness to the majesty of God, etc., I am going to largely avoid these for the purposes of this paper and focus on the place of “place” in Jewish tradition.

As noted above, humans cannot ignore the experience and discourse of land. After all, we cannot exist without a place to be. All our experience is bound up with place. One of the first memories we recall about a remarkable or tragic event is where we were when it happened. Einstein’s teacher, Hermann Minkowski, captured it succinctly when he said: “Nobody ever noticed a place except at a time, or a time except at a place.” Jewish tradition, especially in its biblical stories, intimately combines event and place. Indivisible from the telling of our sacred history is the story of land itself. For the Jewish people, land is not just a backdrop, not a prop, but a partner, a covenantal character in our long unfolding sacred saga.

Cultures with autochthonous myths had it much easier. If the land spit you out, gave birth to you, you could claim that you belonged to that land, and that land belonged to you. (Remnants of this tradition remain in force even today. Citizenship is often determined not by parental status but by location at birth.) But a creation story that speaks of human beings created by God and then placed on the earth, or even created from the earth but not in a geographically identifiable or reclaimable spot, makes it problematic to claim possession and rights to a particular place. The Bible clearly wants to state that land is God’s and any use or claim we humans make on it must be somehow divinely justifiable.

Even more, the story of the Jewish people begins with Abraham outside the land that his descendants would eventually call their own. Yet an enduring claim to a particular place is essential for a tradition like Judaism that is built on peoplehood. Even more telling, then, is the fact that the people were not born of, or in, the land. The Torah clearly wants to teach that no matter how central Israel:the land is to Israel:the people, occupancy in that land is a gift, not a given. The land belongs to God, and was gifted as part of the covenant, a dynamic component in a dynamic relationship of God, the people, Torah and the land.
The early chapters of the Torah seem bathed in this teaching. Chapter 1 of Genesis confers to the first humans the rights of usufruct over the whole earth, but ownership remains with God. From the perspective of Chapter 1, this seems more a matter of semantics than practical concern, for there are no other humans to challenge the first couple's claims, and no apparent boundaries to their "place." The distinction between use and ownership, then, while precise was inconsequential.

Chapters 2 and 3 spell out more clearly the human insecurity in relation to the land, both in the ability to call any place home and in being comfortably supported by it. (It is only in light of this Eden narrative that the verses in Chapter 1, specifically verses 26 and 28, can rear up and be much debated in environmental discussions of human rights and land ethics.)

In Chapter 4, Cain, the farmer, began the human experience of feeling alienated from the land. As punishment for killing Abel, the herder, Cain is told: "When you till the land, it shall not yield its goodness to you. A fugitive and wanderer shall you be on this earth" (Genesis 4:12). The land would harbor neither him nor his efforts at feeding himself. Even when Cain found a place to settle down, the Torah calls that place Nod—movement. Cain was the first of many generations of refugees who found the land inhospitable due to human aggression, whether their own aggression or the aggression of others.

The flood story, the Tower of Babel, even the call to Abraham to leave the place of his birth, broadcast the instability of the relationship between humans and their land.

Yet humans cannot live in such states of wandering, not knowing what place to call home, uncertain if where they got up in the morning will still be the place they can lay down that night. So, Abraham’s call out of Ur was different from the previous biblical stories of displacement. Unlike the others, where displacement was punishment, this was redemption. It was not a separation from, but a calling to. Abraham was going home.

But that journey home for Abraham and his people has not been easy. It has not been a seamless, straightforward story of success. In that journey lies all the real-world problems of place as home.

For any people, the act of claiming any place is problematic. Do you claim it because no one got there before you? Do you claim it because you are stronger than those who are currently there? Do you claim it by

Genesis 12 quite handily solves that problem for the Jewish people in perhaps the only way the Torah could: God gave the Jews that land. God made the earth; God owns the earth; God can gift the earth, or sections of it, to anyone God so chooses. And in this case, God chose to give the Jews that particular piece of land. While the precise contours and boundaries of the land may be open to question, the overall placement and claim to the land is neither questionable nor revocable. At least for generations of Jews.

For thousands of years, during the biblical golden age of Davidic settlement through the decades of the suffering of exile, the Jewish people turned to that place on earth called Judah, or Israel, or Zion, and knew it to be ours. Displacement or exile from the land never meant severance from the land, and certainly did not mean severance from our relationship with God. It meant rather deprivation of the land’s immediate blessings, and was taken to be a sign that we had displeased God. But this was all absorbed amid a constant hope for reunion and restoration, and a continual spiritual and physical orientation to that place, Israel.

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept... If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither..." After the destruction of the Second Temple, throughout the second, 2,000-year-long exile, these words from Psalm 137 were recited as an introduction to the blessings said after weekday meals. But on Shabbat, the pain of exile was soothed by the dream of homecoming. The blessings after the festive meals on that day of rest were (and continue to be) introduced not with Psalm 137, but with Psalm 126, with the celebration of reunion: “When the Lord restores the grandeur of Zion—we can see it as in a dream—our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues with singing.”

We might be far from home, the psalmist comforts us, we might be banished from the home God gave to us, but nonetheless, it is forever ours, and one day we will return.

Being far from home is a constant refrain in the stories of the Bible. What is notable is not just that the stories reflect a painful reality of Jewish history but they seem designed to reflect something more. Both the first part of TaNaKh, the Torah, and the last part of TaNaKh, the Writings, end their storytelling at the boundaries of homecoming, with
the promise of return, the taste of return, but not the experience of return. Why could the Torah not end with the first chapters of Joshua? Why could Chronicles not end with the Jews returning to their land? Why would the editors of the Bible choose to frame these sacred texts in terms of promise instead of arrival?

Perhaps that is part of the rich wisdom of our tradition, where particularistic history intersects with universal experience. Such an expression of expectant homecoming is spiritual metaphor for the constant hope that keeps each of us alive, individually and collectively, as we struggle with the angst of existential wandering. What indeed is the purpose of our lives? Where in fact is that ultimate place called home? What is our purpose here? Where are we going? Where do we really belong? No doubt that is one reason these stories maintain their resonance and claim on us all these years, for they speak on multiple levels of truth.

But this nod to the universal does not cancel out the particular. Nor does the awareness of the sometimes ephemeral connection to home dilute our passion and commitment to homeland.

For the Jewish people, our life, our calendar, our holidays, our liturgy, our stories, our orientation (the way we build our synagogues, decorate our homes, and turn our bodies when we pray), are all bound up in that particular bit of land on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. To this day, if we live outside the land, we might decorate our walls with art from Israel, or mark the wall that faces Jerusalem, purchase goods from there, send tzedakah, donations, there, and seek to be buried with dirt from there.

And yet, we have always acknowledged that Jews can have a “place” outside of Israel. Even before we reached there (Numbers 32), portions of the Jewish people petitioned to live east of the Promised Land. “Now, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a great deal of cattle. And they saw that the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead was a good place for cattle...so they spoke to Moses and Eliezer the priest and the heads of the assembly...and said, ‘If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to us for a possession...’”

At first this was seen as blasphemy, treachery, a disassociation from the Jewish people. Living outside the land meant living outside the people. But the renegade tribes argued, no, not at all. While “we will
build sheepfolds here for our cattle and cities for our little ones, we ourselves will be armed to go to battle with the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place... We will not return to our houses until every family in Israel has inherited their inheritance.”

Jews may choose to live outside the land, indeed may prefer to live outside the land. But that does not break our bonds with our people, or break the bonds of peoplehood and homeland.

I would argue that the tradition of placing a mezuza on every Jewish home is an expression of this sense of extended shared residence. The mezuza is a visual marker placed on the doorpost of a Jewish house. It holds within it a portion of the Torah text. This marker transforms the Jewish home into an embassy of the Holy Land. These homes may be discontinuous in space but they are bound to the specific places of each other, and to the central place of Israel. Even more, they are bound to each other through the central place of Israel. The mezuza also emphasizes the spiritual dimension of Israel, above and beyond its geophysical dimension. For as long as Israel is grounded in real time and place, its spiritual dimensions can reach beyond its physical boundaries.

This connection works in both directions. The primacy of home in Israel is never diminished. Our rootedness and security are bound up in the land and landscape of Israel. That is our source, the hub and hearth that grounds us and warms us. And yet, the boundaries of home are not barriers. Teachings, wisdom, people, and God’s presence flow from there to here, filling the world. The rabbis called the synagogue mikdash me’at, the diminutive Holy Place, the surrogate Temple. While the Temple and Jerusalem can never be replaced or supplanted, emanations of their sacredness can be felt around the world.

Here is another tidbit to add to the complexity of “place.” Despite the entire Torah focusing on getting the Jewish people to the Promised Land, we do not mark, remember or celebrate the moment of our re-entry. It is not that we do not know when it happened. “And the people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped at Gilgal...” (Joshua 4:19). This is the crossing of the Jewish people from the centuries of slavery into the promised land. This is the moment the people had been waiting for. This was the moment that Moses was not able to see. Yet neither the TaNaKh nor the rabbis ever stipulate that we celebrate this date. It is not noted in our schools nor is
this portion read annually in our synagogue cycle. Despite the fact that two full chapters are given over to describe this crossing, this date was never codified in the Jewish sacred calendar.

Perhaps this lack of interest is meant to downplay the militaristic aspect of reclaiming the land; indeed, to downplay any people’s militaristic desire to claim any land by force. Perhaps the Bible and the rabbis wanted to stress that Israel’s claim to the land was not dependent on its wartime successes but rather on the age-old gifting of the land by God to Abraham. Perhaps the intentional oversight of this date is to stress that despite the Joshua narratives no [other] military success is sufficient to claim ownership of any land.

And yet we cannot avoid the need to claim land. Particularity of land ownership is essential, even while it is wildly problematic and the source of strife and killing throughout the generations of humankind. The TaNaKh seems to struggle with balancing the need and the challenge, human ownership with the truth that only God is the land’s true owner. The laws of the Jubilee, the return of all land transfers every fifty years to the “original” tribal owner is one way the biblical tradition manages these conflicting needs. The imposed seventh year of rest for the land, the shemittah year or shevi’it, is another.

At various places in the biblical literature, the land of Israel given to the Jewish people is called nahalah. Nahalah is a word that refers to a section of a great swath of land owned by a master/progenitor that is given as an inheritance or gift to child or inheritor. Both the land of Israel for the Jews, and the Jewish people to God, are called nahalah. From this we can learn that all the earth’s land is of a piece, created and blessed by God. But discrete areas of land are gifted, and needed, by discrete peoples and nations. This seems to be the best way the Bible can manage this complex and problematic question of “place.”

All land is eretz, therefore, God’s creation. All people are bnei adam, humanity. All people will need a place to claim as their own. For the Jewish people, Israel: the land is believed to be covenantantly and eternally bound to Israel: the people. And both are covenantantly and eternally bound to God.