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Friday, January 11

When Prayers for Rain are Answered

By Alex Joffe

The sight of floodwaters covering Tel Aviv highways and Modi'in shopping malls from this week's rains was jarring and unexpected. Israel is, in most minds, an arid land bereft of water, not cursed with its superabundance. But a look at geography and history suggests differently, pointing to both the accomplishments of Zionist technology and their fragility.

Where today there are high-tech industries, tourists, and millions of Israelis, once there were hippopotami. During most of the past 10,000 years, Israel's Coastal Plain was swamp. Bones recovered from excavations there suggest that hippos may have been present even into Hellenistic times, along with an astonishing array of other wildlife. The Nahal Taninim, which empties into the sea near Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael, translates as "Crocodile River", describing another long-extinct denizen. Today's landscape is not only modern—Tel Aviv skyscrapers, the Ayalon Freeway, apartment buildings as far as the eye can see—but deceptive. It hints at the existence of nature, in ways that New York and Los Angeles rarely do, but implies that nature has been overcome. It has not.

Israel's Coastal Plain stretches from Gaza to Haifa. Bordering the Mediterranean are sand dunes and rocky cliffs, cut by rivers from the east and pummeled by waves and storms from the west. The waves breach the dunes and cliffs and deposit sand in the river mouths, which flood to form swamps. Through time, settlements were either located to the east along the foothills, like Antipatris, or, like Jaffa and Caesaria, perched on fossilized dunes or rocky outcrops closer to the sea, with the spaces in between occupied by fish, fowl, and mammals.

From the Bronze Age onward, engineers strove to keep the river mouths open, but silt from the highlands and sand from the sea inevitably closed them off. The immense Bronze Age and Iron Age fortifications at Tel Akko were partly created out of sand dredged from a now-disappeared estuary. Then, in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., the Phoenicians started over, some two kilometers to the west, and founded the Akko—or Acre—that persists today on a rocky outcrop jutting precariously into the sea. Such settlement histories are typical.

The swamps and hidden recesses of the Coastal Plain held abundant resources—and abundant bandits and thieves. As early as the Late Bronze Age, the Hittite king Burnaburiash wrote angrily to the Egyptian king Akhenaten accusing one of Akhenaten's Canaanite princelings of plundering a caravan. Graves of these merchants have been excavated where they appear to have been hastily buried, just north of Akko.

Through the Crusader period, kings and villagers kept the coast under control, maintaining waterworks and harbors and fighting the battle between too much water and too little. But from the medieval Mamluk period onward, sand, silt, and insecurity gradually made the Coastal Plain a malarial marsh. On the eve of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, the coastal interior was occupied by Bedouin who raided Coastal Plain settlements and whose animals destroyed the fragile vegetation that held sand dunes in check. Thereafter, dunes progressed inland at a rate of dozens of feet per year, burying agricultural lands. By the 19th century, the Coastal Plain, along with much of the country, had fallen into disrepair. Before the British mandate, malaria infected a majority of residents; even in Jerusalem, far from the coast, a 1912 survey showed that between 40 and 80 percent of schoolchildren had symptoms.

Change came quickly. In the 19th century, global interest in Palestine, including superpower competition and tourism, began to lift the coast from dereliction. Beginning in the 1870s, Zionists purchased tracts on the coast and in the Jezreel Valley and Huleh Basin, largely unwanted swamps of the Coastal Plain, and set about making them habitable. The first agricultural settlement—Petach Tikvah, along the banks of the Yarkon River—was quickly abandoned because of malaria. But its settlers' successors dug canals and planted eucalyptus for drainage and suppressed mosquitoes. Bypassing traditional subsistence farming methods, they introduced modern agricultural techniques and multiplied yields. Prosperity and labor needs helped ignite mass Arab migration to the area, especially from Egypt, as well as the purchase by absentee Arab landlords of previously abandoned land. Along with the drained swamps, the most successful symbol of the Zionist mastery of nature was Tel Aviv itself, founded in 1909 on a sand dune north of Jaffa.

Yet an increasing population on the coast meant, at first, more grazing animals and cutting of forests for fuel; both increased soil erosion, clogging streams with silt. Complex ecosystems with varied plant and animal species were flattened, reduced to mono-crop orange groves feeding the European market. Many of Palestine's remaining forests fell victim to the building of Turkish railroads and World War I. Thereafter, the British introduced regulations—later

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continued by Israel—for agriculture, land use, town planning, and architecture, rules largely honored in the breach.

The Coastal Plain is Israel's agricultural, industrial and residential heartland. The new state's need for housing, food, and industry was overwhelming and, in turn, overwhelmed sensible planning. By the 1950s, water diverted for all these competing purposes began to reduce the coast's streams and rivers, and discharged waste turned them into toxic trickles. The imperatives of growth led to the 1964 construction of the National Water Carrier, which routed water from the Sea of Galilee south through pipes and culverts, thereby dramatically reducing the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea. By 1967, almost all the streams south of the Galilee were being used for sewage, a problem addressed by treatment plants only in the next decades. Despite enormous progress in public health and water efficiency, there remains enormous competition among these sectors for water allocations—as there is between Israel and the Palestinians.

Today, Israel has over 1,000 square kilometers of man-made "impervious surface area"—buildings, roads, parking lots; this measure places it within the world's top 100 countries. Coastal aquifers have been severely depleted and contaminated by seawater and industrial pollutants. An increasing part of the rain that falls on Judean and Samarian hills slides down paved streets, highways, sewers, and riverbeds to the sea, failing to recharge the aquifers. The automobile has been especially destructive. In 1960 there were 70,000 cars in Israel; today there are 2.5 million. The construction of a modern highway system has constricted the ability of the landscape to drain and recycle water.

Technological societies like Israel and the United States have manipulated environments with determination but little understanding of the long-term impacts. Lining riverbeds with concrete, as with the Ayalon and throughout Los Angeles, gives the illusion of mastering nature. In average years, the consequences are mostly invisible; the absence of thriving ecosystems is apparent, but not the failure of the aquifers to be recharged. Then, the inevitable flooding causes surprise.

When it comes to environmental issues, liberal democratic societies have been partially self-correcting. They periodically take steps, like dismantling dams in the Pacific Northwest and reflooding parts of the Hula Basin, to ameliorate and undo negative conditions. Arguably, however, Israel's environmental progress is slipping, a victim of both politics and economics.

Still, if Israel and the United States have been environmentally overconfident and insensitive, other countries have been catastrophically cruel. The Communist legacy of environmental destruction in Russia, Eastern Europe, and China is nearly beyond description. Soviet engineers reversed the flow of entire rivers and nearly emptied the entire Aral Sea, leaving a chemical-laden dustbowl. Communist politics demanded that technology master and subjugate nature to demonstrate the wisdom and superiority of the Party. Zionists were never so absolute; they were and, one hopes, are capable of learning to work with nature.

The flooding in Israel and elsewhere shows that nature will not be mastered. The response to the hundred-year storm or, worse, the earthquake and tsunami, can be planned up to a point—after which matters are in God's hands. Humans push the limits, ignoring, minimizing, or rationalizing risks as only they can. But flooded highways are gentle reminders that nature has its own reclamation project, which will triumph over ours.

Monday, January 14

Spielberg's *Lincoln* and the Jews: An Untold Story

By Lance J. Sussman

I loved *Lincoln* as much as anyone and, as an American historian, took a special pleasure in it. Among many other things, I thought the depiction of Thaddeus Stevens was terrific. As the father of five children, all of whom grew up in the post-*E.T.* era, I am grateful to Steven Spielberg for having supplied my family with countless hours of great entertainment. As someone descended, in part, from Jews forced to leave Germany in the 1930s and as a rabbi, I especially respect the work he did on *Schindler's List* and his creation of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive. But as an American Jewish historian, I am, I'm afraid I have to say, somewhat disappointed with the latest Spielberg film. So much of it is so good, but it would have been even better if he had put at least one Jew in the movie, somewhere.

He has done it before. Not everyone remembers (as I do, having seen it with one child after another) Spielberg's 1985 adventure-comedy, *Goonies*, but no one who does can forget "Chunk" Cohen. And, of course, there is Private Stanley Mellish, who, in *Saving Private Ryan*, taunts German P.O.W.s with the loud announcement that he's a Jewish soldier. So couldn't Spielberg have done something like that in *Lincoln*?

He had a lot of options. In the very beginning of *Lincoln*, for instance, Spielberg briefly depicts the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry and has two United States Colored Troops talk about it. Couldn't they have said something about General Frederick C. Salomon, one of the Union commanders in this engagement, who was also a Jewish immigrant from Prussia?

Then there's the telegraph office at the War Department where some of the most engaging and entertaining episodes in the movie take place. Couldn't Spielberg have shown Lincoln chatting there with Edward Rosewater (né Rosenwasser, in Bohemia), the twenty-something telegraph operator who sent out the Emancipation Proclamation from that very office on January 1, 1863? True, he was out of Washington and resettled in Omaha, Nebraska by early 1865, when almost all of the action in the movie occurs. But if Spielberg had smuggled him in two years off schedule, who would have noticed—apart from the historians who have been busy documenting Lincoln's minor inaccuracies in small-circulation journals?

A lot of *Lincoln* depicts life in the family quarters of the White House. Couldn't we have been given a glimpse of Isachar Zacharie there? An English Jewish podiatrist who had been recommended to Lincoln by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Zacharie was, according to a September 24, 1864 editorial in the *New York World*, someone who "enjoyed Mr. Lincoln's confidence

perhaps more than any other private individual" and was "perhaps the most favored family visitor at the White House." I'm not sure that Dr. Zacharie made any White House calls during precisely the months depicted in *Lincoln*, but we do have evidence that he corresponded with the president around this time, and the poetic license involved in putting him on the scene would not have been very great at all.

Steven Spielberg omitted all of these people, I have to admit, without really detracting in any way from the quality of his outstanding film, which is truly a great American movie. From the Jewish point of view, however, *Lincoln* represents a missed opportunity—an opportunity to inform a broader public (including far too many Jews) that Jews didn't just show up in the United States after pogrom-makers began torching their neighborhoods in the Russian Pale of Settlement. We were here and played significant parts in the nation's life a considerable amount of time before that.

Tuesday, January 15

If I Forget Thee?

By Allan Arkush

"Between Israel and the Diaspora: Where Do Jews Belong?" This was the theme of a "special day of learning" last Wednesday at Mechon Hadar, an innovative and dynamic institution on the Upper West Side of Manhattan that describes itself as "the first full-time egalitarian yeshiva in North America." Most of the hundred or so participants in the program were college students from all across the country, for whom the special day was something of an interlude in the two-week seminar on "the people, land, and state of Israel," in which they are still immersed. What made the day special was, in part, the presence of a few dozen other people, including much older people, who responded to the invitation to the general public to attend.

The question of the day was one that is evidently on the personal agenda of at least some of the college students. More than one of the educators who addressed the group made it clear that they themselves had wrestled with it all their lives. But the plan was not to ruminate all day about whether, as Rabbi Shai Held playfully put it, it was better to live in Jerusalem or within easy reach of the Kosher Marketplace on Broadway. The idea was to step back from such issues and to consider what Jewish tradition had to say about the importance of living in the Holy Land. The goal of the day's discussions was by no means to come up with any decisive answers. It was rather, as Rabbi Ethan Tucker emphasized, to examine multiple perspectives on the matter found in the tradition, to think about them together, and thereby to enrich the shared vocabulary that would be at everyone's disposal in the future, as they continued to mull things over—together.

Living in the Land of Israel: Obligation, Option, or Sin?" For two hours, Rabbi Held led the group through key biblical, talmudic, and much more recent texts that reflected each of the views represented in his title. He spent much of the time comparing the views of the Rambam (Maimonides), who did not list migration to the land of Israel as one of

the 613 commandments, and the Ramban (Nachmanides), who strongly criticized him for this reason. Giving the Rambam the benefit of the doubt, Held asked why the commandment to make aliyah wasn't on his list and reviewed a number of centuries-old as well as more recent answers to this question. The closer he got to modernity, the more excited he got. Look at the way Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook explains it away! And look how gleefully the Satmars seize upon it! It's amazing how these rabbis can disagree so ferociously about something that is *absent* from the text! In describing the ultra-nationalist Kookists and the anti-Zionist Satmars, Held, who is an old-fashioned liberal religious Zionist, was non-committal, yet he was anything but dispassionate. His deep concern with the texts was contagious and generated intense discussion.

After lunch, and *minhah*, there were smaller sessions in which some of Hadar's other outstanding teachers led discussions of the texts pertaining to such burning questions of Jewish law as "Can you force a spouse to make aliyah?" and whether one can say the Hallel prayer on Israel Independence Day. Devorah Zlochower, who teaches Talmud at Hadar, wrapped up the afternoon with a skillful and trenchant review for the entire group of Nachmanides' commentaries on some verses in Leviticus, in which he expounded on the superiority of the Land of Israel to all other lands. But she too had no axe to grind, and was clearly more interested in responding to questions from the audience like "Did anyone ever propose observing the sabbatical year outside the Land of Israel?" than she was in talking any member of her audience onto the next plane to Lod.

At the end of the day, Rabbi Tucker seemed reasonably satisfied that people's lexicons had indeed been expanded. He drew some broader conclusions too. Our tradition, he said, is clearly not "geo-neutral." Everyone, even the anti-Zionists, recognizes that the Land of Israel has more sanctity than any other place. But what follows from that? The position that the Land occupies in a larger covenantal vision, anchored in Torah, is complex, and not self-evidently stable. It has to remain the subject of a conversation. The conversation is continuing through this week at a very high level, I have every reason to believe, among the scores of college students still at Hadar and their superb teachers, but without the visitors who joined them last Wednesday.

Seeking the Peace of Jerusalem—or a Piece of Jerusalem?

By Moshe Sokolow

There is no end of controversy about Jerusalem, old and new. Archeology has become a full-fledged battlefield in the dispute over who has the superior claim to the city, Jews or Muslims. The Israeli government has just created new controversy with the largest construction surge in decades in East Jerusalem. Jews often dismiss Muslim claims to Jerusalem by noting that there is no explicit reference to Jerusalem in the *Qur'an*—but that is not surprising, since Muhammad died in 632 C.E., while Muslims conquered Jerusalem only in 636. There is, similarly, no explicit reference to Jerusalem in the Torah, and this absence hardly undermines Jewish claims to the city, as it would be illogical to expect a reference to Jerusalem in a Jewish text written long before Jerusalem was settled by Jews. It is true that there are hundreds of references to Jerusalem in post-Torah canonical Jewish literature, such as Prophets and Scriptures; but there are also innumerable references to the city in later Islamic canonical literature, such as the Qur'anic commentaries and Hadith.

Thus, the history of the Muslim association with Jerusalem deserves a serious account.

Popular Muslim convention—at least of Sunni Muslims—accords Jerusalem the status of the third holiest site of Islam. (In Shi'ite tradition, this status is conferred on the Great Mosque of Kufa in Iraq.) Though Jerusalem is not mentioned explicitly in the *Qur'an*, it is believed to be the place described in the following passage:

> Glory to Him who did take His servant [Muhammad] . . . from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs . . . .(Sura 17:1)

Since there was no mosque in Jerusalem in Muhammad's lifetime, the verse has been traditionally interpreted to allude to the Temple on Mount Moriah. This interpretation inspired the name of the mosque later built atop the southern portion of the Temple Mount: *Masjid al-Aqsa'*, the "farthest mosque." It should be remembered that according to the Talmud (BT *Hullin* 91b), the patriarch Jacob took a similar journey, being miraculously transported from Haran to Beit-el—implicitly, the site of the future Temple on Mount Moriah—where, according to a Midrashic source (*Sifrei Korah* 119), he saw the Temple and a service there.

It was the presence of the Al-Aqsa' mosque in Jerusalem, along with the older *Qubbat al-Sakhra*, or Dome of the Rock, that conferred on Jerusalem a stature in Islam similar to that of Mecca and Medinah. The timing and circumstances of its elevation, however, are contested. The great 19th century Islamist Ignacz (Yitzhak) Goldziher maintained that the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705) erected the Dome in order to divert the *haj*, the pilgrimage, to Jerusalem and away from Mecca, which was governed by his arch-rival, Abdullah bin Zubayr. The modern doyen of Genizah studies, Shelomo Dov Goitein, wrote that there is no contemporary evidence for Goldziher's claim; but there is evidence that the Dome was built to rival Christian churches—hence its atypical domed roof. Goitein also noted that the Qur'anic verses adorning the Dome conduct an anti-Christian polemic.

Goitein argued that the earliest Muslim enthusiasts of Jerusalem were the Sufi mystics; many Sufi masters took up residence in the city, where they may be presumed to "have been in close contact with congenial Jewish circles." In contrast, Orthodox Islam was not patently supportive of Jerusalem until later, when the Crusaders threatened and then conquered the city. They killed many of its inhabitants, forbade Muslim residence therein, and interrupted pilgrimages to Mecca. It was this provocation that led to a declaration of jihad against Christendom. The rulers of Syria and, later, Saladin, made the sanctity of Jerusalem the center of their propaganda.

Regardless of whether Muhammad was ever in Jerusalem, physically or spiritually, he was well aware of the city's importance to Jews and Christians. Consistent with his avowed desire to convert them to Islam, Muhammad named Jerusalem the *qiblah*, the direction to be faced by Muslims in prayer. This designation lasted some 17 months, until, after a subsequent avowed revelation—perhaps prompted by continuing Jewish resistance to his initial message—he replaced it with Mecca. But Muslim tradition still refers to Jerusalem as *'awwal al-qiblatayn*, the "first of the two directions" in prayer.

In 636 C.E., Jerusalem—then known as Aelia Capitolina, for the temple of Jupiter reportedly constructed on the Temple Mount by the Emperor Hadrian in 131 C.E.—was conquered by the Muslims under the leadership of the second Calpih, 'Umar Ibn al-Khatab. 'Umar celebrated his victory with a prayer service on the Temple Mount, thus announcing that its prior Jewish and Christian associations had been superseded.

'Umar then invited the Jewish community to reestablish a presence in the city. Two Genizah texts reflect this invitation. One, a letter from the time of the Gaonate of Daniel ben Azaryah (1051-62), relates the events:

> . . . God granted us favor in the eyes of the Ishmaelite kingdom when they conquered the Holy Land from the Christians and came to Jerusalem. There were among them Jews who showed them the site of the Temple. They have dwelt there among them until this day. They imposed on them conditions: to respect the Temple from any contamination, and to pray at its gates without interference. They also purchased the Mount of Olives on which the Presence stood. . . .

The second Genizah source on the subject describes the arrangement engineered by 'Umar under which 70 Jewish families relocated to Jerusalem from Tiberias, where there had been continuous Jewish settlement throughout the Byzantine period.

'Umar's invitation did not mark the first time (nor would it be the last) when Jews were invited to reestablish their presence in Jerusalem. The first ruler to make such an offer was Cyrus, King of Persia, with this proclamation:

> All kingdoms of the earth did the Lord, god of heaven, give to me and he has commanded me to build him a house in Jerusalem of Judea. Whosoever among you, his people, may the Lord his god be with him and may he ascend. . . ." (the very last verse in the Bible: 2 Chronicles 36:23)

When Jews were allowed a presence in Jerusalem, it was always accompanied by the aspiration to rebuild the Temple and renew its service. The Roman Emperor Ju-

lian (361-363 C.E.), known as the Apostate because of his opposition to Christianity, invited the Jews to rebuild the Temple in order to recognize the significance they attached to it—and to counter the importance that Christianity attached to its ruin. In a style reminiscent of Cyrus, he wrote a letter to the "Community of Jews:"

> This you ought to do, in order that, when I have successfully concluded the war in Persia, I may rebuild by my own efforts the sacred city of Jerusalem, which for so many years you have longed to see inhabited, and may bring settlers there, and, together with you, may glorify the Most High God therein.

After 'Umar's invitation, the theme of rebuilding recurs, yet again, nearly a millennium later. Sultan Suleiman "the Magnificent," who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520 until his death in 1566, oversaw the restoration of the present walls and gates of the Old City of Jerusalem and particularly of the Dome of the Rock. A local folktale describes his relation to the site in terms that are borrowed—shamelessly—from the narrative of 'Umar. Unquestionably, the coincidence of the Sultan's proper name with that of Solomon, builder of the original temple, lent credence to the legend and contributed to its propagation.

This theme of rebuilding is not difficult to trace to a more modern and even contemporary period and to extend it, first, to the Balfour Declaration and, later, the activities of the *Ne'emanei Har Ha-Bayit*, the Temple Mount Faithful, as well.

While Islam acknowledges Jerusalem's singularity, as does Christianity in its own way, only Judaism has lamented its decline as well as celebrating its renovation. The customary shattering of a glass under the Jewish wedding canopy in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem (*zekher lahurban*)—accompanied by shouts of mazal tov!—epitomizes our unique attachment to this city and embodies the prophet Isaiah's charge: "Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all that love her; all that mourn for her, rejoice for joy with her." (Isaiah 66:10)