

## Preface for Ben Zion Levinger's Lecture Series

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*"The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books."*

The preamble to Israel's Declaration of Independence opens with the Land, the venue where the Jewish people's identity first took shape, and it closes with the venerable Book widely celebrated as the people's gift to the world. The moment modern Israel came into focus as a state, it instantly and instinctively registered the Land and the Bible as the two central axes of Jewish identity.

Though the Declaration did not say it in so many words, a cursory review of the Bible makes the point even sharper—that the Book is *about* the Land. The covenant the Bible's God cut with Avraham and his offspring and then latterly the promise the God via Moshe made to his people and their descendants, centers on his pledge to bequeath to them the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, what we today denominate as the land of Israel. The Land's material geography – the River and Seas, the hills, valleys, foothills, plains, roads, stones, wells and springs, the trees, fruits, grains, the sheep, doves, lions, the olives, grapes, dates and figs, and the like – all feature prominently in ancient Israel's founding document. One does not have to be a biblical scholar to recognize how much the Book dwells on and advertises the Land.

Generally not as well understood though is that it also goes the other way, that the Land is very much about the Book. The Land of Israel itself serves as a divinely wrought manuscript on which God's teachings are inscribed and elaborated. What the world does not as yet appreciate – Jew and gentile alike – is that you cannot fully understand the Bible unless you know how to read the Land; and for that you certainly must be fluent in biblical scripture but you also need to know the Land, on the ground, as only a long-time resident and lover of the Land can know it. For virtually all gentiles and for most of the Jewish population for lo these many centuries of exile, the text is transparent but the Land is opaque – just names in the story that have negligible significance. Yes, the Jordan river is chilly and cold and must be crossed, and Beth El is the house of God, but Bethlehem, for

example, the house of bread? What does bread have to do with the meaning of the city of Bethlehem, and how does Bethlehem's meaning factor into the larger biblical narrative?

National geography is naturally meaningful for a people, as a matter of course. All countries commemorate the blood-soaked battlegrounds and celebrate the places where the founders established their nation's institutions. Geography equals history. Here and there one might also come across a sacred site or a natural wonder that bespeaks God's or Nature's glory, and its shine illuminates the pride of the people. For the nation-states of the world, geography comprises isolated locales that punctuate the realm's history, wonders and glory.

Jews are different. For the Jewish people geography signifies on an altogether different plane. As you will see, the moral story of the Jewish people is enacted in the bones and sinews that comprise the Land's features, and how those features play off, around, and against each other in biblical history. The Land is continuous and unified by virtue of how it serves as the material and social infrastructure of the biblical story. For the Jewish people the Land has a language and a rhyme of its own, unlike how any other people apprehend their land.

Ben Zion Levinger is a practiced scholar in biblical and Talmudic studies. He reveres and observes the tradition's strictures and celebrates its festivals and fast days, but what distinguishes him is his unrestrained love of the Land. He explores the land of Israel with Bible and maps in hand, and a tour-guide's lanyard around his neck, and extra water in his pack. His style is to scurry up the unpaved ancient pathways ahead of his charges to whom he is showing off this-and-that about the landscape with a glee that pulses off of him, palpable, charming, and irresistible. His purchase on the Land is ever fresh, and profound. The Land is a living being for him, with personality and variety and depth.

Levinger has been lecturing on Scripture for more than three of the five decades that he's been living in the homeland, having cut his teeth on the sacred texts as a youth in Brooklyn's Boro Park and Manhattan's Lower East Side followed by a spell in-country at Yavneh; finally and permanently then to settle in Israel in his mid-twenties alongside his intrepid young wife, both of them with Zionist stars in their eyes. For the past decade or so,

he has been reversing the foreground/background of his weekly classes: rather than organizing the lessons around specific books of the Bible – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, etc. – he has begun to prepare lectures based on the Land’s notable geographic locations – Shkhem (Nablus), Bethlehem, Hebron, the Dead Sea, the Jezreel Valley, Beer Sheba, the Shfeilah (the foothills), etc. – interpreting the biblical text in terms of how the geography informed the teachings. Suddenly geography showed up as a recurrent theme in the Bible’s narrative structure, carrying narrative weight and laying out an overarching context that frames the particular conduct of the human and divine characters as they move the narrative action forward. In other words, he had hit upon an approach to biblical study that not only identified and explained the importance of particular geographic stations but, for the first time, emphasized what those locations meant to the text, and by extension, to the Jewish people. When you audit Levinger’s lectures you will find out why Bethlehem factors in as a structural element in the story, and what it has to do with what bread signifies.

This foregrounding of geography is not merely an analytical exegetical device. By elaborating the meaning of the Land’s geography, Levinger is revealing something crucial about the Jewish people's relationship to their Land. It is not so much a matter of sentiment, of historical attachment, of nostalgia in national memory; it goes to the very meaning of the people. As Levinger tells it, the Land is a living, vibrating, on-going presence in the Jewish people's identity unlike that of any other people’s identity in their land.

The land of Canaan is unique in that it does not belong to its human occupants; it belongs only to the deity. God is sovereign in this Land not only because he is the mythic Creator and Master of the Universe but because, at his command, according to the biblical story, the indigenous tribes of Canaan were exterminated, and are gone forever. Henceforth, no people will ever be able to lay legitimate claim to this particular territory on the basis of indigeneity. From the moment ancient Israel took possession of it, the land of Canaan became a demographically blank slate. And as such, any people who afterward would come to inhabit the once-Canaanite territories could claim only conditional residency there, contingent on their moral behavior, which claims to sovereignty God could annul at any time.

That peculiar fact of the land of Canaan is built into the formal identity of the Jewish people. The prime and abiding characteristic of the children of Israel, beginning with Avram and flowing all the way through to Moshe who was a stranger in an estranging land, was that they were explicitly *not* indigenous, that they were sojourners to and in the land, that their claims to residence could be – and indeed would for a very long time be – revoked. What distinguishes the Jewish people is how well they know this. The Jewish people disavow indigeneity in their foundation story without reserve.

The resident stranger in the land of Israel is meant to serve as a welcome and celebrated emblem of that disavowal. To be a stranger in the land of Israel is to embody robustly and palpably what the incumbent Israelite populace already are, were, and always in principle will be, namely, aliens to the Land, as per the famous Scriptural admonition, “You shall liken yourself to the stranger, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am JHVH your ruler.” Under Israel's sovereignty the alien resident is guaranteed the status of first-class citizenship because in this storied Land every single resident is uniformly non-indigenous both in the present and in their history, and any of its residents who can absorb and would conform themselves to the Land's moral meanings becomes, *ipso facto*, one of the Land's trustees; becomes, *per se*, a member in good standing of the people of Israel.

And therein lies the definitive feature of Israel's national identity. For the Jews, geography has moral meaning, based on a divine promise. Jews, when they are sovereign in their Land, relate to the Land by dramatically absorbing the meaning of its geography. They are sovereign by virtue of how the various features of the Land signify their national values to them. They belong to the Land and are sovereign in the Land by shaping the contours of their national identity according to the moral lessons the Land teaches. For the other nations of the world geography is history; for the Jews geography is morality, and that is what distinguishes them as a Chosen People.

The Bible, accordingly, proclaims the following principle: conformity to the moral meaning of the Land and not native indigeneity in the territory will be the only way any people could claim legitimate sovereignty over the land of Israel. Why? Because from biblical times onward the Israelite way of identifying with the Land, in terms of its moral meaning, will be the only way any future people will be able to rule over it, else the land will degrade and

ultimately spit those people out. What the Bible teaches is that for the land of Israel, the moral meaning of geography supersedes indigeneity as the basis of legitimate claims to sovereignty in the Land; and that, when we come right down to it, is the essential meaning of the people of Israel in the land of Israel. Sovereignty over what was the land of Canaan is unlike any other sovereignty over any other land because for this Land the biblical story ties sovereignty to a moral meaning that is imbued in the geographic features of this particular terrain, a moral meaning that is true only for this land's geographic features and no other land's features.

The purpose of Levinger's lecture series is to decode and disclose the subtle details of that meaning for us, and thus, step by step, to bring us into a more easy-going, authentic acquaintanceship and thereby a more intimate identification with the Land of Israel. His is Bible study for the native, for the resident, for the world after Diaspora. He shows us the Land as it wants to be seen, as an active moral agent; and by doing so, he frames a unique vision for the people of Israel—Jewish, Muslim, Christian, unaffiliated, what-have-you. To live in the land of Israel is to live in a landscape like no other. Every corner has a moral significance – a *moral* significance – that clarifies how that nation which is resident in the Land must be connected to God so that it might answer to the heavenly dictates that authorizes their residence in its territory. God is manifest in the Land by virtue of the Land's meaning, a meaning that can be decoded only by careful, close reading of the biblical text. Any people who do not respect that connection and that responsibility will be vomited out *by the Land*.

For many hundreds of years Jews in Diaspora clung to the Messianic hope that they would one day return to the homeland by dint of their strict observance of the rabbinate's re-formulation of biblical stricture, a re-formulation that by harsh necessity had to play down the centrality of the Land in the text, in the *Midrashic* tales and the code of laws, and in the life of a people in exile. Living in foreign lands, tolerated somewhat by local host populations, they went about their business and avoided trouble, and their survival strategy was just blindly and faithfully to follow the rules as laid out by local rabbinic authorities who interpreted the ancient Talmudic teachings for them, all subject to the constraints the host cultures placed on them. The ordinary diaspora Jew's connection to the

Land was therefore indirect and non-specific, which made sense since none of them had much of a grasp of what the land looked like nor what the experience of living in its embrace felt like. All they knew was that if they followed the strictures, someday God would redeem them and gather them back into the homeland. The Diaspora Jew's conception of and connection with the Land was simple and simplistic, ignorant of the Land's character, summarized mainly by an unbreakable belief in the ultimate coming of a Messiah.

By the Middle Ages, the entire enterprise of Jewish scholarship had taken on a rather abstract air, busying itself with either layer upon layer of picayune dissections of the complicated and exacting body of rabbinically mandated practices or by dedicating itself to mystical flights of the spirit in attempts – largely private and performed in the dead of night – to conjure the divine. The Torah study of medieval Jewish scholarship – and, mind you, those styles of study persist firmly into the present day – pushed reason to the vanishing point, or yearned so hard for the ineffable that it pushed the spiritual imagination to the breaking point. The term *luftmensch* comes to mind. In either case, the Jew's identity had become ungrounded, alienated, esoteric, unbound to the Land. When, finally, the Jewish state was reestablished in our time, this esoteric, picayune Diaspora scholarship turned out not to be a good fit for the needs of a young country trying to find itself, trying to develop a workable code of conduct for a sovereign nation, and having to defend itself from an avalanche of real-life and well armed invaders and marauders. Torah scholarship, as is often the case with these things, had refined itself into a super-sophisticated irrelevance. At best, it had little to contribute to the affairs of state; at worst, it got in the way of a proper functioning of a living, breathing, active-in-the-world country.

Today's Jewish Israelis are confronted with an unequivocal and demanding reality. Their job is to run a full-time, functioning country. They need a way to think about how to graft the nation onto its territory to become a state; about what it means to be sovereign; and how to exercise their sovereignty in accord with the unique character of their ancient biblical heritage. The traditional mode of biblical study which was devised primarily for life in Diaspora was not equal to the new challenges Jewish Israel was facing in the homeland.

Levinger's program that marries Bible study to the specifics of the Land is the answer. His insight is tailor-made to address today's needs.

No *luftmensch* he, Levinger gives us a modern style of biblical scholarship that wrestles with the hard realities of an actual people in a challenging landscape. Using his methods, we consult the Torah to explore meat-and-potatoes questions we don't know how to answer practicably yet, as distinct from traditional Diaspora-bound biblical eisegeses that seeks repeatedly to explain away how some verse couldn't have meant what it said because it contradicted some prefabricated conviction they held. Levinger gives us a way to draw on Torah scholarship to restructure our imaginations in order to deepen and enrich our connection to the Land—the perfect activity for a people seeking to fashion that odd duck they call a Jewish state. His take on Jewishness is at once more creative and at the same time closer to the plain meaning of the text than the standard rabbinic interpretations are; and his notion of the state is considerably different from the prevailing notions of statehood that abound in the secular world today, as we describe below.

Through Levinger's Torah study, one can feel the clay and the loam of the Land's soil in one's hands, and can translate those feelings into lessons that build character, as they unfailingly will, as tilling the soil builds character in a farmer, or standing in battle gear in the field of honor builds character in a soldier. In Levinger's worldview, the 'Jewish' and the 'State' are inextricably bound together as the Bible and the Land are bound together. The one is not tacked on to the other in an uncomfortable tension with each other. Rather, they each so inter-penetrate and amplify the other that we cannot disentangle them, we cannot tell where the one ends and the other begins. Jewish and State. Bible and Land, they live in a permanent pose of mutual realization.

Levinger's represents a radical, scriptural, nonsecular take on a people's relationship with their homeland. His teachings define a national responsibility for the people of Israel – incumbent on all who are resident in the Land, of whatever denomination – to honor the Land's moral imperatives. Note, this notion of honoring a land's moral imperatives is a duty that does not show up in Western society, nor can it. John Locke's philosophy or Thomas Jefferson's politics do not credit the land with any moral weight. A landscape might exhibit aesthetic power or inspire spiritual reflection but in secular political reality a geographic

location can never tell us right from wrong. In the modern world, places do not offer moral instruction. And yet, the way Levinger reads the Bible, they do; and that, all by itself, imparts to the Land an initiative-taking character. Animated with a proactive moral personality, the Land, by its nature, teaches its residents what is important for the society to know, where collective danger lies, and how to live together well. Because the geography is accessible to all in equal measure, it affords the populace a common lexicon of values that binds the nation with a solidarity that continually reinforces itself as the citizenry go about their business from place to place in the course of their ordinary lives. The Land of Israel colors everyday affairs with moral meaning, which elevates the everyday and trains ordinary citizens in the graces and demeanors of moral excellence.

And that is why Levinger's teachings are so important. His approach identifies a divinely mandated mission for Jewish Israel—to inhabit the Land in a way that is sublimely sensitive to its meanings. Scripture is the user's manual for how to live in and on the Land. The Land is the theater on which the biblical teachings can achieve their ultimate moral fulfillment, not in the world-to-come but in today's world, in service of the Land. The Jewish people are the template on which all who reside in the Land can embrace the Land's meaning and learn to respect it.

Through Levinger's prism we see that Jewish Israelis cling so devoutly to their purchase on the Land not because they want to own it, for they know they cannot own it, but because their national existence depends on their ability to cleanse the Land of its moral impurities and to abide in the Land according to the Land's deepest values. Theirs is a particular brand of sovereignty, and they insist on imposing that sovereignty over the Land not to exploit it or its inhabitants but rather to dignify the Land, to honor it, and exalt it, and in so doing, to unite and acculturate and ennoble all who live within its borders. That is the fundamental politics of Israel as it was meant to be – in ancient times as well as (we believe) in the modern – a politics that becomes visible only to those who can read stereoscopically, in the text and in the Land: both, and simultaneously.

Levinger is a tour-guide to another plane, where we are able to glimpse the landscape through those stereoscopic bifocals; and from that vantage, he points out to us, just over the horizon, a Zionism that pushes past Israel as more than a refugee camp. He imagines a



next-stage, more mature Zionism that animates life inside the country, in conversation with the Land and the Bible and the people's identity, and not only with respect to the Diaspora and its oppressions. Levinger's Zionism is dignified because Levinger's Bible study affirms the Land as all-embracing. To view Israel as Levinger refracts it is to see a Land that engages all who would reside on it with a stately, self-standing personality that must be related to with poise, nuance and delicacy. The task of a people ambitious enough to occupy and rule over this divinely documented Land is to build a society that appreciates and is informed by the Land's elegance and moral substance. As long as we hew close to the biblical account, the land of Israel at once teaches away from exclusionist, ghetto-minded Judaism, while at the same time decrying the coarse politics that comes of a secular sovereignty dedicated only to pursuing national interests and the management of ideological warfare. Levinger discloses the biblical lands as what they were meant to be—an ardent consort to a wise and discerning people who would be humble in their settlement of its terrain.

I invite you to partake of Levinger's keen and original vision. The text will come alive for you in surprising and deeply satisfying ways. The biblical story and its famous cast of characters will pop out for you in ways that will stimulate you, provoke you, challenge you, and delight you. You will become familiar with the story and it will become personal for you, and comfortable. The sheer creativity of Levinger's distinctive exegetic style is all by itself a pleasure to behold, not to mention how intellectually exciting studying biblical text with him can be. By grounding Bible study in the Land, he gives Scripture a concrete texture that keeps him rooted so that he never loses the thread in the flights of abstraction that in the past have often marred Diaspora-based styles of biblical learning. Most of all though, you will see the Land, this Land, as you have never seen it before, as you have never seen any land before. Perhaps you will see the Land in some small way as Moshe might have seen it from the top of Mount Nevo, as a panorama of moral landmarks that comprises a unique, coherent value system that binds the nation to the Land by way of the story. Put on Levinger's bifocals and after a while you will begin to situate yourself in the story as an engaged member of the nation, well seated with your own proper place in the Land; and

then, quietly and with gratitude, you will see with new eyes the Land's inner beauty, and if you look very carefully you might just find a goodly measure of peace there, and joy.