

CHAPTER TWO

JEWISH LAND, JEWISH NATION

In roughly seventy years this tiny country, populated by diverse immigrant groups, located in an arid region, and surrounded by enemies, has developed one of the strongest economies and most democratic governments in the region. To understand and appreciate Israel's current success and strength, you must look to its history.



Word Work

Middle East The *Middle East* is the region that encompasses all the countries of Asia south of the former Soviet Union, west of Pakistan, and east of Morocco. The total population of these nations is more than four hundred million. The term sometimes excludes the Arab countries of North Africa between Morocco in the west and Libya in the east.

CREATING A NATION

Although the modern nation of Israel was born in 1948, the Jewish connection to the land in what we today call the Middle East is ancient, dating to the biblical period. Jewish tradition teaches that some 3,700 years ago God made a special promise (or Covenant) to Abraham. The Hebrew Bible states that Abraham's descendants would inherit a land of milk and honey and that they would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens—if they followed God's commandments. According to the Hebrew Bible, that Covenant was fulfilled when the Israelites, the ancient Jews, followed Moses out of Egypt and created an independent nation in the region they called the Promised Land. Historical and archaeological records show that Jews can trace their lineage in this area to roughly the year 1000 BCE.



This map shows comparative sizes of Israel and its Arab neighbors.



According to biblical accounts, the twelve Jewish tribes that emerged from slavery in Egypt eventually united to form one of the world's first constitutional monarchies, which was ruled by Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Because Israel is located at a crossroads between Asia and Africa, it is the site of valuable trade routes and has been a battleground for competing powers for centuries. The ruling kings built a dynasty that protected the twelve tribes from invasion and other threats. Ancient Israel, at its largest, included some or all of the modern-day countries of Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

But internal divisions led to a split in the Jewish nation. After Solomon's death around 922 BCE, ten of the twelve Israelite tribes broke away to form a new kingdom in the north that they called Israel. The remaining tribes stayed in the southern part of the original kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon, and called their land Judah. Not surprisingly, the divided nation was much weaker, making the smaller kingdoms ripe targets for leaders from nearby countries who were seeking to expand their own rule.

Faces of Israel



Avraham, seventeen, was born in Jerusalem to a family of eleven children. His father is a well-respected rabbi, of the eleventh generation in his family to be ordained in Jerusalem. His mother takes care of the family and is involved with charitable activities within their community.

Avraham wakes up at 5:00 a.m. to begin his day at rabbinical school. He learns Jewish philosophy, rabbinic texts, and prayer. His favorite day of the week is the Sabbath, his day off from school. His extended family and their visiting guests gather for a festive meal that lasts for hours.

Avraham is looking forward to starting his own family in the next few years with a wife his parents will help him choose from within the community.



Word Work

Judea/Judah *Judea* and *Judah* are both terms used for the southern part of historic Palestine, which included the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, and Bethlehem. When the Romans conquered the Jewish kingdom, they divided Palestine into three administrative areas: Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. *Judea* is the Roman rendering of the Hebrew *Yehuda* (Judah). The word *Jew* comes from the Latin *Judaeus*, meaning an inhabitant of Judea.

INDEPENDENCE LOST

After two centuries of independence, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 732 BCE. The southern kingdom of Judah held out for over three hundred years but was overwhelmed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Eventually the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians, who were in turn overrun by Alexander the Great and the Greeks. Still, the Jewish people never gave up their hope of regaining their independence. In 167 BCE, the Jews revolted against the Greek despot Antiochus under the courageous leadership of Mattathias and his five sons, who are known as the Maccabees. After three years of fighting, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem and rededicated the holy Temple, a story Jews around the world recall each year during the holiday of Hanukkah. An independent Jewish kingdom was restored in

142 BCE, after the Jewish people had lived for more than five hundred years under the rule of foreign powers. But this Jewish kingdom survived less than eighty years before succumbing to the Romans.

Look Closer

The family of Mattathias became known as the Maccabees, from the Hebrew word for “hammer,” because they were said to strike hammer blows against their enemies. The family is more commonly known as the Hasmoneans, and their story is the basis of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.



Fighting the Romans

After the Romans conquered the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom, the Jewish population was determined to fight for freedom. In 66 CE, the Jews, led by a group

Word Work

Zealot *Zealot* is a word that comes from the Greek meaning “enthusiastic.”

This term refers to one who exhibits great enthusiasm and dedication to a cause. In Jewish history, Zealots were a group that fought bitterly for Jewish independence from the Roman Empire.

called the Zealots, mounted a revolt that took Rome four years to put down. But the revolt cost the lives of perhaps one million Jews. Ultimately, after a long and bloody siege, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem in the summer of 70 CE and razed the Jewish Temple. This act was seen as the most devastating Roman blow yet against the Jewish people because of the Temple’s religious significance and also because it represented the total loss of Jewish political authority in the region.

In 132 CE, Shimon Bar Kochba led yet another revolt against Roman rule that lasted

almost three years. But by the time Rome put down this last rebellion, an estimated 50 percent of the Jewish population in the area had been killed, and the majority of Jews who survived were driven into exile by the Romans, who ruled the land of Israel for nearly eight centuries.

When you hear people today say that the Jewish people were homeless for two thousand years, they mean they had no country from the time the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. However, even though most Jews were exiled by the Romans, there always has been a Jewish presence in the region.

“Climbing Masada was inspiring. I not only witnessed a view but also an ancient civilization. I witnessed the way of life of my ancestors, and I empathized with their struggle to hold on to their values and their lives. In my mind, this experience was yet another example of the necessity of Israel’s safety and security.”

ALLISON, AGE 17, ROCKVILLE,
MARYLAND



Look Closer

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, a group of Zealots fled Jerusalem to the fortress of Masada near the Dead Sea, where they resisted the Romans for three years. Once it became apparent the Romans would overrun their defenses, the leader of the group, Elazar ben Yair, decided it would be better for all of the remaining 960 Jews to take their own lives rather than be captured and sold as slaves. Though Judaism does not condone taking one's life, Masada has remained a powerful symbol to this day and is a popular destination of Jewish tourists visiting Israel.

Surviving after Defeat

Though what is known as the Great Revolt (66-70 CE) was a disaster for the Jewish people, one important development helped the Jews survive without a central religious or political center in the centuries to come. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, one of the leading Jewish teachers, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, foresaw that the battle would be lost. He feared that if the Jewish people could no longer access the Temple or Jerusalem, they would no longer have a way to per-

petuate their faith or govern themselves. He realized that the Jewish people needed an academy devoted to educating future generations.

But Rabbi ben Zakkai was trapped in Jerusalem, and the Zealots would kill anyone who tried to leave the city, because they were trying to force all Jews to support their rebellion. According to legend, the rabbi devised a ruse. His followers announced that the great rabbi had died from the plague and asked the Zealot leaders for permission to bury him outside the city

Word Work

Diaspora *Diaspora*

comes from the Greek word for dispersion. Jews use the term to refer to the period when they were exiled from Israel. It is also used to describe Jewish life and community outside of Israel.



walls to prevent the spread of the dreaded disease. The Zealots agreed, and the rabbi was carried in a coffin out of the city and delivered to the camp of the Roman general Vespasian.

The rabbi emerged from the coffin and told the mighty Roman leader that he had had a prophecy and that he had a request. The rabbi told Vespasian that he would soon be emperor and asked permission to establish a Jewish school. Vespasian agreed to the request on the condition that the prophecy was correct.

The rabbi was right. Vespasian soon became emperor, and he fulfilled his promise and allowed Yochanan ben Zakkai to open his academy in the town of Yavneh, north of Jerusalem, which became the center of Jewish learning for centuries. This innovation helped Judaism survive by ending its dependence on a central Temple and its sacrificial rites. Local synagogues eventually replaced the Temple; prayer replaced sacrificial rites; and an emphasis on Jewish law and education united a scattered community.

Even though the Jewish people were scattered around the

“ Israel matters to me because it’s the only place where I can see, touch, and feel the history of my people. ”

JESSICA, AGE 32, HIGHLAND PARK, NEW JERSEY

globe—in what is referred to as the Diaspora—they never gave up their commitment to their homeland.

For more than two thousand years, Jews all over the world dreamed of returning to re-establish an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel. This dream was recited three times a day in prayer and on every holiday.

Look Closer

After the Jewish revolt in 132 CE, the Romans renamed Judea, Palaestina, because, according to some scholars, they wanted to minimize Jewish identification with the Land of Israel. The first use of the term *Palestine* goes back to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. The Arabic word *Filastin* is derived from the Latin name Palaestina. The name is believed to come from an extinct ancient sea people known as the P’lishtim (Philistines). Recent scholarship traces their arrival in the Levant region to the twelfth century BCE, as recorded in Egyptian accounts.

