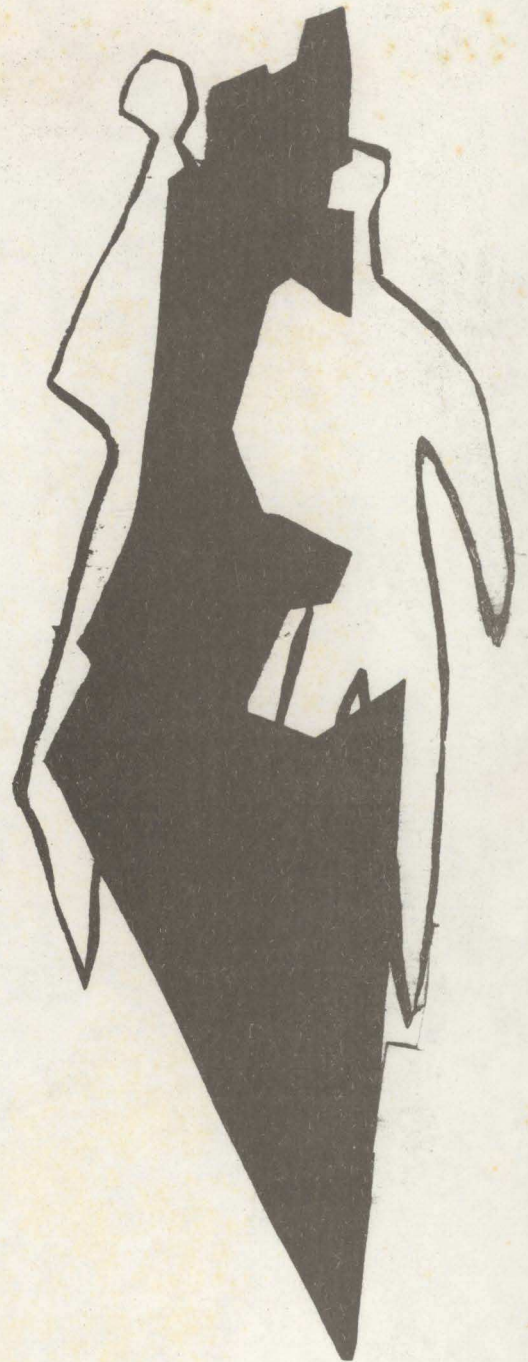
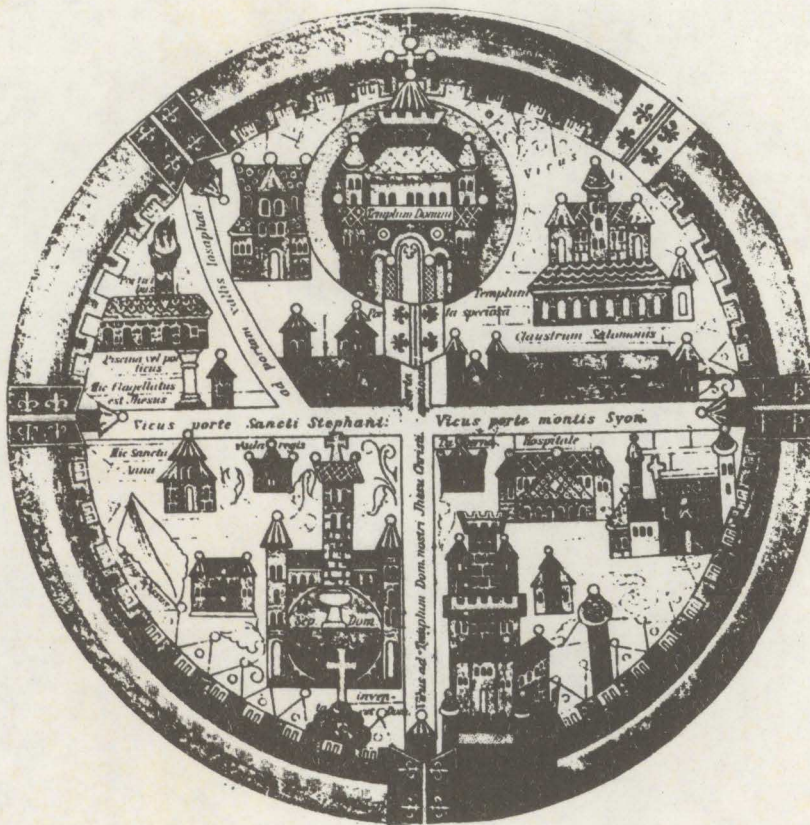


ERETZ YISRAEL



Its place in Jewish Sources

COMPILED BY STEVE ISRAEL

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ERETZ YISRAEL IN JEWISH CULTURE

Act One: The Promise

1. Now the Lord said to Abram; leave your country and your family and your father's house, and go towards a land that I will show to you.

And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you, and through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (Breishit 12)

2. And the Lord said to Abram: "Lift up now your eyes and look from the place where you are, northwards, and southwards and eastwards and westwards for all the land which you see, I will give to you and to your seed for ever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth so that if a man can count the dust of the earth, then shall your seed also be counted. Arise and walk through the land, the whole of its length and the whole of its breadth for I will give it unto you." (Breishit 13)

3. And the Lord appeared to Isaac at the time of the famine, and said to him: "Do not go down to Egypt. Dwell in the land of which I will tell you. Live in this land and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you, and your seed I will give all these countries and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham your father. And I will cause your seed to multiply like the stars of heaven, and I will give to your seed all these countries!" (Breishit 26)

4. I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and I will rid you of their slavery and I will redeem you with a strong arm and with great judgements. And I will take you to me for a people and I will be to you a God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for an inheritance. (Shemot 6)

5. Therefore you shall keep all the commandments which I command you this day, so that you may be strong and go in and possess the land. And so that you may prolong your days in the land, which the Lord swore unto your fathers to give unto them and their seed, a land that flows with milk and honey, for the land which you are going into, is not the land of Egypt which you have left, where you sowed your crops and watered them like a vegetable garden (where there is little natural rain, and irrigation must be done laboriously by hand). The land which you will enter is a land of hills and valleys and drinks water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the very end. And it will come to pass, if you listen diligently to my commandments which I command you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all

your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the later rain, so that you will be able to gather in you corn, and your wine and your oil.

And I will send grass to your fields for your cattle so that you will eat and be full. Take heed that your heart is not deceived and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them. For then the Lord's anger will be kindled against you and he will close the heavens so that no rain will fall, and the Lord will not yield her fruit; and you will perish off the good land which the Lord gives you. (Dvarim 11)

Act Two: On Our Own Land - Fulfilment and Destruction

6. The interior of the Temple was panelled with trees of cedar, sent by the King of Tyre in Lebanon from the Lebanese mountains to King Solomon. When Solomon placed the ark in the Temple, all the trees were watered and the cedars gave forth their fruit. The windows were specially made so that they were broad inside and narrow outside, to let the light out. The rabbis said "whoever builds windows in his house makes them broad outside and narrow inside, to bring in the light. Not so in the Temple because there the light was inside and shone forth onto the whole world."

At the entrance to the Temple there was a vine covered with leaves and clusters of grapes, all made of gold which were donated by the worshippers. Once 300 priests tried to remove this vine with its leaves and grapes, without success. (Talmudic and Midrashic sources)

7. How the gold was tarnished, the finest gold debased! How the sacred gems - the people of Israel - were strewn about at every street corner. The precious sons of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now treated as earthen vessels, as if made by a potter's hand. Even jackals bare their breasts and suckle their young, but the daughters of my people became as the desert ostrich. The tongue of the babe cleaved to its palate for thirst. Infants begged for bread, but no one offered them a crumb. Those who fed on delicacies lay starved in the streets. Those who were brought up in purple robes clung to garbage heaps... The faces of the nobles turned blacker than soot; none could recognise them in the streets. Their skin shrivelled on their bones, it became as dry as wood. Those who died by the sword were luckier than those who died of hunger; those who bled to death from their wounds were luckier than those who starved...

The Lord vented all his wrath; he poured out his fury. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. The kings of the earth, all the world's inhabitants had never imagined that enemies could penetrate the gates of Jerusalem. But the sins of her prophets brought this to pass, the crimes of her priests who in her midst shed righteous blood... The Lord took no notice of them. He showed no regard for the priests, no favour to the elders... Our end drew near, our days were numbered. Our end had come. Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky, they pursued us in the mountains, they waylaid us in the desert. (Lamentations 4)

8. He who has never seen the Temple in its full construction, has never seen a glorious building in his life. He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building. Of what did he build it? of yellow and white marble. He originally intended to overlay the marble with gold but the rabbis advised him not to, because it was more beautiful as it was, looking from afar like the waves of the sea (Talmud).
9. All night seas of flame raged and tongues of fire darted above the Temple Mount. Stars splintered from the baked skies and melted into the earth, spark after spark. Has God kicked his throne aside, and smashed his crown to smithereens? Torn clouds reddened, laden with blood and fire. They went astray in the wide night and poured out the rage of a jealous God, among the distant mountains, the tale of his fury among the desert rocks. Has God torn his purple mantle and scattered the rags to the wind?

The fear of God was upon the distant mountains, terror seized the sullen rocks of the desert. A revengeful God was the God that was revealed. Calm and terrible he sits upon a throne of fire in an ocean of flame. His cloak is of purple fire and his footstool burning coals. Small racing flames crown him. A cruel dance blazes around him. Above his head flame thirstily gulps the space of the world. Calm and terrible, he sits with his arms crossed over his heart. Conflagration spreads at a glance of his eye, bontires leap at a flicker of his eyelashes. Bring the Lord galloping chargers, bring the Lord a fierce fire dance!

And when dawn broke upon the hills and a pale vapour covered the valleys, the flames slackened and the tongues of fire sank back from the burnt sanctuary on the Temple Mount. And when the angels gathered in holy concourse as they always did, to sing a song of dawn, they threw wide the windows of heaven and looked towards the Temple Mount to see whether the doors of the sanctuary were open; and whether the smoke of incense spiralled from them.

And they saw the Lord of Hosts, sitting in the twilight of dawn in utter desolation. His cloak was a cloud of smoke and his footstool, dust and ashes. His head was bowed between his arms, and mountains of sorrow were heaped on his head. In silent desolation he sat and stared at the ruins. A cosmic rage lowered from his brows; there was a great frozen stillness in his eyes.

The Temple Mount still smoked. Piles of ash, mounds of cinders, smoldering brands lay all in heaps; hissing embers tumbled together, glowed like stacks of precious stones in the silence of dawn.

And the fire-lion that crouches on the altar day and night; he too was quenched. A single orphaned curl from the end of his mane gleamed fitfully and died on the pile of scorched stones in the silence of dawn.

The angels knew what God had done to them and they were shocked. They trembled, together with all the morning stars, and they covered their faces with their wings for they feared to look on the sorrow of God.

Their song that morning was a hushed lament, the murmur of a still small voice.

Silently they turned away and wept, each angel alone and all the world wept with them in the silence.

And a long deep sigh rose from the corners of the earth, rose and spread out, and broke upon the silent weeping. The heart of the world was broken. (Ch. N. Bialik)

Act Three: After the Destruction; Exile

10. The Talmud tells us that when the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics, vowing neither to eat nor to drink wine.

Rabbi Joshua went to speak with them to try and make them change their mind. He said to them: "My sons, why do you not eat meat or drink wine?"

And they replied: "How can we eat meat when the meat-offering that used to be brought as a sacrifice in the Temple can no longer be brought? And how can we drink wine when the wine that used to be poured as an offering on the altar can no longer be poured?"

He said to them: "If this is so we should no longer eat bread, since the offerings of corn have also ceased?"

And they answered: "This is correct, but we can still manage with fruit."

And he said to them: We should not eat fruit either since there is no longer an offering of first fruits in the Temple. And we should not drink water because the ceremony of pouring the water on the altar at Succot is also discontinued."

To this they could no reply.

And he said to them: "Come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the tragic blow has fallen and the Temple destroyed. But to mourn over-much is impossible because we do not impose on the community things which the majority can not carry out." (Talmud)

11. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlow said that when he was in Eretz Yisrael, many of the more prominent people with whom he spoke, among those that had come to make their home there, told him that prior to coming to Eretz Yisrael they could not have pictured to themselves that it was an actual place in this world. And that they were convinced that Eretz Yisrael existed in another world completely, because of the degree of holiness that attached to it according to the explanations in books and the descriptions in the Torah... and because of this they could not imagine that it was really of this world, until they came there and saw that Eretz Yisrael really is part of this world. Because physically, Eretz Yisrael is like all other countries, and the dust of the land is like the dust of all other countries. There is no difference. Nevertheless it is extremely holy - its holiness is absolute and very awe-inspiring. (Writings of Nachman of Bratzlaw)
12. Zion, will you not ask after your imprisoned ones,
The remnant of your flocks, who seek your peace
From west and east, north and south,
From far and near, take greetings, from all sides...

I am a jackal mourning your affliction and when I dream of the return of your captives I am a lyre accompanying your songs....
I would pour out my life in the very place where the spirit of God was once poured out upon your chosen ones,
You are the seat of royalty, you are the throne of God,
Though slaves now sit upon your princes thrones
If only I could roam through those places
Where God was revealed to your prophets and heralds.
Who will make me wings, so I can fly away,
And take my broken heart to your mountain heights.
Let me fall prostrate upon your land,
Treasure your stones and touch your fine dust...
It would soothe my soul to walk naked and barefoot
Upon the desolate ruins that were once your sanctuary.
On the place of your ark, now concealed and the spot
In the holy of holies where your cherubim dwelt.
I shall shear my locks and cast them away, and curse
The time that has defiled your pure ones in the polluted lands of exile.
How can I eat and drink calmly when I see
The dogs dragging your lions down?
Or how can the light of day be sweet to my eyes
When I see the ravens beaks picking your eagles' bones?
Happy is the man who chooses to go and settle in your courts,
Happy is he who hopes to come and see
Your light rise, and your dawns break over him,
To see the happiness of your chosen ones, and to exult
In your joy, as you live youths first vigour once more.

(Yehuda Halevi: "Zion, will you not ask")

13. Are you at fifty pursuing your youth,
As your days are preparing to fly away?
Do you run from the worship of God,
And yearn to serve only men?
Do you seek the crowd's company and leave
The one whom all that will may seek?
Are you slow to prepare for your journey?
Will you sell your portion for a lentil stew?
Your desire continually conceives new pleasures.
But does not your soul say to you "enough!"?
Exchange your desire's counsel for that of God.
Desist from pursuing your five senses,
Please your Creator in the days that remain
To you, the days which hasten by.
Do not prevaricate before his will...

Let your heart remain firm in the midst of the seas
When you see the mountains heaving and bending,
And the sailors with their hands like rags,
And soothsayers struck dumb.
They embarked on a straight course full of joy,
But now they are forced back, overwhelmed.
The ocean is before you as your refuge!
Your only escape are the nets of the deep!

The sails tear loose and lash,
The timbers tremble and shudder
The grip of the wind plays on the waves
Like reapers at the time of threshing
First they are flattened to the floor of the granary
Then are thrown high into the stacks.
When they rise up, they are as lions,
When they break, they are like serpents
The first are pursued by the second -
Snakes whose bite is incurable.

The mighty ship falls like a speck before God;
The mast and its banner cannot hold out,
The boat and its decks are confused,
Lower, middle and upper together.
The drawers of ropes are in torment,
Men and women full of anguish.
The sailors spirits are deep in despair,
Bodies grow weary of their souls
The masts strength is of no use,
The aged's counsel does not benefit,
The masts of cedar are no more than stubble...

The people pray, each to his holy one,
And you turn to the Holy of Holies,
You recall the miracles of Red Sea and Jordan,
Inscribed as they are on every heart.
You praise the One who calms the Seas roaring
When the waves throw up their slime,
You will tell him "foul hearts are pure now."

And soon the waves will be silent
Like flocks scattered over the earth...
The night will be like a negress clothed in gold tapestry,
Like a purple robe scattered with crystals,
The stars will be bewildered in the heart of the sea,
Like exiles driven from their own homes...
The water and sky will be ornaments,
Pure and shining upon the night.
The seas colour will be as heavens,
They are two seas bound together,
And between them my heart, a third sea
As the waves of my praise surge forth once again.

(Yehuda Halevi: Self-exhortation
to make the journey to Israel)

14. ...In you I rejoice when I begin my voyage
To you I am grateful every step of the way;
Even if I lacked food and drink
Your pleasant name would still be in my mouth
I shall not care for home or property
Nor for riches, nor for any loss.

I shall forsake the child of my loins,
My only daughter the sister of my soul.
It splits my heart to forget her son
With only his memory to recall him to me
Fruit of my body, child of my delight.
How can Judah, ever forget Judah!
But this is nothing compared to your love,
Until I come to your gates in gratitude,
And shall dwell there, considering my heart
As a sacrifice bound upon your altar.
I shall set my grave upon your land
To remain there as my testimony.

(Yehuda Halevi: "The poet remembers his family")

15. Greetings to the kinsfolk, to brother and sisters
From this prisoner of hope who was ransacked by the sea
And committed his spirit into the hands of the winds.
Now they push him back and forth; the west wind guides the ship,
While the East wind thrusts it back,
Between him and death there is nothing but a step
Between them only the thickness of the planks
He is buried alive in a wooden coffin, but without any earth;
Not even four cubits, not even a handful
He sits, for there is no room for him to stand;
He lies down and cannot stretch his legs
He is ill, he is afraid of the gentile passengers,
As well as pirates and ghosts.
The helmsman and the sailors - all of them riffraff -
Are the governors here.
Honour does not belong to the wise nor success to the skillful;
Only to those who know how to swim,
Because of this my face is downcast - how could my heart rejoice -
But only for a moment. Till I pour out my soul in the bosom of God
At the site of the Ark and the Altar,
Then I shall render to God
Who renders favour to the undeserving,
My choicest songs and praises.

(Yehuda Halevi: "Sea Song")

16. Suddenly a ray of light breaks in on him from the next room. The door is slightly open, and he sees his father sitting on the ground in the corner; the candle in his hand spreads a dark light throughout the house. His father's thin and sad face projects gloom and grief; the corner is full of hidden secrets which pour out into the rest of the house. His father sits silently leaning on one arm, and his honest face with eyes immobile sends forth a terrible sorrow - and he constantly sighs. A few more moments and he hears his father's voice, broken, halting. "Let god remember what we had - let him look and see our disgrace." And the voice goes on in a whisper, slowly, word after word - and the words, awful, awful words. "Oh, God, the

heathens have come into your inheritance, they have defiled your Holy Temple... they have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the faith of the heavens..."

He slips off his bed and creeps silently to the door; and now he sees his father from nearby. The picture is terrible and full of holy dread. The sad chant penetrates the depths of his heart.

"I have set watchmen on your walls, oh Jerusalem..." and he sees before his very eyes, the Wailing Wall, as two large tears roll down its stones, and a jackal creeps in and runs through its cracks... he stands among the ruins by the holy wall, and sees a crowd of Jews stretched out on the ground and weeping audibly. Here are the ruins of towers, and from out of the rubble he hears a voice "Oh to the father who sent his children into exile, and oh to the sons, exiled from their fathers table."

(M.Z. Feierberg: "Where to?")

Act Four: Return

17. I came to Eretz Yisrael at the age of 22½, and my aliyah took some fifteen years. It happened like this. Among the great innovations in my father's house, I count the fact that I received when I was 7½ years old - maximum 8 - a child's story book. You have to understand that in this period, the 1890's, there was no real literature for children. But one day, my father, who was born to be an educational reformer - brought me a small book, a collection of children's stories, each one of which was connected to one of the ten commandments. One commandment, of course, was missing but there were nine stories for nine commandments. And in this collection there was one story about the Shabbat; it was a folk tale about a pious Jew who went out into the wilderness with a group of Ishmaelite nomads, and when Erev Shabbat arrived, he decided of course that he would not travel on, and he stayed alone in the wilderness, a prey to wild animals. And suddenly he came upon a lion - and he was sure the lion was going to tear him apart, but the lion lay down by his feet and guarded him all night. And when the Shabbat went out, he rode on the lion's back and joined the caravan. And at the end of the story there was a sentence where it was written that the descendants of this same pious Jew live till this day in Hebron, and when I read this sentence, I burst into floods of tears. And till this day it is not clear to me if I cried tears of sadness or tears of joy. First of all it became clear to me that Eretz Yisrael is not something that belongs to the world to come, something mystical. On the contrary, Eretz Yisrael is something that exists here and now. That of course made me very happy. The second thing that I understood was that if the descendants of this pious man were still living in Hebron, there was absolutely no reason why I too could not be there - and I still remember how this story wrought a revolution in my world. My practical contact with the real Eretz Yisrael started from that moment.

(Berl Katznelson)

18. I must tell you that there will exist in me no trace of military spirit soon, and therefore there's no point in talking to me about putting myself forward for the senior officers exam... All my thoughts are directed towards the founding of a settlement (in Eretz Yisrael). And if a war should break out there, I'm sure they'll regard me as an officer although I am absolutely prepared to be a plain and simple soldier. There we will be at home, not among strangers. Do you understand what the phrase "at home, not among strangers" means to one who has spent his whole life knocking on strangers doors, without receiving a reply, who has always been greeted with kicks and scorn instead of a welcoming hand? And I believe that the day will come when tired and exhausted from a day's hard work, I will happily survey my own fields - in my own land. And nobody will tell me "get away, dog, you're a stranger in this land."

(Joseph Trumpledor)

19. We considered it, and still consider it our duty to understand and to honour the Arab claim which is opposed to ours and to endeavour to reconcile both claims... We are convinced that it must be possible to find some compromise between this claim and the other, for we love this land and believe in its future... But now you come and settle the whole dilemma with the simplistic formula "Palestine belongs to the Arabs."

What do you mean by saying a land belongs to a population? (Evidently you are referring to the "right" to the land). You obviously mean to say that a people being settled on the land, has so absolute a claim to that land, that whoever settles on it without the permission of this people has committed a robbery. But by what means did the Arabs attain the right of ownership in Palestine? Surely by conquest and in fact a conquest with intent to settle. You therefore admit that as a result their settlement gives them exclusive right of possession; whereas the subsequent conquests of the Mamelukes and Turks, which were conquests with a view to domination, not to settlement do not constitute such a right in your opinion, but leave the earlier conquerors in rightful ownership. Thus settlement by conquest justifies for you a right of ownership of Palestine, whereas a settlement such as the Jewish... does not justify in your opinion any participation in the right of possession.

It seems to me that God does not give anyone portion of the earth away so that the owner may say as God says in the Bible "for all the earth is mine." The conquered land is, in my opinion, only lent to the conqueror who has settled on it - and God waits to see what he will make of it.

I believe in the great marriage between man and the land. This land recognises us, for it is fruitful through us; and precisely because it bears fruit for us, it recognises us. Our settlers do not come here as do the colonists from the West to have natives do their work for them. They themselves set their shoulder to the plough and spend their strength and their blood, to make the land fruitful. But it is not only for ourselves that we desire its fertility. The Jewish farmers have begun to teach their brothers the Arab farmers, to cultivate the land more intensively... Together with them we want to cultivate the land.

(Martin Buber: Open letter to Mahatma Gandhi, 1939)

20. I stood up and said to him: Blessed be the Lord who enabled you to see what you saw. There are those who see without understanding what they see. You saw and understand what you saw. We must give thanks that even you understand, who is destined to receive the land. We ought to have paid more attention to the commandments of the Torah, especially so in a land where it is written "and you shall inherit, and you shall inhabit the land and you shall take care to obey all my laws," but the day is short and there's much work to do - many things that the land itself obliges us to do, to plough, to sow, to reap, to thresh, to winnow, to plant, to hoe, to harvest and tread the grapes, to pick and crush the olives, to feed the animals and the fowl, to shear the sheep and to guard our work and protect it from thieves and bandits, and it is written that the commandment to settle Eretz Yisrael is equal in weight to all the other commandments. I go now to take these young saplings on my shoulder for planting in the earth, as it is written: "and you shall plant vineyards, and drink their wine and create gardens and eat their fruit, and by your planting you will not be uprooted from your land which I have given you, said the Lord." The Lord's planting is dependent upon our planting. Each of our plantings is also the Lord's planting. The whole world belongs to the Lord and he divided it among his creatures, according to his will, but Ishmael took the whole of the world; and they kill each other and destroy each other for the empires they want to build, and we got only this tiny land - and we didn't come here to create an empire and not to rule, but only to plant and sow and plough."

Not everything I said he understood, but I saw from his expression that he saw the truth in my words.

In this fashion we sat until the light began to fade, and the evening breeze began to blow, and then he raised himself up and left in peace. Before he left, he looked at my saplings and asked me how many years it would take them to give fruit. He sighed and said: "I will not eat from their fruit but you and your children and their children will eat them."

I raised my eyes to heaven, and I said: "With the grace of God."

(S.Y. Agnon: "Underneath the Tree")