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*Dvar Torah for Parshat Mattot-Massei*

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# Returning to the Land

Prof. Noam Pianko '90 | BronfmanTorah | Mattot-Massei 2016

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Noam Pianko (Bronfman '90) is the Samuel Stroum Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Washington. He just returned from serving as faculty for the 2016 BYFI summer.

2016 Bronfman Fellows pose for a pre-Shabbat photo at Goldstein Youth Village in Katamon or Gonen

I noticed an interesting juxtaposition of Jewish and Bronfman time while reading this week's parasha on the plane home after a summer on BYFI faculty. The fellows and I were flying back from Israel to America, as the weekly Torah reading, the double parasha Matot-Masei, commands the Israelites to prepare for the reverse journey—the entrance into the promised land. This disconnect between the fellows' return to America and the biblical command to return to the Land of Canaan presented a helpful opportunity for me to reflect on the intense summer

experience.

As my in-flight map tracked our progress in the opposite direction, from Tel Aviv to New York City, I was drawn to a troubling passage in the text that brought out an increasingly unresolved tension that I found myself grappling with this summer. In preparing the Israelites for their mission to conquer the land of Israel, God instructs:

“When ye pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, and ye shall drive out the inhabitants of the land, and dwell therein; for unto you have I given the land to possess it.”  
(Numbers 33:52-53)

The Biblical narrative of homecoming links the return to Canaan with the command to drive out the previous inhabitants of the land. Zionism integrated the first part of this biblical narrative into its interpretation of the modern Jewish return. Zionism understands Jewish immigration to Palestine in the nineteenth century as a *return* to the land. However, most Zionist theorists and the founders of the modern state worked hard to disentangle a return based on the Biblical narrative from the the injunction to “drive out the inhabitants.” Indeed, the state’s founding documents testify to the ways in which Zionism struggled to define its understanding of return to the homeland in contrast to the Biblical texts. The vision for the modern Jewish homecoming would be based on a selective reading of the Biblical promise—a return to the Jewish promised land with a mandate to recognize the Arab inhabitants of the land.

Looking back over the summer, I realize that many experiences, speakers, and conversations reminded me that the founding of the state did not completely succeed in avoiding the biblical association of return with dispossession. Early in the summer, the fellows took a walking tour of the San Simon monastery and the adjacent neighborhood of Katamon. I had always wondered why Israelis referred to the area as “Katamon,” while maps and signs called the area around Goldstein Youth Village “Gonen.” I learned from the tour guides that Katamon, which means “the area under

the monastery” (of San Simon), had been an Arab neighborhood of Jerusalem before the war. Our tour guides explained that after the War of Independence the Israeli government moved Jews in the neighborhood and changed the name from “Katamon” to “Gonen,” which means “protectors.” However, the attempt to replace the old Greek name used by the Arab population with one more in line with the narrative of the Jews as defenders of Jerusalem failed to stick. The intentional effort to reshape the history of the neighborhood reminded me that the founding of the state could not avoid the displacement of former residents and the active effort to remap the demography of the Jerusalem area.

During the second week of the fellowship, BYFI hosted two speakers who work together on a fascinating project called “Roots.” Roots is a grassroots initiative of Palestinians and Israelis based in the West Bank, working together to foster understanding. Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian activist, and Hanan Schlesinger, a Jewish Settler, visited our group to discuss their initiative. The two articulated both sides of the Biblical legacy—Schlesinger emphasized his understanding of Zionism as the Jewish people’s return to the land promised in the Bible, while Ali highlighted his struggles as a member of a Palestinian family displaced by the War of 1948. I was inspired by the efforts of these two brave leaders. They seek peaceful ways listening to one another to share their respective collective narratives as a Palestinian and a Jewish settler. At the same time, I recognized the tremendous challenge facing Jews trying to validate the Biblical promise of return, while respecting the Palestinians’ perspective on the occupation of the West Bank.

My experiences this summer pushed me to read this week’s parasha with an increased sensitivity to an enduring question raised by the text: Can the modern state view its return to the promised land as the fulfillment of this week’s parasha without the disturbing declaration that accompanies the biblical return? Zionism, and the State of Israel, has defined itself in opposition to the textual juxtaposition between return and expulsion. In many ways it has succeeded in spite of some very existentially threatening circumstances. But, the biblical text’s association of return to the land with driving out the inhabitants needs to stand out as a warning about the ease with which territorial claims can lead to the disregard of those already living in the territory.

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Perhaps the journey from Israel to America provides the space necessary critique the biblical blueprint for entering the promised land. Only by actively challenging this week's parasha's prescription for returning to the homeland will Israel remain a Jewish and democratic state.

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Continue the conversation. Send Noam your thoughts: [npianko@uw.edu](mailto:npianko@uw.edu)



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