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Chapter 6. The Land of Israel

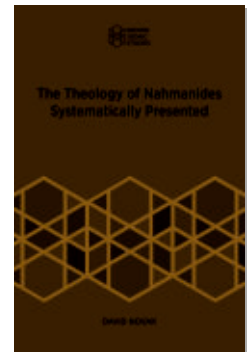
Published by

Novak, David.

The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented.

Brown Judaic Studies, 2020.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.73558>.



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[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:27 GMT)

Chapter 6

The Land of Israel

[6.1] The centrality of the Land of Israel in the divine scheme of the universe is a momentous motif in Nahmanides' theology. The Land is the place on earth where the mediation of nature is least significant and the presence of hidden miracles most significant. Since keeping the commandments merits the experience of hidden miracles, even those commandments which are not contingent on dwelling in the Land assume a more intense meaning when practiced there. And the Land unites the strengths of hidden and public miracles. For, like the hidden miracles, divine providence there is continual; and, like the public miracles, providence there is frequently manifest. Of the blessings of the Land, Nahmanides writes:

All these blessings are miracles. It is not simply by nature that the rains come [in due season]... Even though these are secret miracles in that the world proceeds in its accustomed manner (*ke-minhago*), they are made manifest (*mitparsim*) by the fact that they are continual throughout the Land of Israel... in a way unparalleled in all the world. It will be plain to all that this comes from the Lord. [CT: Lev. 26:11 - II, 185]

[6.2] The Sanctuary in Jerusalem epitomizes the special character of the Land:

The mystery of the Sanctuary is that the glory which rested on Mount Sinai abides on it unseen (*be-nistar*). [CT: Exod. 25:1 - I, 453]

[6.3] Thus certain phenomena can occur only in the Land of Israel:

This [disease, *tsara'at*] is not natural and does not occur [just anywhere] in the world... when Israel is wholly committed (*shelemim*) to the Lord, the spirit of the Lord will always be upon them to preserve their bodies, clothing, and houses in a good appearance... This will happen only in the chosen land... the matter is miraculous (*nes*). [CT: Lev. 13:47 - II, 75]

The word *tsara'at*, which designates the disease Nahmanides is discussing, is usually translated "leprosy," in accordance with LXX at Lev. 13:1 ff. (*lepras*). But unlike the disease long known as leprosy (now called Hansen's Disease), *tsara'at* afflicts clothing and houses as well as bodies. Further, its symptoms in human cases are more like those of eczema or psoriasis than like those of a dismembering disease like leprosy. Maimonides (*Hilkhot Tum'at Tsara'at*, 16.10) regards the term as generic, covering several different physical conditions. He designates *tsara'at* as supernatural (*'ot ve-pele*) and does not present any physical etiology for it. Instead he elaborates on the moral etiology suggested by the Rabbis (e.g., *Sifra: Metsora*, ed. Weiss, 73a re Deut. 24:9): *tsara'at* is a punishment for improper speech.

Halevi attributed the singular Jewish propensity for *tsara'at* to the unique physical characteristics of Jews and their possessions, resulting from the *Shekhinah* in Israel (*Kuzari*, 2.61-62). For him the etiology of the affliction was the subject of an "abstruse science" (*hokhmah mufla'ah* - 2.58, tr. Hirschfeld, 119). Nahmanides extends this approach to include the unique physical characteristics of the Land of Israel (cf. *Kuzari*, 2.15 ff.).

[6.4] The Land of Israel provides the optimal environment for keeping all of the commandments, even those which are also to be kept elsewhere:

The forbidden sexual unions are matters of personal, bodily obligation (*hovat ha-guf*) and are not contingent on living in the Land of Israel. Yet this obligation has a mystical meaning... The Land of Israel is the center of of the inhabited world (*ha-yishuv*). It is the portion of the Lord, specially his. He did not give it over to any of his angels to govern, manage, or rule... For the root of all the commandments is addressed to those who dwell in the Land of Israel. [CT: Lev. 18:25 - II, 109]

[6.5] The theme is further developed in Nahmanides' discussion of the verse the Rabbis took as the Scriptural basis of the commandment to recite grace after meals (*birkat ha-mazon*): "You shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God upon the good land which he has given you" (Deut. 8:10):

Our Rabbis have a tradition (*qibblu*) that this is a positive commandment [not just a promise of future prosperity and contentment]. The verse's sense (*ta'amo*) is that you ought to bless the Lord your God... And the sense (*ve-ta'am*) of 'upon the good land' is as if to say, 'and do it there, on the good land.' He commands us to bless him whenever we are satisfied; and to do so on the land he has given us, which he shall cause us to inherit forever, and to find satisfaction in its goodness – although, of course, this obligation (*hiyyuv ha-mitsvah ha-zo't*) applies everywhere. [CT: Deut. 8:10 - II, 382]

Because the commandment to recite grace after meals, at all times everywhere, is derived from the verse by the Rabbis (B. Berakhot 20b-21a), Nahmanides calls this aspect of the verse "the obligation, (or obligatory force) of this commandment." An obligation (*hiyyuv*) is a commandment not dependent on conditions that can be avoided (see Maimonides, *Hilkhot Berakhot*, 11.2 based on B. Sotah 44b). If the obligation applies everywhere, Nahmanides asks, why is the commandment that states it linked to a phrase about the Land of Israel? To be sure, the commandment has broader application. Indeed, thanking God for food is seen as pertaining to non-Jews as well as Jews (Bereshit Rabbah 43.7 on Gen. 14:19; cf. Y. Berakhot 6.1/9d re Psalms 24:1.). But Nahmanides finds that even though the commandment is to be observed everywhere, one best appreciates the food God brings forth from the earth (*min ha'arets*, see B. Berakhot 38a-b) in that land (*ha'arets*, specifically the Land of Israel) where providence is most direct (see Y. Berakhot 6.1/10a re Psalms 72:16; B. Ketubot 111b; Bereshit Rabbah 15.7).

[6.6] The Land of Israel is the proximate locus of the manifestation of the *Shekhinah*. After giving the outward meaning of the verse, "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20) as an expression of the importance of zeal in human administration of the divine laws governing human affairs, Nahmanides offers a mystical interpretation based on his primary kabbalistic text, *Sefer ha-Bahir* (sec. 74-75). The interpretation connects the command to pursue justice with the remainder of the verse: "that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you":

The first "justice," which is literal justice (*tsedeq mamash*), is the *Shekhinah*... But what is the second "justice" that terrifies the righteous?... This is the higher justice (*tsedeq 'elyon*), through which you will live in the world-to-come. It is the great light stored up (*tsafun*) for the righteous in the hereafter (*le-'atid la-vo*). "And you shall inherit the land [that is, the world-to-come]," through the first "justice," which is the Land of Israel. [CT: Deut. 16:20 - II, 419]

This comment plays on the double meaning of 'the land' in rabbinic thought, where it means either the Land of Israel (e.g., Hullin 16b re Deut. 12:20) or the world-to-come (e.g., M. Sanhedrin 10.1 re Isaiah 60:21). The kabbalistic gloss connects the two seemingly separate meanings of the word.

[6.7] The sanctity of the Land of Israel results from its centrality, marked for Nahmanides by the site of the archetypal heavenly Temple:

From antiquity the nations knew that this place [Jerusalem] is the choicest site, the center of the inhabited world (*ha-yishuv*). Perhaps they knew from some tradition that its excellence (*ma'alato*) is because it directly faces the heavenly Temple where God's Presence (*Shekhinato*) is called "Justice" (*tsedeq*). [CT: Gen. 14:18 - I, 86-87]

[6.8] The Land of Israel is the only remnant of the earth as it was before human sin became manifest. It is wholly under direct providence, without the mediation of nature:

When the commandments are fulfilled there, the Land of Israel will be as the world was at its beginning, before the the first man's sin... When Scripture says "and it was so" [Gen. 1:30], this refers to the nature which was placed in creatures forever... The animals of the Land of Israel will be in a state of perfection, their vicious behavior (*ra'at minhagam*) will cease, and they will revert to the primordial nature (*ha-teva ha-ri'shon*) impressed on them at the time of their creation... Thus Scripture states that in the days of the redeemer, who will come out of the stock of Jesse, peace will return to the world and carnage (*ha-teref*) will cease [Isaiah 11:1-9]. The nature of the animals will be once again as it was at the beginning. [CT: Lev. 26:6 - II, 183]

[6.9] The Land of Israel not only is the place least subject to the mediation of nature, it is in a way itself an intermediary of God's governance:

God does not attend to anything, as it were (*kivyakhol*), but it; and it is through this attention that he attends to all other lands... there is in this a deep mystery, inasmuch as this land is attended to in every way. It is all things, and all other lands in truth are nurtured from it. [CT: Deut. 11:10 - II, 393]

[6.10] The sanctity of the Land of Israel stems from the fact that it is the earthly place where the connection with the transcendent reality of the world-to-come is most proximate. It is the location of the Garden of Eden:

He figured in this portentous place [the Garden of Eden] all the work of the upper world. It is the world of souls given in material form, so that one can understand through it the constitution of every creature: bodily, spiritual (*nafshi*), and angelic... It is the most estimable place in the lower world (*'olam ha-shafal*). For it is the center of the world, leading directly to the upper world. So the divine will be seen there more frequently than anywhere else on earth. We believe that the Land of Israel and Jerusalem are the most important places, especially suited for prophecy because of this direct connection [with the upper world], and especially with the [heavenly] Temple, which is the throne of the Lord. [KR: *Torat ha-Adam: Sha'ar ha-Gemul* - II, 296]

[6.11] Nahmanides draws on the ancient idea that all the nations of the world are under the control of angelic intermediaries, whereas Israel is under the direct control of God himself (LXX at Deut. 32:8; Siracides 17:17; B. Shabbat 156a). But he stresses the centrality of the Land of Israel at least as much as that of the people of Israel:

Why is it called "the land of the Lord" (Hos. 9:3)? Is not the whole world the land of the Lord? He created everything, and all is his. The basis of an answer is found in the verse: "when the Most High gave the nations their portions, differentiating the human race (*benei adam*), he set the boundaries according to the numbers of the children of Israel. For the portion of the Lord is his people, etc." (Deut. 32:8-9). The meaning is that the Lord created heaven and earth and imparted power over the lower beings to the higher beings, causing a particular star or constellation to rule over each people in its land, as is known from the science of astrology (*be-hokhmat ha-itstagninut*)... The Lord, glorious is he, is the supreme God and lord of the entire world. But the Land of Israel is the center of the habitable world (*emtza'ut ha-yishuv*), the Lord's own special portion. He did not place any angel over it as a magistrate, administrator or governor... Outside the Land of Israel, even though everything is for the sake of his Glorious Name, there is no perfect purity, because of the ministering angels who govern there, and peoples go astray after their officials, even worshipping them... This is the meaning of the rabbinic statement (T. 'Avodah Zarah 4.5; B.Ketubot 110b), "whoever dwells outside the Land of Israel is like one who has no God." [KR: *Sermon for Rosh Hashanah* - I, 249-50]

[6.12] Just as the nations of the world are not under direct providence but are related to God through intermediate heavenly powers, so are all other lands related to God. Only the Land of Israel is directly ruled by God:

The most honored Lord created everything and placed earthly beings (*tahtonim*) in the power of higher beings (*'elyonim*), giving them power over every people in its land, to each a definite star and constellation, which "the Lord your God apportioned (*halaq*)" (Deut. 4:19)... The constellations are in heaven, and above them are the higher angels, who rule over them... That is why we say God is "king of kings." [KR: *Sermon on Kohelet* - I, 200-01]

[6.13] The connection between the commandments of the Torah and the Land of Israel colors Nahmanides' discussion of an opinion held by many of the Rabbis that the patriarchs observed the entire Torah before it was revealed at Mount Sinai (M. Kidd. 4.14/ end; B. Yoma 28b; Y. Berakhot 2.3/4c; Bereshit Rabbah 95.3; Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1925] 5.259, n. 275). Nahmanides seems more inclined to the opposing view, that the patriarchs kept only the Noahide Commandments and circumcision, and that no one kept the entire Torah until it was revealed at Sinai (B. Sanhedrin 56b; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1.16; Maimonides, *Hilkhot Melakhim*, 9.1; KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 173). But in commenting on Gen. 26:5 (CT - I, 151) he argues that if the maximal opinion is correct (*ve'im ken*, CT - I, 149) the patriarchal observance was only in the Land of Israel. The logic is that if the commandments can be observed fully by the people of Israel only in the Land of Israel, then single individuals, without the support of the community, would surely require the Land to be able to observe the full complement of the commandments.

Abraham our father learned the whole Torah through the holy spirit... and observed it as one who was not actually commanded to do so, but kept it voluntarily. Yet his observance was only in the Land of Israel. [CT: Gen. 26:5 - I, 150]

The idea that one may observe what has not been commanded, with a lesser reward than for obeying explicit commands (B. Kiddushin 31a; Tos., s.v. *gadol*; *Hiddushei ha-Ramban ad loc.*, p. 296), allows Nahmanides to open a middle ground between the maximalist and minimalist views of patriarchal observance. In a different way, the Rabbis too saw the Land of Israel as the optimal locale for observing the *mitsvot* (*Sifre*: Devarim, no. 43 re Deut. 11:17-18, ed. Finkelstein, 102. – I thank David Berger for this reference.)

[6.14] For reasons clearly linked to his historical situation, Nahmanides saw in the Torah a positive obligation for every Jew at all times to live in the Land of Israel:

In my view, to live in the Land of Israel is a positive commandment... and what I have explained is the essence of the matter. [CT: Num. 33:53 - II, 335]

[6.15] Nahmanides disagrees here with Rashi, whose *Commentary on the Torah* understands the words, "and you shall dwell therein" (Num. 33:53) as an assurance of reward: *If* during the Israelite conquest of Canaan, you properly dispossess the Canaanites, *then* you shall dwell in safety in the land. Nahmanides is especially critical of Maimonides for not listing the *mitsvah* of dwelling in the Land of Israel as one of the 613 commandments of the Written Torah. He does not consider it sufficient that neither Rashi nor Maimonides disputed the merit of dwelling in the Land:

The fourth *mitsvah* we are given is to inherit the Land which the Lord, exalted be he, gave our fathers... not abandon it to other nations or to desolation... We are commanded to inherit the Land and dwell in it. This is a positive commandment for all generations, for each of us, even in time of exile, as is known from numerous passages in the Talmud. [Notes on Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*: Addenda, pos. no. 4, pp. 244-46]

[6.16] The sanctity of the Land of Israel is such that it is sinful to abandon it, even through economic hardship. Of Abraham's descent into Egypt after reaching the Land at God's behest, Nahmanides writes:

Know also... that his departure from the Land because of the famine was an advertant sin (*'avon*). For God would have saved him from death. It was on account of this deed that it was decreed that his descendents would be exiled in the land of Egypt under Pharaoh's rule. [CT: Gen. 12:9 - I, 79-80]

Nahmanides identifies two sins in the text: first, Abraham's passing off his wife as his sister, risking her being taken into Pharaoh's harem and violated. But that sin was inadvertant (*bi-shegagah*). The second, his descent into Egypt, was advertant. (For the distinction, M. Yoma 4.2; Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah ad loc.*) The commentators on Nahmanides' *Commentary on the Torah* have trouble explaining why one sin was advertant, and the other inadvertant and so less serious (Chavel, note on CT - I, 79). But perhaps we can connect Nahmanides' greater concern over desertion of the Land with a fear lest that lapse be repeated in later generations, an event more likely than the temptation to pass off one's wife as a sister.

[6.17] The Land of Israel is not only the perfect environment for fulfilling the commandments, but it has the power to alter some of our obligations. Thus in commenting on a verse which seems to call for unreserved use and enjoyment of the Land by the conquering Israelites, Nahmanides elaborates on a Talmudic gloss:

The goods to be found in the full houses are permitted, even if they contain things forbidden by the Torah [Hullin 17a]... and even when lives are not at risk. [CT: Deut. 6:10 - II, 373]

Maimonides (*Hilkhot Melakhim*, 8.1) had derived the Talmudic permission from a concern that in wartime soldiers might be on the verge of starvation. He sees the ruling as a dispensation based on the commandment to preserve life even at the cost of violating a negative precept (B. Sanhedrin 74a re Lev. 18:5; B. Yoma 85b). But Nahmanides, noting that the Talmudic permission applies even when there is no danger, argues that the Land, at least in some cases, by its very sanctity, changes the commandments altogether. (But cf. Semahot 7.8; B. Kiddushin 21b-22a; B. Sanhedrin 59a for the application of wartime dispensations in non-life-threatening situations not confined to the Land of Israel; see *Sifre*: Devarim, no. 211 re Deut. 21:10, ed. Finkelstein, 245).

[6.18] Nahmanides never misses an opportunity to show how the sanctity of the Land of Israel anchors the specifics of many of the commandments, both Scriptural and rabbinic. An early example is seen in his explanation of the ruling (M. Megillah 1.1) that the book of Esther must be read on the fifteenth of Adar in cities walled since the time of Joshua, but on the fourteenth in all other cities and towns. Marvelling that the Rabbis would so sharply differentiate Jewish practices in two kinds of place, Nahmanides introduces the sanctity of the Land of Israel as the explanation:

When I examined the Scriptural texts, the problem was settled for me. Clearly at the time of the miracle the Jewish people had already received the order to go back up to the Land with Cyrus' permission and had resettled in their cities... When Ahasuerus commanded that the Jews be killed and massacred, the open towns and unwalled cities were in the gravest peril. There was greater danger that they would be overrun by the enemy than there was for walled cities... So the miracle was greater there... And the reason for the decree [by Mordecai and Esther – Esther 9:20-21] differentiating two separate days for celebration of the miracle is that open towns in the days of Ahasuerus took precedence over walled cities. For the root of the miracle was for those Jews in the Land of Israel, which was desolate and still had not been rebuilt... Yet

it was not right that Jerusalem, the holy city, and the rest of the ruined cities of Judah and Israel should be classed with open towns. So the ranking of a city was based on its condition at the time of Joshua... This is because they treated the Land of Israel with honor. [*Hiddushei ha-Ramban ha-Shalem*: B. Megillah 2a, pp. 6-7]

Nahmanides here follows R. Seemon in the Palestinian Talmud (Y. Megillah 1.1/70a), where it becomes clear that the cities in the Land of Israel, which were unwalled at the time of Mordecai and Esther, should not be considered less important than the foreign capital of Shushan, which was walled at that time. Nahmanides' argues that attention should be paid to the Land of Israel on two counts: (1) the greater miracle took place there because of the Land's greater vulnerability, since it had only unwalled cities at the time; (2) the cities of the Land of Israel should not be put in a less honorable category than the foreign capital of Shushan.

[6.19] Nahmanides does not make the sanctity of the Land of Israel independent of the relation of the Land to the people of Israel. The Land is sanctified and blessed because it is included in the perpetual covenant between God and Israel. Thus, in commenting on the verse, "And I shall remember My covenant with Jacob, and my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham shall I remember, and the Land shall I remember" (Lev. 26:42), Nahmanides writes:

In truth (*'al derekh ha-'emet*) it should be said that God remembered Jacob and Isaac and Abraham, who are parties to a covenant (*benei berit*). For all of the qualities ascribed to them are so when they are so covenanted. But since the Land of Israel is included along with them, God will remember it too in that totality (*bi-khlal*). Our Rabbis hinted at this when they said (*Vayiqra Rabbah* 36.7), "Why did He privilege (*zekhut*) the Land along with them? R. Simeon ben Laqish said that it is like a lord who had three daughters raised by a maidservant. Whenever the lord asked after the welfare of his daughters, he would also say, "Inquire for me too about the welfare of the one who is raising them." [CT: Lev. 26:42 - II, 191]

