

An Ancient Connection

Standing in Cairo, a major Arab capital and a cultural center of the Arab world, President Barack Obama emphasized some necessary but unpopular truths. He [told](#) his intended audience of Muslims worldwide that the U.S.-Israel relationship is “unbreakable” and is based upon “cultural and historical ties.”

The president also denounced the rampant Holocaust denial in Muslim societies. “Six million Jews were killed—more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today,” Obama said. “Denying that fact is baseless, it is ignorant, and it is hateful.”

When speaking about Israel, Obama explained that “the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history” of persecution, which “culminated in an unprecedented holocaust.”

There is much more to the story of Israel than persecution. Without a doubt, the Holocaust convinced much of the world of the urgent need to establish a Jewish state. But the urgency of Israel’s establishment and the timing of its creation must not be confused with the Jewish people’s deep historical roots in the Land of Israel.

By adopting the notion that Israel exists merely as a product of the Holocaust, Israel’s detractors can freely assert that the Palestinians were forced to pay for the crimes of the Europeans, and that there is no Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel. This is exactly what Yasser Arafat and his top aides did at Camp David in 2000, when they denied that any Jewish Temple ever existed in Jerusalem.

A *Jerusalem Post* editorial written after the Camp David summit explained the Palestinian Authority’s reasoning. “Without recognizing Israel’s ancient connection to Jerusalem, the Palestinians can cling to the notion that Israel exists only by might, not by right.”

What, then, is the Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel? Why, of all places for a state, did the early Zionists choose a tiny sliver of land in the eastern Mediterranean? What was the pale, Polish, 20-year-old David Ben-Gurion thinking when he got off the boat in sun-scorched Jaffa in 1906?

He was thinking not only of the challenging days ahead of him, but of the past. The Jewish connection to Israel is rooted in *thousands* of years of history, a significance that was never lost on Israel’s first prime minister and the millions of Jews who followed in his footsteps.

The Hebrew tribes, led by Joshua Bin Nun, entered the Land of Israel around 1,400 BCE, after a long exile in Egypt. They were later united in a monarchy under King Saul and his successor, King David, who established Jerusalem as his capital. Except for a brief exile to Babylon in the 6th century BCE, Jews lived in their land until the Roman Empire crushed the last remnants of the Jewish revolt, led by Bar Kochba, in 135 CE.

After suppressing all Jewish resistance, the Roman emperor Hadrian attempted to erase the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel. The area had long been known as Judea, but Hadrian renamed it Syria Palaestina (later anglicized as “Palestine”), after the Philistines, the Israelites’ Biblical enemies. Jerusalem was renamed Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were barred from entering. One could be forgiven for thinking that Jewish history should have ended then, with most Jews forced out of the country, the Temple in Jerusalem a pile of rubble, the Galilee empty of its Jewish inhabitants and Masada a silent testimony to a tragic last stand.

But Roman efforts to eliminate the Jewish people would not be successful. Scattered thousands of miles apart, the Jews never gave up their aspiration to return to their ancient homeland. For nearly 2,000 years, Jews in all corners of the world longed for “next year in Jerusalem.”

Many Diaspora Jews fulfilled this hope. By the 9th century, returning Jews revived Jewish life in Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias and elsewhere. Even after the Crusaders massacred many Jews during the 11th and 12th centuries, Jews continued to return. In fact, there has been continuous Jewish presence in the Land of Israel since Biblical times.

This is the key point. The goal of Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, was to re-establish a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, which was still inhabited by many Jews when Zionism emerged at the end of the 19th century.

What also must be emphasized when telling the story of Israel, regardless of the intended audience, is the fact that the Zionist movement sought, and won, international recognition and legitimacy. After World War I, the League of Nations incorporated the British government’s 1917 [Balfour Declaration](#)—which favored the “establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”—into the British [Mandate for Palestine](#). The [U.S. Congress](#) endorsed the Mandate soon after.

In 1947, the [United Nations](#) called for the establishment of a Jewish state alongside an Arab state in Palestine. The Jews immediately accepted the resolution, while the Arabs vehemently rejected it and went to war with the stated aim of destroying the nascent Jewish state.

Less than a year later, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion [declared](#) the establishment of Israel, proclaiming “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state.”

This is the truth about Israel’s roots that must be accentuated, even to the most unreceptive listeners.