

Mishnah rules that the laws of *shemittah* are not in effect there at all. For the Sages of the Mishnah, political realities play a role in defining the extent of the Land for halakhic purposes.

There is some flexibility regarding the boundaries of the Land. The Torah gives more than one map. The Mishnah assumes that the boundaries change over time.

But the whole debate is premised on a bedrock assumption: although the boundaries can shift, there are boundaries. Whatever their disagreements over details, all the biblical authors agree that there is such a thing as the Promised Land, and it's located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Some Jews in modern times (for example, in Germany in the 19th century) wanted to eliminate notions of Promised Land and sacred space from Judaism. For the varied authors of the Torah, such a purging is just not possible. Like it or not, land matters to Judaism. There's flexibility regarding where and how it matters, but not on the question of whether it matters at all.

This lesson goes beyond geography. The same basic idea that comes out of comparing this week's Torah reading with next week's applies more broadly in Judaism: *There are boundaries. We can debate where they should be located; sometimes, they move. But the debate starts from the acknowledgement that boundaries are important to us as Jews.*

This lesson is one that has particular import for Conservative Jews. The project of our movement is to bring Torah and its observance into the modern world. As we do so, it's crucial to recall that in *מִסְעֵינוּ*, in our journeys, we're not free as Jews to go anywhere at all. This is something Jews on the right and on the left both need to accept. Jews on the right need to realize that boundaries can be flexible, and the Bible is okay with that. Jews on the left need to realize there are boundaries, so that not every change we want to make is acceptable.

One might have thought that a list of geographic place-names, a map in prose, might be a little, well, boring, or even irrelevant. But a careful look at what seems boring in this week's Torah reading turns out to be instructive. In the ways they differ, and in the ways they don't, the Torah's varied maps of the Promised Land serve as instruction, as guidance, as Torah for us modern Jews.

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מטות מסעי תשע"ט



Boundaries on the Move

Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer, Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS

Every week, we read a parashah from the Torah during our Shabbat morning service, and then the beginning of the next parashah during our Shabbat afternoon service. The result of reading from two parashiyot on a single day can be surprising. This week, as we read first from Masei, the last parashah of Numbers, and then from Devarim, the first from Deuteronomy, we can hear an ancient debate about an issue that remains deeply contested: where to draw the line.

Parashat Masei (at Numbers 34) contains what we might call a map in prose. This map describes the extent of the Promised Land that the Israelites will soon enter. The boundaries are defined as follows:

- The southern boundary runs through the Negev Desert about 30–45 miles south of Beersheva, so that the northern part of Negev is within the Promised Land.
- Much of the western boundary consists of the Mediterranean Sea. Moving southward, the western boundary continues along the riverbed called the River of Egypt (*נחל מצרים*), Wadi El-Arish today, which runs west of the Gaza Strip.
- The northern boundary runs through current-day Lebanon, probably starting slightly south of Beirut and extending east.
- The eastern boundary's northern flank is somewhere to the east of Damascus. It then moves westward to Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), and continues south along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

But next week's parashah, at Deut. 1:7, provides a different description of the Promised Land's borders, also found in more detail in Gen. 15:18–21. According to the map those passages share, the Promised Land is considerably larger:

- The western boundary is still the Mediterranean and the River of Egypt.
- The northern boundary is not clarified with great specificity, but it seems to extend up to Asia Minor (today's Turkey).
- The eastern boundary is the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria.
- The southern boundary is not spelled out, but it may extend all the way to the Gulf of Eilat.

The most important difference between the two maps involves Transjordan, which was inhabited in ancient times by two and a half Israelite tribes: Reuben, Gad, and part of Manasseh. Several passages elsewhere in the Bible agree with one or the other map. Josh. 13, 14, and 22 describe how each of the twelve tribes received their own territory under the supervision of Joshua. These chapters assume the map from this week's reading in Numbers, treating Israelite tribes in Transjordan as residing outside Israel's territory. But other passages agree with Deut. 1 and Gen. 15, regarding the Transjordan's inhabitants as within the Promised Land (Exod. 23:31, Deut. 11:24, Josh. 21, 2 Sam. 24, and 1 Kings 4–5).

How can we account for the presence of these two “maps” in the Torah? Modern biblical scholars such as me believe that the Torah was formed when scribes combined several documents that had been written by groups of sages, priests, and prophets from ancient Israel. All of them were mediating and interpreting messages from God and traditions they received from their ancestors. The more limited map of the Promised Land from this week's parashah stems from the Priestly school of ancient Israel, whom we call the P authors. The other map appears in Deuteronomy, which was written by Levites, and in sections of Genesis and Exodus written by scribes called the J and E authors.

The differing opinions regarding borders lead each school of thought to view certain events differently from the other. Where did God change Jacob's name to *Israel*? J and P both remember this important event: In J (Gen. 32:27–30), this event happened at Peniel, in Transjordan. But that version of the story is problematic for the Priestly authors, because in their view, Peniel is located outside the Promised Land, and one would assume this momentous event took place inside the Land. In a P passage (Gen. 35.6–15), God bestows the name *Israel* on Jacob and his progeny at Bethel, on the west side of the Jordan River.

Similarly, in this week's Torah reading: when P tells us about the tribes of Reuben and Gad settling in Transjordan, they make it clear that their settlement there it is a concession. God permits them to live there only if they help conquer the Promised Land too (Num. 32:16ff.); the key word repeated in verses 20, 23, 29, and 30, is אִם, “if.” When Deuteronomy tells us about this same event at the end of next week's parashah (3:12ff.), the tribes' settlement there is neither conditional nor a concession. The land east of the Jordan is God's gift to those tribes; the key verb is נָתַתִּי, “I have given you” (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, and twice in 20). The men from these tribes still fight in the Israelite army, but their receipt of their land in Transjordan is not contingent on their doing so.

We can notice a consistent מחלוקת or debate in the Torah about the extent of the Promised Land. The Torah provides two conflicting maps of the Land, along with two sets of texts that consistently view events through the lens provided by the one map or the other.

What do we learn from all this?

First, of all, it is significant that the debate occurs at all. The boundaries of the Land of Israel according to the Bible are not set in stone; there is more than one biblical view of its correct or ideal boundaries. Similar flexibility regarding the boundaries shows up in the Book of Kings. After Hiram the king of Tyre provides lumber and gold with which Solomon had the Temple built, Solomon transferred twenty towns in the Galilee to King Hiram to pay for these materials (1 Kings 9:11). This story gives rise to another disagreement, however. Later biblical historians who wrote the Book of Chronicles regarded the idea that the king of Israel could give up parts of the Promised Land in the conduct of international diplomacy as problematic, and so they altered the story so that Hiram granted the towns to Solomon (2 Chron. 8:2). (However the later version does not quite explain why Hiram would pay Solomon in return for goods that Hiram sent to Solomon!)

The variety of views grows even larger in rabbinic literature. The Mishnah asks what areas are covered by the laws of *shemittah*, the command to let farmland lie fallow every seventh year (*Shevi'it* 6:1). It rules that the Land of Israel within which land must lie fallow does not correspond to either biblical map. Instead, these laws are fully in effect only in the limited area settled by the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile. In areas that had been settled by the Israelites centuries earlier in the time of Joshua, the laws of *shemittah* are partially in effect. And what of areas of the Land (according to either biblical map) that were not settled by Israelites at all—that is, Syria and Lebanon? The