

"If your children accept circumcision they will enter the land, but if not they will not enter the land. Rabbi Berachia and Rabbi Chelbo said in the name of Rabbi Avin and Rabbi Yose, It is written, "And this is the matter (lit.: word) that Joshua circumcised" (Jos. 5:4), Joshua said something to them and then circumcised them. He said to them: Do you think that you can enter the land uncircumcised? for so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: And I will give to thee, and to thy seed after thee etc., in order that you will keep My covenant."

This interpretation marks a change in the pattern and logic of Chapter 17 of Genesis.⁵⁵ In this chapter, God makes a promise to Abraham. Later in this chapter, Abraham is required to keep the covenant, by practising circumcision. It seems that the chapter's structure does not make the realization of the promise in the first part conditional on the observation of obligations by Abraham or his descendants. The Midrash sees the two parts as interdependent. Entry to the land is subject to the observance of the commandment of circumcision. To reinforce this view, the Midrash has recourse to the story of Joshua's circumcision of the people before they enter the land. The story in Joshua emphasizes the link between circumcision and eating the Passover sacrifice.⁵⁶ However, the theory that circumcision forms part of the preparations for entering the land is also possible. It would seem that the precedent in Joshua is not the sole influence upon the formation of the midrashic excerpt quoted here. It seems to be part of a

55. Analysis of the commentary in its full context shows that the Midrash presents another pattern of the relations between man and God than that which operates in the biblical text. According to the biblical text, God makes a gift at the establishment of the covenant. Man is required in parallel to observe certain commandments. It is assumed that Abraham had long since proved his righteousness and would definitely strive to keep the commandment of circumcision. However, Abraham's readiness to observe the commandment is not a condition for the giving of the divine gift. Another pattern emerges from the commentary of Rabbi Yudan in *Bereshit Rabba*, 46:9. This pattern links the different elements listed in the chapter, not by the principle of the covenant, but according to a pattern based on human religious action. Observance of the commandment of circumcision carries with it the right to enter the land, perhaps on the principle that one commandment draws another. Circumcision and entering the land both entail acceptance of the "divine yoke" in an active fashion, as a human religious activity. The divine presence granted to Abraham – "I will be your patron God" – is the result of the chain of previous events. The divine presence, which is an integral part of the divine promise in the covenant, is understood here as a goal achieved by virtue of human religious effort.

56. Jos. 5:9.

broader process, which makes entry to the land dependent upon the fulfillment of the Torah and the commandments. The inheritance of the land is thus dependent on observing the commandments. Therefore, it is natural that circumcision, which is mentioned in this passage, should be understood as a condition for entering the land. What is not so natural, however, is that this dependence of entry to the land on the observance of commandments should be emphasized at the expense of recognizing the principal message of this text, which describes the promising of the land to Abraham.

The inheritance of the land, and the Patriarchs' inheritance of the land, have become subject to the system of Torah and commandments. The emphasis laid on a specific commandment is the result of the local commentary. The biblical raw material allowed one commentary to emphasize the commandment of sacrifice and another to emphasize circumcision. However, it is clear that the choice of the specific commandment is not derived from a necessary or essential link between the commandment and the inheritance of the land, but from the midrashic possibilities offered by the biblical text. In other commentaries, varying expressions of this conceptual process can be found.

"Never undervalue the commandment of the 'omer, for Abraham merited the inheritance of the Land of Canaan by means of the commandment of the 'omer, as it is written, 'And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,' in order that thou mayest keep my covenant, and which is this? – the commandment of the 'omer'"⁵⁷

The midrashic pattern is identical to the last interpretation quoted above from *Bereshit Rabba*. The only difference lies in the commentator's decision to emphasize the commandment of the 'omer rather than the commandment of circumcision.

Abraham's position as the figure who will both inherit and bequeath the land emerges in the following dialogue from Ezek. 33:23:

"Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying: 'Son of man, they that inhabit those waste places in the land of Israel speak, saying: Abraham was one, and he inherited the land; but we are many; the land is given us for inheritance. Wherefore say unto them: Thus saith the Lord God: Ye eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes unto your idols, and shed blood; and shall ye possess the land? Ye stand upon your sword, ye work abomination, and ye defile every one his

57. *Vayikra Rabba*, 28:6.

neighbour's wife; and shall ye possess the land?"

The people's claim reflects the biblical understanding according to which Abraham inherits the land and in turn bequeaths it to his descendants. The people improve on the biblical *theologoumenon* by an inference from minor to major in numerical terms: since they are many, their inheritance of the land is assured. In contrast, the prophet claims that their wicked behavior gives them no right to inherit the land. This dialogue links two strands in the biblical view of the Land of Israel. On the one hand, it cites the claim to the inheritance of the land by virtue of Abraham; on the other hand, it assumes that the people's presence in the land is dependent on correct religious behavior, and that incorrect religious behavior will lead to expulsion from the land.⁵⁸ The dialogue in Ezekiel juxtaposes two biblical conceptions. The treatment of this confrontation in rabbinic commentary reinforces the rabbinic view that the inheritance of the land was dependent on the observance of the commandments. In the list of issues which Rabbi Akiva interpreted, and on which Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disagreed with him, we read:

"Rabbi Akiva interpreted: Behold, it says 'Son of man, they that inhabit those waste places,' etc., and is this not an instance of inference from minor to major, for Abraham, who only served one God, inherited the land, and shall we, who serve many gods, not be permitted to inherit the land?

Rabbi Nehemiah said: Abraham, who only had one son and sacrificed him, inherited the land, shall we, who sacrifice our sons and daughters to idolatry, not be permitted to inherit the land?

Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean said: Abraham, who relied on no-one [no one's merit], inherited the land, shall we, who have someone on whom to rely, not be permitted to inherit the land?

And I say, Abraham, who was only commanded to observe a few commandments,⁵⁹ inherited the land, shall we, who have been given all the commandments, not be permitted to inherit the land? Know that you may hear this from the answer that the prophet gave, as it is said, 'Thus saith the Lord God, Ye eat with the blood,' etc., 'Ye stand upon your sword,' etc. 'Ye eat with the blood,' this refers to the sin of eating a limb from a living animal; 'and lift up your eyes unto your idols,' this refers to idolatry; 'and shed blood,' this refers to murder; 'ye stand upon your sword,' this refers to perversion of justice and theft; 'ye work abomination,' this refers to homosexuality; 'and ye defile every

58. See Lev. 20:23ff. See also Davies' description of the conception of the land in the Bible: Davies 1982, 6-21.

59. In the Erfurt manuscript: "a single commandment."

one his neighbour's wife,' this refers to incest. And this is derived by inference from minor to major. You have not even kept the seven commandments given to the sons of Noah, and shall you say, We will inherit the land? And I prefer my interpretation to that of Rabbi Akiva."⁶⁰

It is worth noting that none of these ways of understanding the biblical inference from minor to major presupposes that the Patriarchs (or in this case Abraham) inherit the land by virtue of a divine promise. In all these sayings, Abraham is represented as inheriting the land on his own account, and his descendants inherit it similarly. The commentators do not see Abraham as receiving the land on behalf of his descendants. The first two sayings embody a sort of minor to major inference that suits an idolatrous outlook. The third saying is more interesting in the context of the present discussion. Abraham has no one on whom to depend, while we do have someone on whom to depend. The term "to depend" is linked to the conceptual context of the term "merit."⁶¹ The inheritance of the land is not the result of Abraham's inheritance of the land; however, his merit aids his descendants and enables them to inherit the land. The concept of merit is linked to the context of the observance of the commandments and the accumulation of merit. The land is inherited by virtue of good deeds. Abraham's role is not to bequeath the land to his descendants, but to add his merit to that of his offspring, in order to enable them to inherit the land. The good deeds "bequeath" the land, and Abraham's role is merely that of someone with a surplus of "merit," which assists his descendants. The *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land by Abraham's descendants by virtue of a divine promise is transformed here into the idea that the father and the descendants both inherit by virtue of a single system, activated by merit. The father merely assists his children to accumulate the necessary amount of merit.

The last saying illustrates the conceptual transformation most clearly. Abraham was given one commandment, and inherited the land by virtue of it. It seems reasonable to understand this interpretation as proposing that the land was inherited by virtue of observing the commandment of circumcision. The textual version which speaks of several commandments⁶²

60. *Tosefta Sotah*, 6:9.

61. See *Sifra, Behukkotai*, chapter 8, 6, p. 112c; and see our discussion below.

62. These changes in formulation also occur in the tradition of formulation in the parallel passage in *Sifrei Devarim*, section 31, p. 50.

probably adds the seven Noahide commandments to that of circumcision. This addition seems to have been influenced by the prophet's answer, which is explained in the Midrash as referring to the seven Noahide commandments. It is clear that the minor to major inference is sharper when a single commandment is contrasted with all the commandments. In any event, it is the commandments that cause the land to be inherited, and Abraham only inherited it by virtue of observing the commandments. It is not Abraham's special role that confers the land on his descendants, but the commandments, which confer it equally on Abraham and his offspring.

Also the prophet's answer to his people is not seen as a simple enumeration of sins, but as organized according to the legal categories recognized by the Sages. The list of sins given by the prophet is identified by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai with the seven Noahide commandments. This identification provides further assistance in bridging the gap between the two approaches apparent in Ezek. 33. If breaking a commandment cuts the link to the land, observance of the commandments bestows the right to the land.

In the light of the central position of Torah study in the rabbinic world, it comes as no surprise to find that Torah study is cited as the basis for inheriting the land.

Isaac used to chastise Jacob, and Isaac his father taught him Torah, and he shut chastised in his house of study, as it is written, "And Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents," and he learnt whatever he learnt from his father, and afterwards he separated himself from his ancestors, and stayed in the house of Eber to study Torah. Therefore he merited a blessing and inherited the land, as it is written, "And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings."⁶³

The transference of the right to the land from the Patriarchs and their status to correct religious behavior is reflected in the parable quoted below that comes from *Sifrei Devarim*, section 48, that deals with the uniqueness of the Land of Israel:

A parable is told of a king who was traveling along a road and saw a certain man of good stock and gave him a slave for his use. He then saw another man of good stock, refined, delicate and busy with some activity, and he knew him and his ancestors, and said, I decree that I do with my

63. *Shemot Rabba*, 1:1.

own hands, and feed him. Thus all the lands were given servants for their use: Egypt drinks from the Nile, Babylon from the rivers, but the Land of Israel is not like them – they sleep in their beds and the Lord sends them rain.

Who are the men of good stock in the parable? If it is assumed that they are intended to represent the different lands, it becomes difficult to interpret the parable. What is the significance of the “nobleman” for the lands, and what is the meaning of “busy with some activity” in relation to them? It must thus be assumed that the parable refers to population groups. The men of good stock receive inheritances. Israel, the second man of good stock in the parable, is rewarded with the Land of Israel. The uniqueness of the Land of Israel lies in the special personal relationship with God, in the way the rains are sent. The provision of rain is a specific detail in the description of the land’s uniqueness. The point of the parable is to describe the nature of the right to the Land of Israel, through which is made manifest the personal relationship with God. What, then, is the basis of this right to the Land of Israel? Two men of good stock appear in the parable. The king knows the ancestors of the second man, but the link to the Patriarchs does not seem to be the basis of the link to the land. Both men are described as being of good stock, and there seems to be very little real difference in their pedigrees. The addition of the fact that the king knows the ancestors of the second man provides at most a trivialization of the biblical *theologoumenon* of the bequest of the land to the Patriarchs.⁶⁴ The distinctive characteristic of the second man is that he is busy with some activity. From this it follows that the basis of the link to the Land of Israel is proper religious behavior. This, and not the connection to the Patriarchs, is the basis for inheriting the land. This parable shows us pictorially how the role of the Patriarchs as bequeathers of the land was set aside, and replaced by another criterion concerned with correct religious behavior: Torah and

64. It should be noted that the motif of the fathers does not find expression in the teaching of this passage, and only forms part of the parable. It is likely that the parable, as a literary means of expression, enables the assimilation and application of this motif, even when the formal discussion of the section does not refer to the Patriarchs. In the preceding section in *Sifrei*, section 37, p. 71, we find a parable praising the Land of Israel while mentioning the motif of the father, even though this motif is not a necessary part of the content of the moral lesson. If we will: the Patriarchs’ link to the Land of Israel is repressed into the text’s sub-conscious and emerges only in the context of the parables.

commandments.

We have thus far seen how the principles of Torah and commandments have replaced the place earlier filled by the motif of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the Patriarchs in the biblical view, and have relegated this motif to the sidelines. This change is linked to other changes in rabbinic thought. The role of "merit" in the inheritance of the land has already been discussed. The implications of the concept of merit for the status of the Patriarchs will now be examined.

From the Covenant of the Patriarchs to the Merit of the Patriarchs

One of the biblical sources from which we learn of the biblical *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant is Lev. 26:42. Rabbinic commentaries on this verse reveal not only a lack of understanding of the biblical *theologoumenon*, but also the new conceptual context that the verse takes on, due to the changes in the conceptual world of the Sages. The following is the *Sifra*' discussion of this verse:

"Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob': Why were the Patriarchs listed in reverse order? Because if the deeds of Abraham are not [sufficient], then those of Isaac are, and if those of Isaac are not [sufficient], then those of Jacob are. Each and every one of them is worthy that the whole world be dependent on him. Perhaps this refers only to the Patriarchs, where are the Matriarchs mentioned? You will find the answer in the word '*et*', for it refers to the Matriarchs, as it is written, 'there was Abraham buried, and [*et*] Sarah his wife.' And how do we know that the covenant was made with the land? The text says, 'And I will remember the land.'"⁶⁵

Even at first glance, it is obvious that the commentary in *Sifra* is not interested in what seems to me to be the biblical focus of interest: the restoration of the violated covenant by calling to remembrance the patriarchal covenant, while mentioning the land's link to the covenant made with the Patriarchs. Evidence for this can be seen in the question as to the relationship of the Patriarchs to each other. As far as the promise of inheriting the land is concerned, it seems that the basic promise was made to Abraham. The other Patriarchs receive renewed confirmation of this

65. *Sifra*, *Behukkotai*, chapter 8, p. 112c.

promise, and they merit anew the blessing of Abraham.⁶⁶ As far as the inheritance of the land is concerned, it is thus handed down in a chain through the generations, assuming dependence on previous generations. The comment quoted here assumes different relationships between the generations. It bases this on the reversed chronological order of the Patriarchs, in order to emphasize the independent standing of the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs are not represented here as links in a chain of transmission, but as possessing autonomous status. This description demonstrates that it is not the blessing of inheriting the land, passed down from generation to generation, that is the focus of interest in this interpretation, but another aspect associated with the Patriarchs. This aspect is expressed in the word "worthy." "Worthy" refers to the spiritual virtue and merit of each of the Patriarchs. The verse under discussion is read: "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob" – and I will remember the merit of Jacob. The covenant with the Patriarchs turns into the merit of the Patriarchs in this interpretation. The passage quoted here shows that, as far as merit is concerned, each of the Patriarchs has his own store, which is not dependent on the chain of generations. The following sentence demonstrates another transformation which is derived from the reinterpretation of the verse in terms of merit: "Each and every one of them is worthy that the whole world be dependent on them." Merit does not only serve its possessor, but others too. The influence of merit on the entire world is described in this context. I will discuss below the cosmic dimensions that the status of the Patriarchs takes on in rabbinic literature. In this context, I shall merely point to the difference between the covenant with the Patriarchs, by virtue of which their descendants inherit the land, and the merit of the Patriarchs, on which the entire world depends. The change from covenant to merit expands the limits of those who derive benefit from the Patriarchs.

The change from covenant to merit also explains the next part of the passage quoted above. As long as we are discussing the covenant, there is no reason to pay attention to the Matriarchs. There is no covenant made with the Matriarchs in the Bible, and the covenant is restricted exclusively to the Patriarchs. However, from the moment we change the meaning of the covenant to that of merit, there is nothing to prevent us from widening the category of those who possess merit. From now on, not only the

66. See Gen. 26:3; 28:4; 28:13ff.

Patriarchs but also the Matriarchs possess merit.

The connection of the land to the Patriarchs is also examined in a new way. While the biblical meaning of the verse concerned the promise of the land, by virtue of the patriarchal covenant, it seems that in the present context, even the Land of Israel receives merit. Several interpretations can be suggested for the phrase "a covenant made with the land," but I do not wish to begin a detailed discussion of this phraseology in the present context. For the purposes of this discussion, I will limit myself to one possible interpretation, according to which the land itself contributes its value and its merit to the collection of merit that is the focus of interest of this passage. This should not be a surprising idea. The idea that the Land of Israel possesses merit is explicitly formulated elsewhere in rabbinic literature,⁶⁷ and is not essentially different from the view according to which the Torah, or any particular commandment, also possesses merit.⁶⁸

The commentary in *Leviticus Rabba* 36:5 is a reworking of the *Sifra*'s commentary. After the Midrash presents all the interpretations cited above, it adds:

"And why does he mention the merit⁶⁹ of the Patriarchs, and mention the merit of the land with them? Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: It is like the case of a king who had three sons and one of his handmaidens brought them up, and when the king asked about the welfare of his sons he used to say: Find out how the nurse fares. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, mentions the merit of the Patriarchs and mentions the merit of the land together with them, 'Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob etc... and I will remember the land.'"

We can already see from the way in which the question is formulated that the land possesses merit comparable to that of the Patriarchs. The relationship between the land and the Patriarchs does not involve the question of the inheritance of the land, but rather the question of the nature and quality of merit. The point of the parable quoted here is to emphasize the qualitative difference between the merit of the land and that of the Patriarchs. The relationship between them is similar to the difference in status between the sons and the handmaiden.⁷⁰ The handmaiden should not

67. See Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashana*, 16b.

68. See *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:4.

69. Missing in Manuscript L, but appears in the other manuscripts.

70. On the metaphor of the land as a handmaiden, see also the parable told by Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Simon in *Bereshit Rabba*, 2:2.

be undervalued; she is raising the king's children. Her role is limited to caring for the king's children, however, and in the final analysis she is only a handmaiden. If, according to the biblical *theologoumenon*, the land is of major importance and the gift of the land is a great honor, then according to the rabbinic description, merit is of primary importance, and the land's merit is secondary to that of the Patriarchs.

The concept of the merit of the Patriarchs is the key to understanding the interpretation of *Sifrei Devarim* on the formulation in Deuteronomy of God's oath to the Patriarchs:

"'Which God swore to your fathers.' What is the meaning of 'to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob?' If it refers to oaths to the Patriarchs, it is already written, 'according to the oaths thou didst address to the tribes. Selah.' What is the meaning of 'to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob?' Abraham was worthy by himself, Isaac was worthy by himself, Jacob was worthy by himself. It may be compared to a king who gave his servant a field as a gift. He gave him nothing but the field itself. The servant improved it, and said, What do I have, he gave me nothing but the field itself. He went and planted a vineyard, and said, What do I have, he gave me nothing but the field itself. Thus when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the land to our Father Abraham, he gave him nothing but the land itself, as it is written, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for unto thee will I give it.' Abraham arose and improved it, as it is written, 'And Abraham planted a tamarisk-tree in Beersheba.' Isaac arose and improved it, as it is written, 'And Isaac sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold.' Jacob arose and improved it, as it is written, 'And he bought the parcel of ground.'"⁷¹

As with the interpretation in *Sifra*, here too the mention of the Patriarchs' names is understood as evidence of their merit. The interpretative technique used here cannot have recourse to the order of the names, since the conventional order is followed in this case, so it has to fall back on the redundancy of the word "your fathers," together with the repetition of each Patriarch's name. The meaning which emerges from the interpretation here is more radical than that apparent in the *Sifra* commentary. In the latter, we read that God remembers the merit of the Patriarchs only after a sin. However, when the *Sifrei* speaks of the merit of the Patriarchs in the context of God's oath to the Patriarchs concerning the giving of the land, it appears that the first oath concerning the land is connected to the merit of the Patriarchs. From this it follows that this is not an oath sworn purely out of

71. *Sifrei Devarim*, section 8, p. 16.

God's love, but is a result of the merit of the Patriarchs. This is the commentary's message.

The parable that follows this commentary expresses this message, from a slightly different angle. The parable is cast in the well-known form of a king who gives a present to his servants, while the story line concerns what the servants do with the gifts they have received.⁷² In this parable, the servants make improvements to the gift they receive from the king. Thus, the Patriarchs improve the Land of Israel by their actions. When we receive the Land of Israel, we do not merely receive the land as God gave it to us, but as it has been improved by the Patriarchs. Both the commentary and the parable emphasize human action. The commentary emphasizes human action as merit, by whose virtue they become worthy of a gift. The parable stresses human action as improving upon divine action. The commentary deals with the religious value of the Patriarchs' actions; the parable describes the physical action of improving the Land of Israel. The factor common to both the commentary and the parable is the emphasis laid on the position of human action, as distinct from divine gift.

The emphasis on the perfect religious act posits an entirely different relationship between Israel and the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs are no longer the beloved heirs of the land, by whose sole virtue we can inherit. Instead, the Patriarchs are now the ideal representatives of a lifestyle in which we all participate. The key to inheriting the land is in the Torah and commandments, and the Jewish people are potential participants in this process. In this context, I would suggest that the status of the Patriarchs should be regarded as only quantitatively different from that of every Jew. They do not constitute a special category and are not portrayed as having a special relationship to God by virtue of which they inherit the land. Instead, we should regard the Patriarchs as those who have most successfully realized the ideals shared by all Israel. The significance of their actions is measured in terms of merit which benefits all Israel throughout time. However, this type of merit can be acquired by anyone who performs good deeds. It is difficult to document this understanding, but a hint of it⁷³ appears in the

72. See for instance *Seder Eliahu Zuta*, 2, p. 171.

73. I see the words of the *Tanhuma* only as giving support for this, since the *Tanhuma* is a reworking of the *Mekhilta*, in combination with the adding of the first sentence of the quotation. This sentence talks of the inheritance of the land, while the commentary from the *Mekhilta* speaks of the inheritance of this world and the next.

juxtaposition of the motifs in *Tanhuma, Beshallah*, 10:

“‘Then he sang – and they believed in God’: therefore they merited the inheritance of the land.

You find that as a reward for his faith in God, our Father Abraham inherited this world and the next, as it is written, ‘And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness,’ and also ‘And the people believed’ etc.”

The same religious processes permit Abraham to inherit this world and the next, and Israel to inherit the land. We have here, first and foremost, evidence of a world view according to which religious life – the Torah and its commandments – forms the principle that organizes reality and enables the inheritance of the land. However, it seems that another central principle in rabbinic thought is expressed in this conceptual process. I refer to the central position of Israel (the Jewish people) in rabbinic thought, as Kadushin has phrased it: Israel as a value concept in rabbinic culture.⁷⁴ The people of Israel are not merely appendages to God’s love of the Patriarchs,⁷⁵ but rather the reverse. In the final analysis, the concept of the Patriarchs is subordinate to the value concept of Israel and serves it. The primary link is not with the Patriarchs, but with the People of Israel. The Patriarchs, having fulfilled the ideals of Torah and the commandments, serve as an example of the ideal “Israel,” and thus place their merit at the disposal of “Israel” throughout history.

The Patriarchs, the Land of Israel and the World to Come

The inheritance of the land by the Patriarchs is expressed in the biblical story by the accounts of patriarchal burials. Abraham purchases the Cave of Machpela in order to bury Sarah there, and the Patriarchs carefully observe the tradition of burial in this tomb. The tomb constitutes solid evidence of the inheritance of the land. It seems to me that the importance of burial in the Machpela Cave should be understood against the background of the promise of the land to the Patriarchs. Burial in the patriarchal tomb expresses the realization of the promise of inheriting the land. This seems to be the case in the Bible. However, the Sages did not understand the significance of burial in the Land of Israel in this way. From the

74. On Torah and Israel as value concepts, see Holz 1979, 35ff.

75. See Deut. 6:7ff; 9:4ff; 10:14ff.

moment that the Patriarchs' special link to the Land of Israel is no longer recognized, it is necessary to explain the great care taken over burial in the land. The answer given by the Sages lies outside the accepted boundaries of the world of biblical thought.

"Why do all the Patriarchs demand and desire burial in the Land of Israel? Rabbi Eleazar said: There is a reason for it. Rabbi Chanina said, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: What is the reason for it? 'I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.'"⁷⁶

The point is made even more clearly in another version:

"Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: A land whose dead live first, in the days of the Messiah. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish in the name of Bar Kappara brought proof from the verse 'Who gives soul to the people who live on it [the land].'"⁷⁷

The very proposal of the problem: Why do all the Patriarchs demand and desire burial in the Land of Israel?, shows the dissociation from the biblical conceptual context. Enthusiasm for burial in the Land of Israel needs explanation, which is provided from the concepts of rabbinic culture. The Patriarchs' enthusiasm for burial in the Land of Israel is linked to their expectations of resurrection. The dead of the Land of Israel are those who will come to life in the future, or at least those who will come to life first of all. This answer moves the meaning of the link with the Land of Israel from the present physical context to the eschatological context of the world to come.⁷⁸ The transference of the significance of the Land of Israel to the eschatological context emerges from several sources in rabbinic literature.⁷⁹ In this context, the well-known Mishna in *Sanhedrin* 10:1 may be cited: "All Israel have a share in the world to come, as it is said: 'Thy people shall also all be righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever.'" "The land" is interpreted as referring to the next world. Thus the Land of Israel symbolizes the world to come.⁸⁰ The significance of the inheritance of the land and burial there is transferred from historical reality to eschatological reality.

76. *Bereshit Rabba*, end of section 96, p. 1198.

77. Version of manuscript *vav*, Theodor-Albeck ed. p. 1239.

78. The next world in its usual meaning in rabbinic language: the resurrection of the dead. See Finkelstein 1951, Appendix 1: The Mishna "All Israel have a share in the world to come etc.," p. 212ff.

79. See also Weinfeld 1984, 135.

80. See also *Ketubot* 111a, and *Sifrei Devarim*, section 333, p. 383.

The Cosmic Significance of the Patriarchs

One of the important transformations in rabbinic thought is the transposition of central themes to the cosmic plane. The Torah, for instance, attains cosmic significance as the blueprint according to which the world was created.⁸¹ Even the existence of the Jewish people is justified not just from a nationalistic viewpoint, but from a cosmic perspective.⁸² In the context of this general phenomenon, it is interesting to examine the position of the Patriarchs in rabbinic sources. In biblical literature, one of the most important conceptual contexts in which the Patriarchs are set is the view of the Patriarchs as makers of covenants, by whose virtue Israel inherits the land.⁸³ The decline of this perspective of evaluation of the Patriarchs has been the subject of our discussion. I would now like to raise the possibility that the other side of this decline is the rise in the Patriarchs' cosmic standing. The Patriarchs are seen not only as the Patriarchs of Israel, who bequeath the Land of Israel to the Jewish people; their significance now concerns the entire world. Not only the Land of Israel, but heaven and earth are now the patrimony of the Patriarchs. Moreover, it has already been noted above that the Land of Israel is seen as representing the world to come. If the land of Israel represents the world to come, the bequeathers of the land are seen as the bequeathers of the world to come. We thus arrive at the position that both this world and the next are the patrimony of the Patriarchs.

The cosmic implications of the Patriarchs' status have already been mentioned in our discussion of the merit of the Patriarchs. As seen above in the passage from the *Sifra*, "Each and every one of them is worthy, that the whole world be dependent on them." Once the power and the accumulated merit of the Patriarchs is stressed, it is natural that their power is not restricted to the national sphere, but is widened to encompass the whole world. If there is still some doubt as to the significance of the word "world" here, the following passages will assuage it. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the Patriarchs are listed among the six things created before the creation of the world, according to *Bereshit Rabba* 1:4. It is no exaggeration to interpret this dictum as embodying the significance that the

81. *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:1, and other sources.

82. See *Vayikra Rabba*, 36:4, and other sources.

83. Apart from the sources already discussed above, see also 2 Chr. 20:7.

Patriarchs give to the entire universe. Their precedence over Creation is intended to emphasize their position in relation to the entire universe, and their power which benefits the world. In addition to this inclusive view of the Patriarchs as a group, in relation to the creation of the world, we find that each Patriarch is dealt with specifically, and each Patriarch's role in relation to the entire universe is articulated in rabbinic sources.

"'When they were created' – *behibbaram*. R. Joshua b. Karhah said: *Behibbaram* is identical in lettering with *beabraham*: i.e. for the sake of Abraham, whom He was one day to raise up. R. 'Azariah quoted on this statement of R. Joshua b. Karhah the verse: 'Thou art the Lord, even Thou alone; Thou hast made heaven' (continuing the whole passage) (Neh. ix, 6); and what was all this toil for? Because, 'Thou art the Lord God, who didst choose Abram,' etc. (*ib.* 7). R. Judan said: It is not written 'On the high mountains are the wild goats,' but, 'The high mountains are for the wild goats' (Ps CIV, 18): thus for whose sake were the high mountains created? For the sake of the wild goats. Now the hind is weak and afraid of wild beasts; when therefore she wishes to drink, the Holy One, blessed be He, throws her into a state of panic and she beats with her horns [on the rocks]; the wild beast hears it and flees. 'The rocks are refuge for the conies' (*ib.*): the coney takes shelter under the crag from the flying bird, lest it devour it. Then if the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world thus for the sake of unclean things, how much more for the sake of Abraham!"⁸⁴

The commentary on the verse from Nehemiah exemplifies the conceptual change that has taken place in this period. The original verse emphasizes the choosing of Abraham in the context of what it relates afterwards – the giving of the land to his descendants. The rabbinic commentary emphasizes Abraham's status in the context of what it has already related – a description of the creation.

The treatment of the cosmic status of Jacob is no less picturesque:

"Another explanation: 'And I will remember my covenant with Jacob.' Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Reuben, The Holy One, blessed be He, said to His world: I will tell you who created you, I will tell you who made you – Jacob created you, Jacob made you, as it is written: 'Your creator Jacob, your maker Israel.' Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi, The animals were only created because of the merit of Jacob, as it is written: 'Behold the beasts which I have made with you.' Rabbi Yehoshua ben Nehemiah said in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Isaac, The heaven and the earth were only created because of the merit of Jacob, why is this? 'And he

84. *Bereshit Rabba*, 12:9.

made witness in Jacob' and there is no witness except heaven and earth, as it is written, 'I call to witness against you this day the heavens and the earth.'"

After the midrashic discussion continues with the possibilities that the heavens and earth were made because of the merit of Israel or the merit of Moses, it returns to the status of Jacob:

"Rabbi Abahu said: Everything was created because of the merit of Jacob, as it is written: 'Jacob's portion is not as these, for he is the creator of all.' Jacob is the creator of all."⁸⁵

If no commentary relating to the cosmic role of Isaac could be found, it might not be surprising, since in the Bible too the figures of Abraham and Jacob are more dominant than that of Isaac. Nevertheless, a dictum on the cosmic status of Isaac also appears in the course of midrashic literature:

"'These are the generations of Isaac': this is as the verse says, 'The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; and he that begetteth a wise child will have joy of him.' Of whom did Solomon say this? Of Isaac. When Isaac was born everything rejoiced: the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, and stars and constellations. And why did they rejoice? Because if Isaac had not been created, the world could not have subsisted. As it is written: 'If not for my covenant day and night, the laws of heaven and earth I would not have made' and 'my covenant' means Isaac, as it is written: 'And I will establish My covenant with Isaac.'"⁸⁶

The method of proof used in the last-quoted comment is worthy of note, since it exemplifies the conceptual changes described in this article. The verses used for proof employ the term "covenant," but the concept is transposed from the specific national context of the covenant of Abraham which is confirmed with Isaac, to one that bears cosmic significance. From now on, the existence of the covenant is the existence of the heavens and earth by virtue of Isaac.

In this context, it is worth examining several sources that emphasize not only the acquisition of the land, in relation to Abraham, but also the acquisition of the heavens and the earth. Sometimes Abraham possesses the heavens and the earth,⁸⁷ and sometimes he grants possession of them to God.⁸⁸ Here we find an expansion of the motif of inheritance, from this

85. *Vayikra Rabba*, 36:4; the final phrase according to Manuscript vav.

86. *Tanhuma, Toledot*, 2.

87. See *Tanhuma, Aharei Mot*, 9.

88. See *Sifrei Devarim*, section 313, p. 355: Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 4b; *Bamidbar*

world to the next. We have already mentioned the passage from the *Mekhilta*, according to which Abraham inherited this world and the next. I would like to suggest that all this tendency to expansion fills the gap created by the decline of the biblical *theologoumenon*, the subject of this article. Inheritance of the land is replaced by a broader inheritance, according to rabbinic concepts. It may be summarized by the following quote: "Our Father Abraham who acquired by righteousness the heavens and the earth and this world and the next world."⁸⁹

To conclude this section of the article, I would like to examine the well-known gemara in *Shabbat* 118a-b, on the virtue of the enjoyment of the Sabbath. After the dictum of Bar Kappara, according to which whoever has three meals on the Sabbath will be saved from the birth pangs of the Messiah, the judgment of Gehinnom and the war of Gog and Magog, the saying of Rabbi Yose is presented:

"Whoever enjoys the Sabbath will be given a heritage without limitations, as it is written: 'Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord, and I will make thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and I will feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father'; not like Abraham, of whom it is written, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it etc.,' and not like Isaac, of whom it is written, 'For unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these lands,' but like Jacob, of whom it is written, 'And thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south.'"

The heritage associated with the Patriarchs is no longer the physical inheritance of the Land of Israel. The boundaries of the Land of Israel are seen as a limitation. The heritage of Jacob is not the land but that which transcends the limitations of place. The combination of this tradition with the earlier eschatological tradition reinforces the understanding according to which "a heritage without limitations" is not a heritage of this world at all. One earns this heritage by observing a commandment as fully as possible – by delighting in the Sabbath. The commandment enables one to merit a heritage that transcends earthly limitations – the promised heritage of the Patriarchs. It is not Jacob who bequeaths this inheritance; he is merely the first to have merited it. Everyone who delights in the Sabbath merits this heritage without limitations by virtue of observing the commandment, not by virtue of Jacob. Thus we see how this simple dictum, in

Rabba, 12:11; in *Tanhuma, Behar*, 1 these two exegetical traditions are merged.

89. *Otiyot de Rabbi Akiva*, Recension I, ed. S. Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot*, II, 370.

fact, draws together a number of conceptual threads we discussed above.

Conclusion

At this point of our discussion, we must return to the question with which we opened our inquiry. From the viewpoint of rabbinic tradition, what is the significance of the promise to the Patriarchs, when this promise is examined outside the confines of the Jewish people? As I suggested in the Introduction, and as this article has shown, rabbinic literature was not interested in emphasizing the universal aspect of the status of the Patriarchs, or the promise to the Patriarchs. Rabbinic literature is characterized by a tendency to turn inwards. This introspective tendency is reflected in a detachment from history and an emphasis on the cosmic status of Israel. It is reflected beyond this, however, in the special emphases of rabbinic literature. This literature is principally interested in Israel and its status, and in the Torah by which Israel must live. However, the introspective tendency and the attribution of cosmic status open up a channel for contact between the Patriarchs and the entire universe. This opening is not the result of the logic of the promise, but rather a result of the unique logic of rabbinic literature. From the tortuous workings of the rabbinic mind emerges the understanding that the Patriarchs maintain the entire world, and that their blessing benefits the whole universe. The Patriarchs' role in this context is very close to the general rabbinic view of the role of the righteous man, and is not dependent on the specific promises made to the Patriarchs. This does not detract from the conceptual possibility that is opened up here. Even if, according to the Sages, the promise to and covenant with the Patriarchs is not of central importance, and they have no other heritage but Israel, it seems that the Patriarchs' merit benefits the entire world. The Patriarchs are considered in the light of their status and their spiritual being. The central subject here is not God's actions towards them, expressed in the promises He gives them, but their own actions, which give them spiritual status. In this context, we may turn to the rabbinic texts with the question of the nature of mankind's connection to the Patriarchs' blessing. Is this blessing, which derives from their merit and status, restricted exclusively to Israel?

It seems to me that at this point, we must distinguish between the deep logic of the rabbinic sources and what is explicitly expressed in the litera-

ture. The sources that describe the status of the Patriarchs emphasize their cosmic role. At first glance, a cosmic role seems to include a universal role, since mankind forms part of the universe. In this sense, we may suppose that the Patriarchs' blessing benefits the entire universe and all mankind. However, we must also admit that generally speaking, rabbinic cosmic awareness does not include a universalistic element. Such an element is not explicitly derived from the cosmic arguments, nor is it expressed in them. The reason for this appears to lie in the introverted nature of rabbinic thought. If the cosmic emphasis is an outcome of this introverted trend, it is hard to suppose that universalistic arguments will be implied by these cosmic arguments. However, what was explicitly expressed in rabbinic thought at the time it was formulated is not necessarily a full distillation of its raw conceptual potential and of its internal theses. Whatever was not explicitly formulated, due to the context and the time, remains contained within the premises of rabbinic thought. As soon as we claim cosmic status for the Patriarchs, the concept of the Patriarchs is released from its national, genealogical context, and is opened up to a broader spiritual meaning. We do not counter the deep logic of rabbinic thought if we recognize the universalistic dimension as part of the cosmic dimension. In this light, the status of the Patriarchs, their blessing and their merit benefit the whole world.