

Affinity

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The Idolatrous Nexus Between God and Sovereignty

In his discussion of religion and sovereignty in various contexts, Robert Yelle (2019) stresses the ambivalent relationship between the modern state and transcendence. Despite Max Weber's argument that modernity disenchanting the world of its gods and demons, modernity is actually obsessed with transcendence, managing it, controlling it, and affirming it in certain forms while excluding it in others. Moreover, in contrast to various scholars, from Carl Schmitt through Georges Bataille to Rudolf Otto, which highlighted the connection between the sacred and the sovereign during times of political and social instability, Yelle argues that the sacred, as it manifested by religious institutions, not only reinforces the social order, but also encompasses individual and collective acts of protest, dissent against, attack upon, or efforts to dissolve and remake it. This utilization was examined by William Cavanaugh (2024) as the conversion of the divine into "Gods of our own making" – means the sovereign state. Therefore, the sovereign state embodies the transfer of the holy from the divine God to the nation-state and the national collective. This phenomenon also applies to the transformation of collective consciousness into a national 'we', an idolatrous expression of collective narcissism, leading to racism and a readiness to commit acts of violence on behalf of the national collective. In the Jewish-Zionist context, this transformation was described by Yaacov Yadgar (2024) as supersessionism – a political theology of replacement, where Zionism in general, and the State of Israel in particular, are understood to be assuming the role and position of historical, traditional Judaism. In this process, the transcendent God is transformed into an immanently political one. It does not imply the absence of God, but rather the replacement of God with an alternative ultimate power: the sovereign state. Consequently, the state is divine in nature, embodying unlimited power. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Hebrew term sovereign (*Ribon*) was transformed from a divine meaning (*Ribon Ha'Olam*) to a national collective one only by Zionists in the 1920s (Kaminer, 2019).

Affinity – or, an alternative relation with the land

In contrast to the common discourse, seeking a 'secular' solution to inter-religious tensions, thereby linking violence with fundamentalist religion,¹ I wish to explore an alternative to current violence within tradition itself. In other words, I argue that the transcendent can help cultivate a shared appreciation for the land and its significant sacred sites, rather than the sectarian divisions created by the zero-sum game of colonialism and nationalism. Moreover, I argue that this alternative not only holds the potential to promote peace in the Middle East, but also offers a challenge to, and an alternative vision beyond, the European Westphalian political order of sovereignty. This

¹ See: Cavanaugh, 2009.

political order, Mahmood Mamdani (2020) argues, goes hand in hand with colonial policies. Accordingly, this alternative points toward what Mignolo (2013) calls a decolonization not only of Israel/Palestine in particular, but also of the modern nation-state form more broadly.

Given the evident power dynamics, I contend that by framing the presence on the land as *affinity*, in contrast to sovereignty, we might move forward a bit in forming an alternative political framework of shared connection to the Holy Land. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, affinity has several meanings, including:

Alliance or association between people; society, companionship. Similarity of characteristics or nature; resemblance; common ground. The state of being closely connected or mutually dependent. The state or fact of being near to something; closeness; proximity.²

The spectrum of senses that the concept of affinity offers presents a starkly contrasting political framing of the land. Unlike the zero-sum game proposed by sovereign common sense, the concept of affinity provides a political horizon of moral, shared, and non-competitive connections to the same piece of land, which includes the sharing of space and rituals in sacred sites, ultimately leading to political collaboration. Shifting the focus from immediate earthly conflicts to the divine allows us to raise our gaze toward a shared goal, qualifying a higher moral position. Therefore, *affinity* offers transformation from ownership to belonging, thus not eliminating other ties to the same land. This suggestion, I argue, has a historical and contemporary plausibility, leading to an actual alternative political discourse.

To develop this alternative, I return to Palestinian/Eretz-Yisraeli Jewish and Muslim cultures and their shared affinity to the land. A good starting point can be Maimonides' articulation of the Temple Mount's sanctity. According to Maimonides, the celebrated 12th-century Iberian-Jewish sage, the mountain's eternal sanctity resides in the divine presence and not in human rulings, as these can change due to geopolitical transformations:

[...] the original consecration sanctified the Temple and Jerusalem for eternity, while in regard to the consecration of the remainder of *Eretz Yisrael* [... it] did not sanctify it for eternity. [That is] because the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem stems from the *Shekhina* [in Hebrew: the divine presence of God], and the *Shekhina* can never be nullified [...] In contrast, the [original] obligation [...] on the Land stemmed from the fact that it was conquered by the [Jewish people, as a] community. Therefore, when the land was taken from their hands [by the Babylonians,] their [original] conquest was nullified. Thus,

² https://www.oed.com/dictionary/affinity_n?tab=meaning_and_use#9353525 (Accessed: 22.5.2025).

according to Torah law, the land was freed from the obligations [...] because it was no longer *Eretz Yisrael*. (*Mishneh Torah*, The Chosen Temple, 6, 16)

This framing is highly significant in early modern Jewish culture. As Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2022) has articulated, the sages who gathered around Rabbi Isaac Ashkenazi Luria (*Ha'ari*) in 16th century Safed developed a unique approach to Jewish migration to and presence in Eretz-Yisrael. According to this approach, based on the post-Biblical texts of the *Mishna* and the *Zohar*, Jewish migration to Eretz-Yisrael seeks to join the *Shekhina* in its exile and to redeem it within the concrete political reality.³ A vivid illustration of this attitude is Rabbi Solomon Alkabetz's account of the divine epiphany he, Rabbi Joseph Karo, and other counterparts experienced during *Shavuot* eve in 1533. According to Elkabetz, while learning *Mishna*, the *Shekhina* began speaking to them, mourning for its exilic state, and urging them to immigrate to Eretz-Yisrael, to enter the king's palace, and to be united with the *Shekhina* (Idel, 2021).

A similar perspective can be found among Sephardi Eretz-Yisraeli sages from the 17th to 19th century, who assert that the advantage of living in Eretz-Yisrael lies in the close relationship with the *Shekhina*. This intimacy entails heightened divine scrutiny and accountability, thereby demanding higher moral standards. For example, the 19th century Jerusalemite Rabbi Isaac Farhi wrote:

The intention of the holier migrant to Eretz-Yisrael should be to have the reverence of the lord of the earth upon him. As it is not the same for one to defy the king's orders outside of his palace and for one to defy his orders within the palace and in front of the king. As one who comes to gather at the king's house must summon fear and reverence, as he ought to realize that he was privileged to be one of the king's closest servants, who meet the king regularly. Therefore, he must be afraid not to fail in observing the king's commandments (Farhi, 1969: 91).

This approach emphasizes identification with the *Shekhina* in its state of exile, following the destruction of the Temple, as the basis for Jewish presence in Eretz-Yisrael. Furthermore, as argued by Zvi Zohar (1998), this approach was neither intended to pre-empt the coming of the Messiah nor to serve as a precursor to future historical events.

Since Jewish and Muslim approaches to the land emerged within the same intellectual and cultural atmosphere, it is not surprising that Muslim scholars envisioned Palestine in ways closely resembling those of their Jewish counterparts. The Syrian scholar Shamsuddin al-Kilani (2001: 601) argues that for the Muslim Sufi scholars, Jerusalem was "the causeway connecting them to heaven" and a venue for

³ About the appropriation of the concept of *Aliyah* in Zionist discourse, see: Harari, 2019.

fulfilling their "aim of revelation and connection through sublimation". For example, in his *Kitāb Mu jam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries), the 13th century scholar Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī illustrated Jerusalem's central place in Muslim consciousness, writing that "the word Muqaddas [...] means 'purified' [...] the meaning of 'glorify Your Holy Name' is that we purify ourselves for You [...] Hence comes the name Bayt al-Maqdis, that is, the purified home, through which people purify themselves of their sins" (Quoted in: al-Kilani, 2001: 602).

A similar sensibility appears in the 17th century Gazan scholar Ṣāliḥ al-Tamartāshī's book, *Al-Khabar al-Tāmm fī Dhikr al-Arḍ al-Muqaddasa wa-Ḥudūdihā, wa-Dhikr Arḍ Filasṭīn wa-Ḥudūdihā wa-Arāḍī al-Shām* (The Complete Account of the Holy Land and Its Borders, the Land of Palestine and Its Borders, and the Lands of al-Shām). There, al-Tamartāshī describes Palestine as the most elevated place on earth and as the very essence of the greatness of al-Shām, rendering it especially worthy of habitation (Sadan, 1979).⁴

A comparable vision is articulated by the 17th century Nablusi scholar Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb, who opens his *Durr al-Niẓām fī Maḥāsin al-Shām* (A String of Pearls on the Beauties of al-Shām) by portraying al-Shām, here referring specifically to Palestine, as a divine adornment on earth, a sacred jewel and an earthly throne of the divine presence, aligned with the heavenly throne. He further emphasizes its spiritual potency by noting that each night God reveals himself there and grants forgiveness to those Muslims who have repented. With regard to Jerusalem, Ibn Ḥabīb depicts the city's inhabitants as neighbours of the divine. The city, he explains, is wholly sacred, sanctified by the prayers of prophets and sages, leaving no space for evil within it. Each night, he adds, seventy thousand angels descend from heaven to fill the city's skies with prayer and praise (Sadan, 1979).⁵

These Jewish and Muslim scholars articulate an alternative attitude toward the land, one grounded in affinity and in a sense of connection with the divine, whether it is in exile, as in the Jewish case, or in a non-exilic (but not sovereign either), as in the Muslim case. For both the Ari and Farhi, Jewish migration to and presence in Eretz-Yisrael does not aim to benefit the Jews as a community or as a national collective. In contrast to the national political agenda, it is not the nation that stands at the centre of these transformations. rather, it is a transcendent entity that the collective, or more accurately, groups from it, serve. For al-Ḥamawī and Ibn Ḥabīb, residence in Palestine

⁴ Interestingly, this text, like many other medieval and early modern Arabic works, has not been published in a critical scholarly edition in English. Its first publication appeared instead in Hebrew translation, in Sadan's article. See: Foster, 2017: 127. See also Foster's discussion of al-Tamartāshī as the earliest Arabic source to refer to Palestine explicitly using the term 'Palestine'. Foster, 2017: 87-140.

⁵ Also see Ghaleb Anabseh's (2021) discussion on this text.

derives its significance from its connection to the heavens rather than from any claim to sovereignty. Indeed, 20th century critics of Zionism continued these approaches in their criticism over Zionist political agenda and reliance on colonial powers in the Middle East (Maor, 2007; Raz-Krakotzkin, 2012; Tzoreff, 2023). For some contemporary critics, it serves as an alternative framework for thinking within the current reality of the sovereign state (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2017).

This attitude can also be traced in early statements of the Palestinian national movement. As Ussama Makdisi (2019, 172-173) argues, the movement's initial response to British colonialism and to the emergence of Zionist sectarian claims was grounded in the idea that Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike should receive recognition for their heritage and their attachment to the land, an approach that closely aligns with the notion of affinity rather than exclusive sovereignty. This vision was shaped by the ecumenical spirit of the Nahda, which celebrated communal coexistence and shared cultural horizons.

Moreover, in his speech at the 1939 St James's Palace Conference, the Palestinian (Christian!) representative George Antonius declared that an Arab state in Palestine would:

Enable the Jews to have a national home in the spiritual and cultural sense, in which Jewish values could flourish and the Jewish genius have the freest play to seek inspiration in the land of its ancient connexion. It would secure Great Britain's interests on a firm basis of consent. And it would restore Palestine to its proper place, as a symbol of peace in the hearts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam" (Makdisi, 2019: 186).

One can therefore see that the paradigm of affinity, whether grounded in sacredness and affiliation with the divine, as articulated by medieval and early modern Jewish and Muslim scholars, or in an earthlier notion of shared attachment, does not constitute a distant or purely utopian vision. Rather, it is rooted in concrete historical precedents. At the same time, current political conditions demand the development of a counter-hegemonic political agency if such an agenda is to be realized. This development, I argue, can be a starting point for an alternative evaluation of Jewish and Palestinian shared existence in the holy land.

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