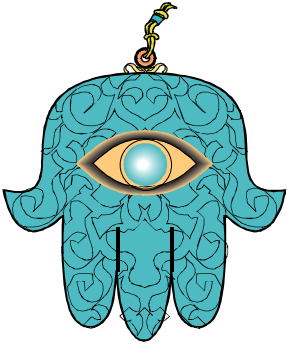
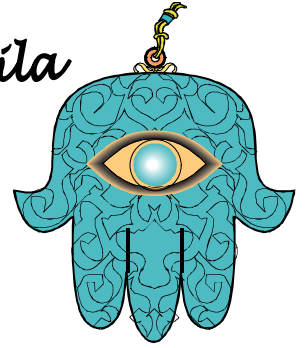


# Spiritual Thought for the Week

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## “Holy Land and Homeland” *Parashat Lech-Lecha (Genesis 12:1-17:27)*

Contrary to popular belief, the first Zionist was not Theodor Herzl, and the first Zionist Congress was not in Basel in 1897. The first Zionist was Avraham Avinu, and he convened the first Zionist Congress in Eretz Yisrael, approximately 3,500 years ago. With God’s command of “**Lech Lecha**” (**Go Forth**), Abraham not only changed his life and that of his family, but he also charted out the destiny of the Jewish people forever.

For over 3,000 years, Israel has held a dual symbolism to every Jew: **Holy Land and Homeland.**

As a “Homeland,” Israel has served as the one place that all Jews can call home. During the Biblical period, Israel was the center of economic, political and spiritual vitality for the Jews, until the destruction of the Temple – and the state – by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. After 70 years of exile, the Temple was rebuilt, and Jewish sovereignty in Israel was re-established. We lost the land again in 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and exiled us from the land. For 1900 years, Jews longed to return to their homeland. We expressed this longing in prayers, poems, psalms and rituals. We ended every Seder with “Next Year in Jerusalem,” and at every wedding we vowed never to forget Jerusalem.

In 1948, after almost two millennium of waiting, and following the leadership of the modern-day Abraham – Theodor Herzl – and his vision of political Zionism, we finally heard a new Declaration of Independence, as David Ben-Gurion pronounced the historic words “We hereby declare the State of Israel.” All of this is about “homeland.”

But Israel is much more than a “homeland.” It is a “Holy Land.” It is the abode of the spirit, where every single one of us – Israeli citizens or not – can nourish our souls with the special air and spirit of the land. It is the land of Torah, of culture, of history, of arts and sciences, and of Hebrew literature. It is the land of Shalom – peace, and of Ha-Tikvah – hope. It is the place where all Jews – those who live there and those who don’t – can find inspiration, strength and pride in being Jewish.

Thank you, Abraham. Your journey – both physical and spiritual – is still ours today.