

Boundaries of the Land of Israel in Tanach and Talmud

The *sedra Masei* delineates a set of boundaries for the nation of Israel. What we will do in this series of *divrei torah* is describe the evolution of these boundaries through time and their halachic implications.

Boundaries as promised to Abraham

We begin with the so-called covenant of *bein ha'btolim*, a covenant between God and Abram (before his name was changed to Abraham), in Genesis 15:18-21: “*In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates; The Kenites, and the Kenazites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaim, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.*” Moreover, Genesis 13:7 stipulates that “*I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land **to inherit it,**” and Genesis 13:15 says “*For all the land which you see, I will give to you and your children **forever.**” Thus we interpret this as a promise of an inheritance forever. Nachmanides points out that this promised land is precisely defined, including listing the ten nations there, and much larger than the boundaries specified in *Masei* that Joshua was commanded to conquer.**

These boundaries are depicted by Figure 1, taken from Rabbi Menachem Leibtag’s website:



Figure 1-Boundaries based on Genesis 15

But subsequently, at the covenant God made with Abraham at his *brit milah*, He said (Genesis 17:8) “*And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.*”

These boundaries are depicted by Figure 2 as the area in pink, a map from Rabbi Menachem Leibtag’s website (which also has superimposed some notes about the present-day Israel authority over the region):



Figure 2- Boundaries based on Genesis 17

Boundaries as commanded to Moses

The book of Numbers delineates the boundaries of the land to be inhabited by the Israelites. It first gives the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe, a portion of what is today Jordan. Numbers 34:15 summarizes this: *The two tribes and the half tribe have received their inheritance on this side of the Jordan near Jericho eastward, toward the sunrise.* Earlier (Numbers 34:13) we find a summary statement *And Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, This is the land which you shall **inherit** by lot, which the Lord commanded to give to the nine tribes, and to the half tribe.* The language is consistent with that to Abraham, namely that the land of Canaan is the inheritance of the Israelites, as seen in Numbers 34:2: *Command the people of Israel, and say to them, When you come into the land of Canaan; this is the land that shall fall to you for an **inheritance**, the land of Canaan with its borders.*

What are the details? Numbers 34: 3-12 (Soncino translation) tells us:

Then the Negev quarter shall be from the wilderness of Zin along by the border of Edom, and your south border shall be the end of the Sea of Salt on the east; And your border shall turn from the Negev to Maale-Akrabbim, and pass on to Zin; and its limits shall be from the south to Kadesh-Barnea, and shall go on to Hazar-Addar, and pass on to Azmon; And the border shall turn from Azmon to the river of Egypt and the limits shall be at the sea. And as for the western border, you shall have the Great Sea for a border; this shall be your west border. And this shall be your north border; from the Great Sea you mark your line to Mount Hor; From Mount Hor you shall mark your line to the entrance of Hamath; and the limits of the border shall be to Zedad; And the border shall go on to Ziphron, and its limits shall be at Hazar-Enan; this shall be your north border. And you shall point out your east border from Hazar-Enan to Shepham; And the border shall go down from Shepham to Riblah, on the east side of Ain; and the border

shall descend, and shall reach the side of the sea of Kinnereth eastward; And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limits shall be at the Sea of Salt; this shall be your land with its borders around. Figure 3 presents this boundary as outlined in red.

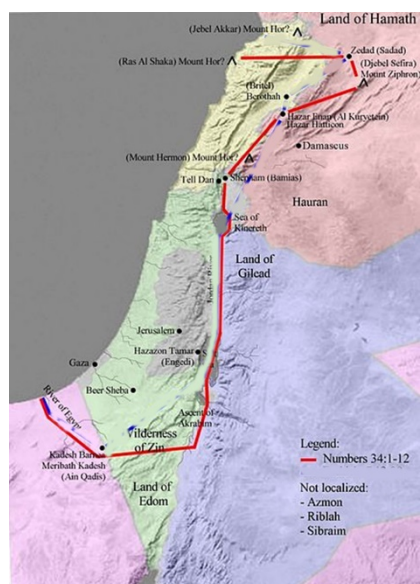


Figure 3-Boundaries based on Numbers 34

Notice that at the top of the map are three mountains each identified as possibly being Mount Hor, namely Jebel Akkar, Ras Al Shaka, and Mount Hermon. The cartographer chose Ras Al Shaka as to point to which to draw a straight line to Zedad to depict the northern border. Other scholars interpret the northern border to be the Litani River between Sidon and Beirut in Lebanon. In his *chumash* Hertz identifies Mount Hor as the Nur or Amanus Mountains. In the Second Temple period, the rabbis, seeking to establish with greater precision the geographical definition of the Promised Land (for reasons which we will explain in the next installment of this *dvar torah*), began to construe Mount Hor as a reference to the Amanus range of the Taurus Mountains, which marked the northern limit of the Syrian plain.

Boundaries under King David

King David's conquests were in around 1000 BCE. The boundaries of Israel after these conquests are given in 2 Samuel 8: 1-14. *And after this it came to pass, that David defeated the Philistines, and subdued them; and David took Methegammah from the hand of the Philistines. And he defeated Moab, and measured them with a line, making them lie down in the ground; with two lines he measured to put to death, and with one full line to keep alive. And so the Moabites became David's servants, and brought tribute. David defeated also Hadadezer, the son of Rehob, king of Zobah, as he went to extend his dominion at the river Euphrates.... Then David put garrisons in Aram of Damascus.... And he put garrisons in Edom; throughout all Edom put he garrisons, and all they of Edom became David's servants.*

Figure 4 is a Wikipedia map of that territory:



Figure 4-Boundaries as conquered by David

This is an important map to contrast with those in the two previous *divrei torah*. The previous maps depict what was promised to the Israelites, whether to Abraham or to Moses. This map depicts what the Israelites actually conquered. The Torah delineates mitzvot that are only commanded to those living in the “land of Israel,” e.g., the laws of *shmitta* (leaving land fallow every 7 years). To what boundaries do these mitzvot apply? To one of the “theoretical” boundaries promised to Abraham or Moses? To the “actual” boundaries as defined by the conquests of King David? Or some other set of boundaries?

Boundaries as per Ezekiel

To complicate matters, some 400 years later the prophet Ezekiel (622-570 BCE) proclaimed the following as an **inheritance**: Ezekiel 44:13-20: *Thus says the Lord God: This shall be the border, according to which you shall divide the land for inheritance to the twelve tribes of Israel; Joseph shall have two portions. And you shall inherit it, one as well as another; concerning which I raised my hand to give it to your fathers; and this land shall fall to you for inheritance. And this shall be the border of the land toward the north side, from the Great Sea, by the way of Hethlon, as you go to Zedad; Hamath, Berothah, Sibraim, which is between the border of Damascus and the border of Hamath; middle Hazar, which is by the coast of Hauran. And the border from the sea shall be Hazar-Enan, the border of Damascus, and the north northward, and the border of Hamath. And this is the north side. And the east side you shall measure from Hauran, and from Damascus, and from Gilead, and between the land of Israel and the Jordan, from the border to the east sea. And this is the east side. And the south side southward, from Tamar to the waters of Meribot-Kadesh, to the river, as far as the Great Sea.*

And this is south side towards the Negev. The west side also shall be the Great Sea from the border, as far as opposite the entrance to Hamath. This is the west side.

Figure 5 is a Wikipedia map that describes Ezekiel’s boundaries (in blue), and contrasts them with those (in red) declaimed by Moses:

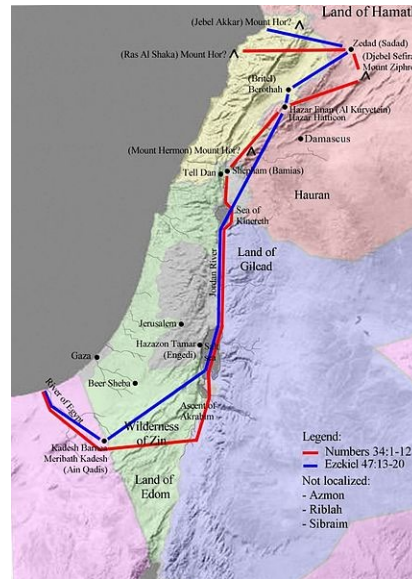


Figure 5-Boundaries as described by Ezekiel

Boundaries upon the return of Ezra and Nehemiah

The Israelites were exiled to Babylonia after the first temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezar I in 586 BCE. Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE, and it was then that he issued an edict (see [Ezra](#) 1:1-4 and [2 Chronicles](#) 36:22-23) allowing the Jews to return to the land of Israel. But they did not immediately leave Babylon, finally doing so when encouraged by Artaxerxes I in 457 BCE.

The cities that mark the boundaries of Israel upon their return are given in Jerusalem Talmud [Sheviit](#) 16a. The southern boundary matches with that of [Numbers](#) 34:4. The eastern boundary is the Jordan river and the western boundary is the Mediterranean Ocean. But the northern boundary line, according to this listing, did not extend far beyond Baniyas, and on the sea-coast not farther than Achzib (nine miles north of Acre). These de facto boundaries will end up playing a major role in the rabbinic decisions on what constitutes “the land of Israel” for halachic purposes. They are depicted in Figure 6.



Figure 6-Boundaries associated with Ezra’s return

Keep in mind that both the Abraham and Ezekiel boundaries are described as inheritances, and the promise to Abraham is that they will be inheritances forever. Thus the land as promised maintains its status as an “inheritance” to Israel even though the children of Israel are exiled from the land. But the boundaries established by David contain areas which are not part of the original “inheritance” declarations.

Implications of these boundaries

As mentioned earlier, the Jewish people's **ownership** of the land began with God's promise of the land to Abraham. The **sanctity** of the land, by contrast, did not begin until the Jewish people actually took possession of it, upon their reentry into the land after the exodus from Egypt and the journey through the desert. At that time, they were commanded to **conquer** the land. Since God made the consecration of the land dependent upon its conquest by the Jewish people, it follows that conquest by a Gentile nation nullified its holiness. In contrast, Ezra was not commanded to reconquer Eretz Israel, but to **settle** it. God made the sanctity of the land dependent on the Jewish people **manifesting their ownership** over it.

The Rabbis declared that this latter sanctity continues to posterity, regardless of how many times it has been conquered by Gentiles. One possible reason for the Rabbis making this ruling is that Ezra sanctified the land even though he had no political autonomy. Since this sanctification was a divine beneficence, not contingent on a conquest of territory, it did not lapse when the land was taken from the Israelites in subsequent generations. The Talmud distinguishes between three consecrations of the land, the first consecration (*kedusha rishonah*), consecration for the time being (*kedusha l'shaatah*), and consecration for the future (*kedusha l'atid*), and classifies Solomon’s consecration (after the Davidic conquests) as *kedusha rishonah* and Ezra’s consecration as both *kedusha l'shaatah* and *kedusha l'atid*.

The question is especially important today, as we consider the current borders of Israel vis-à-vis those presented in the historical maps given in our earlier exposition. We will look at two specific situations in which a definition of the Israel boundary is important: (1) whether laws of *terumah*, *maaser*, and *shmitta* have to be observed on the produce of the land and (2) what are the boundary implications for a messenger who delivers a *get* to a divorced wife.

In the latter case, the Talmud puts an extra requirement on the messenger who delivers divorce papers from a husband outside of Israel to his wife who is living in Israel. In that case, the messenger must declare that he personally has witnessed the writing and signing of the *get*. So the Talmud has to define what “outside of Israel” means. The very first Mishnah of Gittin includes a definition of boundaries: *Rabbi Judah says: Foreign parts extend from Rekem eastwards, Rekem being included; from Ashkelon southwards, Ashkelon included; and from Acco northwards, Acco included. Rabbi Meir, however, held that Acco counts as Eretz Israel in the matter of bills of divorce.* We all know where Acco and Ashkelon are; Rekem is a small town due north of Bethlehem. Essentially, the Talmudic Rabbis consider the boundary of Israel in this matter to be defined by northernmost, southernmost, and easternmost points.

There are three types of territories, (1) those settled after the conquest of the land as completed by David and resettled by Ezra, (2) those settled after the conquest of the land as completed by David but not resettled by Ezra, and (3) those territories that were never part of the Davidic conquest nor subsequently settled into by Ezra. Territories defined by (1) are clearly subject to the religious laws pertaining to Eretz Israel. (By the way, though there is no Temple, and therefore no Cohanim or Leviim to feed, *terumah* and *maaser* are still taken from the fruits and grain, and this portion is generally discarded.)

There is controversy regarding territories defined by (2). Maimonides (1138-1204), for example, ruled that these territories are exempt from laws of *teruma*, *ma'aser*, and *shmitta*, but are subject to other rules. Tosafot (13th century) ruled that these territories had no sanctity whatsoever. And both Ramban (1195-1270 CE), and in recent times Rabbi Kook, the chief Rabbi of Palestine until 1935, ruled that these territories had all the sanctity of Eretz Israel.

With regard to territories defined by (3), there are those who interpret Deuteronomy 11:24 “*Every place where your foot should tread shall belong to you,*” as meaning that any territories conquered by Israel are endowed with the sanctity of Eretz Israel. The controversy about whether or not the Rabbis have implemented this interpretation pivots on whether or not the conquest was done in an “obligatory war” (approved by a king or by a Sanhedrin) and on whether the conquest was “communal” or “private.” We leave this controversy to the Rabbis to duke out.

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