

Z'chut Eretz Yisrael (The Merit of the Land)

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Shabbat Nachamu 5786 / July 24, 2026

The dark times continue for American Jews and the Jewish state.

Earlier this week, in an outright antisemitic video bordering on blood libel, Mayor Mamdani publicly pronounced Israel's prime minister a war criminal and declared that he is no longer welcome in New York City.

Yesterday, a “visibly Jewish man” was stabbed in broad daylight on the Upper West Side by a man yelling “Allahu Akbar.”

Meanwhile, Israel's reputation among Americans continues to plummet, fueled both by rising Jew-hatred and by the appalling actions of some Israeli officials.

This week we commemorated Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. We grieved the destruction of the Temple, the Crusades, the expulsions, the Holocaust, and October 7.

What lies ahead for us is unclear. But the way things are going is not good.

We are in narrow straits, with little room to breathe between the anti-Israel left and the Christian nationalist right.

I keep coming back to this subject because I believe American Jews and the State of Israel are facing a genuine existential threat.

Last Shabbat, I spoke about Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal, the Hungarian Hasidic rabbi who, in 1943, recanted his longstanding opposition to Zionism and declared that the genocide of Europe's Jews had made emigration to *Eretz Yisrael* an urgent mitzvah.

In building his theological case for Zionism, Rabbi Teichtal argues that in times of extraordinary trouble, the Jewish people could be saved by what he calls *z'chut Eretz Yisrael*—the merit of the Land of Israel.¹

His claim rests on the biblical idea that *Eretz Yisrael* is *kodesh*—holy. Not *physically* different from every other land, but *spiritually* different.

The Talmudic sages saw *Eretz Yisrael* as the meeting point of heaven and earth.

Yehudah HaLevi taught that the Land of Israel was the cradle of creation, the birthplace of prophecy, and the one place on earth where the Jewish people could realize our “full spiritual glory.”²

That's why he called it “the gateway to heaven.” Only there, he believed, can we truly fulfill our sacred mission to be “a light to the nations.”

That is *z'chut Eretz Yisrael*—the merit of the Land of Israel.

And in times of trouble, it can save us from our enemies.

It might even save us from ourselves.

I know this concept is hard to wrap your head around.

It's so abstract and otherworldly, while the Israel we know today is very much of *this* world.

As one of our congregants put it so insightfully: "Those rabbis and poets were writing about something that didn't exist: a receding horizon, a spiritual or symbolic homeland with priests and animal sacrifice, not Eurovision singers and a booming trade in home seltzer-makers."

Does *Eretz Yisrael* still have this mystical redemptive power when it's filled with shopping malls and falafel stands?

When it's sullied by political corruption and the seedy side of modernity?

When it's stained with the blood of October 7 and the casualties of war?

Is it still possible for its fertile soil to nurture the vision of the 1948 Declaration of Independence, which says:

"The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles;

"it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants;

"it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel;

"it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex;

"it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture;

"it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions;

"and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations"?

The founders of *Medinat Yisrael* understood the meaning of *Eretz Yisrael* in the Jewish spiritual imagination, and they sought to build a society worthy of that ideal.

Now, the straits are growing narrower by the day. But we must not give in to despair.³

The merit of *Eretz Yisrael* can still open a pathway to redemption.

Our present troubles are summoning the Jewish people to re-embrace the founders' vision.

But wrapping ourselves in the flag won't get it done.

If we are true Zionists, we have a duty to help realize the age-old dream for our Land—"a city knit together"⁴ in friendship, equality, and peace.

The gateway to heaven is still open.

The question is: Do we have the courage to walk through it?

1 See Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal, "First Introduction," *Eim Habanim Smeichah*.

2 HaLevi's view as summarized by Eliezer Schweid in *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny*, 56, 60.

3 See *Isaiah* chapter 40, the haftarah for Shabbat Nachamu (the Shabbat of Comfort).

4 *Psalms* 122:3.