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8-17-2010

August 17, 2010: If Peru, Why Not the Land of Israel?

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2010). August 17, 2010: If Peru, Why Not the Land of Israel?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/450>

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Title: If Peru, Why Not the Land of Israel?

Date: 2010-08-17T06:05:00.003-04:00

8/17/2010--Two weeks ago, in enthusiasm for encountering the spirit of the divine in the settings of the Inka empire, I described my trip to Peru. This led my friend, colleague and teacher, Robert Taylor, to ask why I would not visit the Holy Land next, in which Judaism also began as a religion of place. Surely I could also encounter the spirit of the divine in Jerusalem and walking in the footsteps of Jesus in the hills of Galilee. And this spirit would not be a distant indigent experience, but my very own heritage. I do not doubt for a minute that visiting Israel would have that effect. And I do want to make that trip. But for now I feel that I cannot. The reason is Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel has written an open letter to President Obama trying to persuade him not to pressure Israel to stop building Jewish housing in Jerusalem: "For me, the Jew that I am, Jerusalem is above politics. It is mentioned more than six hundred times in Scripture-and not a single time in the Koran." (letter here). I don't doubt Wiesel's sincerity. Maybe he is right that Muslims can build in the City wherever they wish. Maybe I am wrong that Israel has no intention of ever sharing Jerusalem, even with a peaceful Palestinian State. But whoever is right, clearly American-Jews-visiting-Jerusalem are pawns in a political game. My presence would be, and that presence is, taken to be an endorsement of Wiesel's opposition to policies I agree with and a warning of political disaster to the Democratic Party. I won't go to Jerusalem because Wiesel is right that Judaism is a religion of place. For now, and I hope not forever, that place is held not spiritually, but militarily. That place does not embrace, but excludes.