

Religion Today
January 7-13, 2000
The Holy Land and the Golan
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After several wars, the small Middle East country of Israel has found itself occupying large amounts of territory and -- even after the cessation of hostilities -- in a state of war with many of its Arab neighbors. Israel's prime minister, Ehud Barak, plans to negotiate peace on all fronts. To do so, he is willing to exchange occupied land for peace.

Now imagine you are Mr. Barak and you have two areas of land to give away. Which would you get rid of as fast as you could? In the first, called the West Bank, most Jewish settlers are hated by their Arab neighbors (clashes between the two groups usually result in injury, if not death) and so live in small enclaves surrounded by high barbed-wire fences and patrolled by armed guards. In the second, called the Golan Heights, the people get along with their Arab neighbors and hence live a calm life -- no barbed wire or guards. (And, the Golan contains Israel's only ski resort!) The answer seems obvious: you would work to get rid of the West Bank quickly, and go slow on the Golan Heights.

But the exact opposite is taking place. Barak is moving slowly and delaying the turning over of the West Bank, while he works hard to entice Syria into negotiations over the Golan Heights. This is because he considers the West Bank part of the Holy Land. The Golan Heights is not so-considered, despite centuries of Jewish habitation of the region. The difference lies in the specific time when Jews lived there.

The West Bank is part of the region that was once called Judea and Samaria during the time recorded in the Bible's Old Testament. It thus constitutes part of the territory ruled by King David, King Solomon, and their successors. Their country extended from Beer Sheva in the

south to Dan in the north, a city north of Galilee along the Jordan river. Neither David, Solomon nor their descendants ever ruled the Golan Heights.

In fact, the Golan Heights only became Jewish in the times of the Maccabees and Herod (second and first centuries B.C.) after the last book of the Old Testament had been written. Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., it actually became, along with Galilee, an important region of Jewish settlement and religious activity for several centuries. But this extended period of occupation does not qualify the Golan as part of the Holy Land, because the occupation occurred much too late to be recorded in the Jewish scriptures. Thus the judgement of Barak, following that of most Israelis, is that the West Bank is more important because it belongs to the Holy Land, that land upon which most of the modern state of Israel sits, while the Golan Heights are merely occupied territory.