Father Ryan has done a superb job of conjuring up for us the glory of the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the heyday of the Jerusalem Temple and the pious longing for Zion in the soul of a twelfth-century Andalusian poet and then the transformation of the notion of ascent into the political act of “making aliyah” to Israel within the discourse of Zionism. My remarks this evening will strengthen and underscore his observations and reflect further on the way in which the notion of pilgrimage has been adapted and transformed under the shifting pressures of history and how it is very much alive in several different contexts in Jewish life today.

There is no doubt that the font of the Jewish notion of pilgrimage is the picture drawn by the Hebrew Bible and the Mishnah of the Second Jewish Commonwealth. The first Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE, and the Judean leaders exiled to Babylonia were invited by Cyrus to return to the Holy Land to restore the Temple, which, after many tribulations, they succeeded in doing. It was that structure, re-purified by the Maccabees/Hasmoneans and vastly enlarged by Herod, which stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 of the Common Era. The utopian plan for this pastoral and agrarian society called for Israelites to travel to Jerusalem three times a year, in addition to bringing tithes of various sorts at other occasions. To be sure, the offering of sacrifices in the Temple cult was an integral part of these ceremonies, but I think that for the average Israelite the essence of the experience, which must have been very powerful, lay elsewhere. Voices from the Psalms stress over and over again the joyous and overwhelming experience of joining the great throng of celebrants. Coming from far-flung settlements and remote farms, the pilgrims were able to overcome their individuated lives and become absorbed into a kind of holy communitas that was plugged into the original sources of sanctity that emanated from the Temple. This was the direct, corporeal experience of being part of God’s people standing in God’s presence. In the Israelite universe, the Jerusalem Temple is the axis mundi, the place where heaven and earth are aligned, the physical place that God chose as a dwelling place for His spirit.

I would therefore identify three essential components of the ancient Israelite pilgrimage. The first is the positive experience of totalization—I am distinguishing this from Levinas’ negative use of the term—in which the individual experiences himself or herself as absorbed into the throng of celebrants. The second is that the pilgrimage is about joy and thanksgiving rooted in agricultural bounty and not about sin and expiation, and this stands in sharp contradistinction to images—and I confess that these may be stereotyped—of medieval Christian pilgrims being driven by a desire for the remission of sin and the curing of physical and mental suffering. The third component has to do with the existence of a sacred center, which is an embodied, physical place—and not only a building or a structure—and which is the point of arrival, the destination for the pilgrim.

What happens to the idea and experience of pilgrimage after the Temple is destroyed and the sacred center, Jerusalem itself, rendered inaccessible, which was the fate of the Jews after 70 CE? The answer to that question is woven into an extraordinary and much larger story about how
a new class of religious leaders, the Sages or the Rabbis, succeeded in reconfiguring the faith of the Israel to survive in a non-Temple world. Take, for example, the festival of Passover. As described in the Bible, especially in chapter 12 of Exodus, Passover is the pilgrimage festival par excellence. Israelites travel from all over the Land of Israel to Jerusalem, gather in family groups on the hills surrounding the Temple on the night of 14th of the Hebrew month Nissan, slaughter and roast a lamb (the paschal sacrifice), and eat it together with matzot (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs, symbolic acts that recall the original liberation from Egypt. Now when the Temple was destroyed and sacrifices could no longer be offered and access to Jerusalem was forbidden, the Rabbis reconfigured the holiday by replacing the central sacrificial ritual with a family feast consumed at home (and not in the synagogue) in which the story of the Exodus was elaborated in a series of textual exegeses. Sacrifice was replaced with text and verbal interpretation; the ceremony was called the seder, the Hebrew word for order, because of prescribed sequence of symbolic acts, and the text accompanying the feast was called the haggadah, which means telling or expounding. The seder and the haggadah turned out to be a great success story because they rescued an important ritual whose chief mechanism had been rendered inoperable. Over time, the compensation turned out to be much more powerful than the original, and, as Jews dispersed throughout the world, the Passover seder became an indelible and portable part of their experience.

Such was the general approach of the Rabbis in dealing with the termination of pilgrimage as a real practice. The events in the agricultural calendar marked by the pilgrimage festivals were moved to the background, and instead, moved forward were the great moments in the sacred history of Israel, such as the revelation at Sinai for the Shavuot festival seven weeks after Passover. The memory of the ascent to Jerusalem and the offering of prescribed sacrifices was now transferred to the liturgy, which was recited by all Jews and not reserved for priests. The once-a-year entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur now became a written narrative, which was enacted as a kind of communal oratorio in the synagogue on that sacred day. The centrality of Jerusalem was heightened by being linked to the coming of the Messiah and being made into the focus of a new eschatological scheme. It is the place to which the Jewish people will be returned at the end of history.

This fix for the abrogation of the pilgrimages has stood the Jewish people in good stead for some two thousand years in its dispersal throughout the world. Not always have Jews been able to abide a merely liturgical connection to Jerusalem/Zion, as Father Ryan has shown us with the story of the audacious journey of the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi to the Holy Land. In the sixteenth century, the Galilean hill town of Safed became the scene for an extraordinary gathering of Spanish exiles who fomented a revolution in Jewish religious life by renewing and promulgating the secret lore of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah. Throughout the late Medieval and early Modern periods, there were always functioning communities of pious Jews in Jerusalem and other holy cities. If I may be permitted a personal note, my own paternal great grandfather, as an act of piety, left Lithuania at the end of the nineteenth century to die in Jerusalem and went on to surprise everyone by living another twenty years and probably outliving his son, my grandfather, who emigrated to America only to die in the great influenza of 1918.

To this picture it is important to add that in the modern period pilgrimage as a concrete, physical act has been revived in contexts that have nothing to do with Jerusalem/Zion. At the
center of the religious revival movement known as Hasidism, which swept Eastern Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, was a new kind of charismatic rabbinic figure called the zaddik or the rebbe. Each zaddik held court in the town that was the seat of his influence, and followers, sometimes living at great distances, would often travel great distances to make pilgrimage—and the ancient Hebrew term ‘oleh regel is self-consciously used—to the zaddik’s court to celebrate the High Holidays and the festival of Sukkot in the early fall. That practice continues today and can be observed at the headquarters of Lubavitch/Chabad at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. You can also go on any given day to the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Old Montefiore Cemetery in Queens and see hundreds of Jews on pilgrimage of a different sort. Pilgrimages to the graves of saintly rabbis became a common practice in another cultural sphere of world Jewry, among the Jews of Morocco and North Africa generally, and this was a practice that was brought with them to Israel. The greatest pilgrimage of all today takes place on Lag BaOmer, thirty-three days after Passover, when hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews, mostly of North African background, travel to Mt. Meron in the Galilee for a day of feasting and festivity. Worthy of mention as well are the tens of thousands of Jews who undertake a reverse pilgrimage away from Israel in order to spend the High Holidays in the Ukrainian city of Uman, the site of the burial of the Hasidic rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who died in 1810.

The most powerful reinvention of the idea of pilgrimage, Father Ryan perceptively points out, is in the notion of aliya, “ascent” to Israel. Because of the hilliness of the Land of Israel in relation to Egypt and the Jordan Valley, traveling to the Land is always associated with the word for going up or ascending in the Hebrew Bible. With the rise of Zionism in the early twentieth century, that biblical root was appropriated and given a very specific meaning: the volitional act of leaving the Diaspora and settling permanently in Palestine/Israel. The majority of the current Jewish citizens of Israel and their parents did not arrive there as a result of this process. They came because of the constraints of history. German Jews came as refugees from Hitler in the 1930s. Masses of Jews from Arabic-speaking lands came in the early 1950s because the establishment of Israel made it very difficult to stay where they were. A million Jews from the former Soviet Union came in order to find a better and freer life. These are the same reasons, in other words, that motivate most migrations and explain why America is the country that it is today. Yet the norms of Israel’s culture were not formed by this mass majority but rather by a kernel of Zionist leaders and early settlers who gave the notion of aliya a powerfully ideological turn. To “make aliya,” in their conception, meant to turn one’s back on the degraded values of Diaspora Jewish life and settle permanently in Israel as a means of self-redefinition and self-realization. Just as the establishment of Israel struck a redemptive chord for the Jewish people, so willed commitment to the enterprise was considered a gateway to redemption for the individual Jew.

But there is something in this notion that is inimical to the very idea of pilgrimage: the demand for permanence. Pilgrimage is, in essence, a visit, which might be prolonged into a sojourn, and, yes, some may stay on, but that becomes something else. This impermanent notion of pilgrimage is in fact very much alive and well in the life of American Jewry. For serious Jews in all walks of life, frequent visits to Israel are a constituent and vital part of their Jewish identity and practice. The relationship between American Jews and Israel is far from being a one-way transaction, but it is certainly not fully symmetrical. American Jews journey to Israel for a host of family, professional and religious reasons, but most of all they go in order to recharge their
spiritual and cultural identities at the great center of Jewish energy. And if that is not pilgrimage, then I don’t know what is.