

A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

Taking Responsibility for the Land

Parashat Eikev deals heavily with the theme of entering and securing the Land of Israel. Multiple blessings are part and parcel of entry into the Promised Land. The people are promised a “good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains” (Deut. 8:7) and one that is replete with seven species (wheat, barley, dates, pomegranates, figs, olives, and grapes; 8:8). But those blessings are dependent on the observance of the mitzvot and the loyalty of the Israelites. Betrayal of the covenant is reflected in the people’s relationship to the Land: observe the commandments and receive rain at its proper time; pursue other gods and mimic the ways of the Canaanites and be faced with drought, sickness, and starvation. While the threat of punishment may propel one to observance, a deeper message is ingrained in this week’s parashah.

Joseph Bekhor Shor comments on this divine supervision, focusing on Deuteronomy 11:12, “it is a land which the Lord your God looks after.” He writes that God looks after both the Land and its citizenry “to remember the land and its inhabitants, and to take careful accounting of their deeds. ‘God always keeps His eye’ to check them and to be sure they are nourished according to their deeds.” Weaving this notion into the theology of Deuteronomy, the Bekhor Shor explains that the destinies of the people and the Land are intertwined. God notes well the deeds of the people. The Land will respond accordingly.

Such sensitivity, or perhaps hypersensitivity, may teach us volumes both about general respect for the environment and the particular case of living in modern Israel. Torah compels us to take responsibility for our behavior. We are not islands of being. We are deeply connected to each other and to the environment in which we live. To think otherwise is to delude ourselves and to destroy the rebirth of the Jewish people in its own Land. Being respectful of God and our fellow humans nurtures the world around us—enabling each of us, with God’s blessing, to bring forth the fruit of the earth and savor its sweetness.

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

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Waters of Uncertainty

“If it doesn’t rain, we don’t know what’s going to happen,” commented a NASA water-cycle scientist recently on the drought that has been devastating California. With rainfall and reservoirs at historically low levels, the state’s farm owners and laborers are increasingly faced with dire choices: What percentage of their fields will they have to leave fallow? How many farmhands and migrant workers will have to be laid off? At what point should one give up—uproot one’s family, move on, and do something else? As the drought intensifies, so do the feelings of uncertainty. The stories of the drought’s impact—on individuals, families, and entire communities—remind us how tenuous life is for those whose livelihoods are bound up in the land and for all those who depend on them.

In Parashat Eikev, as the Israelites are on the threshold of entering the Land, Moses embarks on an extended praise of Canaan, a land where “you will lack nothing” (Deut. 8:9). To underscore its special nature, Moses compares the Promised Land, one that “soaks up its water from the rains of heaven” (11:11), to Egypt, where the grain was “watered by your own labors [literally ‘with one’s feet’], like a vegetable garden” (11:10). Thinking about the harsh realities currently facing California, the “promised land” of America’s own mythic imagination, these verses don’t seem to make much sense. What farmer would prefer a field that depended on rain (which might, as we learn later on in the parashah, be occasionally withheld) to a field sustained with irrigation? What are the springs and intermittent rains of Canaan compared to the mighty Nile, with its predictable rhythms and flow?

It turns out that our commentators also struggled to understand these lines. Sifrei Devarim, a collection of midrash halakhah, posed the

question directly: “Is the verse praising the Land of Israel or praising Egypt?” (Sifrei 37). Indeed, Egypt is depicted in Genesis as a fertile land of abundance: “like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt” (Gen. 13:10), and it was to Egypt that Abraham and Jacob fled during times of severe famine in Canaan. And yet, it’s difficult to imagine the verse implying that the land of Canaan is *worse* than Egypt. Moses had just presented the Israelites with a utopian vision of a land bursting with natural resources: water, minerals, fruits, and grains.

Many traditional interpretations of the passage simply ignore the realities of the region’s climate in order to harmonize the verses with the parashah’s overarching theme of praise. Rashi, although he made his living growing grapes and would certainly have been sensitive to the vicissitudes of nature, follows the Sifrei, and suggests the verses highlight how life in Canaan will be less arduous than in Egypt: “In the land of Egypt one had to bring water from the Nile with one’s feet and then water the fields and one had to disturb one’s sleep and expend effort” to transfer the water from the plains to the highland. But the Land of Israel “drinks water ‘from the rains of heavens’—you may continue to sleep in your bed while the Holy One Blessed be He does the work for you” and waters all parts of the land, its hills and valleys. The Israelites are no longer servants, as in Egypt, but are served.

Modern biblical historians, on the other hand, have suggested that the key to understanding the verses as favorable to Canaan is to read them ironically. Playing on the Israelites’ longing in the wilderness for the abundance of Egypt—“the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic” (Num. 11:5)—Moses disparages it as nothing but a “garden patch” when compared to the bounty of Canaan. Moses’s use of the phrase “*vehishkita veraglekha*” (to water with your feet) can be seen as a further dig at the Israelites’ Egyptian fantasies, since *mei raglayim* (waters of the feet) was a familiar euphemism for urine.¹ From this perspective, Egypt is but a measly plot of land of urine-soaked vegetation while the land of Israel drinks from the pure waters of heaven.

But is there a way we can regard the very tenuousness of life in the land of Canaan as desirable? Can we imagine that a state of uncertainty is the preferred existential condition? In “The Promise,” in his collection of essays *On Zion* (1952), Martin Buber demonstrates how the very verses of our parashah express a profound theological

statement about the relationship between Israel and God in the Land of Israel. Life in Egypt *was* actually easier than in Canaan, he acknowledges. The Nile rises and falls fairly predictably, and though it takes a significant amount of human and technological effort to distribute its waters, the Egyptian farmer could readily believe that his own efforts would ensure his survival. As far as water was concerned, Egyptians felt themselves independent of the divine. The gift of the Nile, once given, had come to seem like a possession; separated in their memory from the giver, the giver was then forgotten.

The situation of the farmer in Canaan was much more precarious; in spite of being assured of *yoreh* and *malkosh*, the early and late rains in their seasons, rainfall in the land was variable. But, according to Buber, the Bible considers being provided for as detrimental to the kind of life that really matters. It is much harder to lose sight of God’s ongoing involvement in the world when life hangs in the balance: “the very nature of the land of Canaan bears witness to the unremitting providence of God” (25). The farmers in Egypt can mistakenly believe that their own efforts will secure their survival, but the farmers in Canaan—and, by extension, those who live in the land and depend on them for their survival—know otherwise. Dwelling in the land will ensure that they continually seek out God as a source of strength and comfort: “In Canaan, Israel realizes that rain is a *gift* and it recognizes the giver” (27). Buber’s writing emerges from his sense of the unique role the land of Israel plays in the realization of God’s covenant, and contemporary residents of Israel—and California—may or may not feel that their experiences of drought deepen their connection to the divine. However, we all might reflect on whether it is amidst the stresses and challenges of our own lives that God’s presence is most keenly experienced.

¹Lyle Eslinger, “Watering Egypt (Deuteronomy XI 10–11),” *Vetus Testamentum*, XXXVII (1): 1987.

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