

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### A Little Black Mark

Rabbi Rachel Bovitz, Director of Millennial Engagement

#### JUSTICE.

Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

. . . I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

—*Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (from the section dated 1784)

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin describes a personal practice that involved daily focus on 13 moral virtues. Franklin's memoir, translated into several languages in the late 18th century, became widely influential, reaching even Eastern Europe, where Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin of Satanov wrote *Heshbon Hanefesh*, published in 1808. Rabbi Lefin included justice and most of the other virtues in Franklin's list when he created his 13 primary *middot* (moral virtues) to be focused upon in *mussar* practice (the Jewish approach to cultivating these virtues). Rabbi Lefin's definition of *tzedek* (justice) paraphrases a classic Talmudic teaching attributed to Hillel: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Both Franklin's program and *mussar* practice remind us that we cannot quickly gloss over the Torah's prescription, mentioned twice in our Torah portion: לֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אֶחָיו / עֲמִיתוֹ ("You shall not wrong one another") (Lev. 25:14, 17). Many of us take these simple words as a given, because we consider ourselves to be decent human beings. *Mussar* sees *tzedek*, typically translated as "righteousness," as a virtue requiring commitment to self-reflection, honesty, and discipline on a daily basis. Like Benjamin Franklin, we may need to mark "a little black spot" when we have wronged others in small or large ways or have withheld our kindness. Such acknowledgment helps us hold firmly to Torah as a tree of (the good) life.

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## Behar-Behukkotai 5775

## בהר-בחוקתי תשע"ה



### God's Earth: Between Blessing and Curse

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, The Jewish Theological Seminary

Portions of the Torah sometimes come to greet us with a timeliness, even an urgency, that seems positively breathtaking. How did the Torah know that we would need to hear this message—this one and not another—and to hear it right now: this week, this year, and not some other time? Snow is falling heavily in Denver as I write—the snow arriving much later in the year than usual—and a tropical storm is making itself felt in the Carolinas, much *earlier* in the year than usual. Pope Francis, we are told, is going to release an encyclical this summer that calls on world leaders to take action to prevent the looming catastrophe for the planet that extremes of climate change seem to herald. And here is Leviticus—in many ways the most intimate of the Torah's five books, because it usually meets us frail, mortal, human beings where we live, in our skins and with our families, in private spaces of home and tabernacle—instructing us as a society, as a *species*, that divine blessings of rain and sun will turn to curses if we do not do our part in stewarding God's earth properly. The text insists that a fateful choice is in our hands. And it seems far from confident that we will make the choice wisely.

It must be said, in the name of honesty, that the regulations for sabbatical and jubilee years set forth in Parashat Behar of Leviticus are enormously complicated. The impact they would have on the soil and the economy—could one actually carry them out—is highly debatable. Rabbis and commentators have labored to explicate and apply these rules for centuries; renewed Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel has posed challenges that have been met ingeniously and variously over the years, most recently *this year*, the latest in the cycle of sabbaticals. As one who lives far from the Land and has not worked through the tractates and codes that struggle to make sense of the Torah's demands on this score, I am led to focus attention on the radical principle that seems to underlie those demands: "For the Land [*ha'aretz*, which in the Torah means not only the Land of Israel but also "the Earth"—a second meaning that I believe we are meant to hear at this juncture] is Mine; you are but strangers [*gerim*] resident with Me. Throughout

the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land” (Lev. 25:23–24).

The Torah’s message seems clear: Human beings may hold onto the Land (in both senses of *ha’aretz*) physically. But we do not own it. If we did, it would be ours. How could it be? We are here on earth for such a short time, and matters of deeds and estates are so complicated, and subject to innumerable vicissitudes. The notion of permanent ownership is quite absurd when viewed from the perspective of eternity. When our days walking the earth are complete, we will return to the earth, become part of it. But own it? Be its master? Really?

Leviticus thereby poses a powerful paradox to us and to itself. The Torah’s commandments are given to us, frail mortals that we are, and God’s earth is entrusted to us as well—to us, its resident strangers. We are told to “observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security” (25:18–19). Were we not able to observe God’s commandments, it would be pointless and perverse of the Torah to instruct us to do so. The promise of enjoying earth’s bounty is surely not made to Israel only to tell us what we are inevitably going to deprive ourselves of through disobedience.

Time and again, however, Leviticus betrays awareness that what it demands of us is hard. Do not sow seed in the seventh year, as you do the other six. Be confident that God will take care of your needs that year and the next. Buy and sell property knowing that, in the jubilee year, all property will revert to its original owners. Walk tall through the land, take responsibility for its stewardship, use every ounce of energy and brainpower at your command—in order to *follow God’s commands*, and subordinate your will to God’s. This is the force, I think, of the command (26:1) not to worship idols, for—as we read in the preceding verse—“it is to Me that the Israelites are servants” (25:55). The lack of ultimate control, combined with the measure of control required by responsible stewardship, is a hard balance for a human being to strike.

Just how hard is evident from the litany of blessings and curses spelled out in Parashat Behukkotai. The biblical scholars (I cite Jacob Milgrom’s commentary here) tell us that “a collection of blessings and curses is frequently found at the end of major legal documents both in Israel . . . and throughout the ancient Near East” (*Leviticus 23–27*. The Anchor Bible, vol. 3B, p. 2286). The collection’s placement at the close of Leviticus is thus no surprise. Does the text really believe no one will notice that, as a rule, obedience is *not* met with the promised reward, or disobedience with the threatened punishment? I doubt it—yet the blessings and imprecations come nonetheless, in a tone alternately sober and bitter. It is as if the Torah wants to make every effort possible to get

human beings to take good care of the earth entrusted to us. Threats and promises just might work.

As we read them today, in 2015, the curses carry tangible meaning as never before. The disruptions of rain and fertility are happening before our eyes, and they result not from divine punishment (at least not visibly so) but from human action and inaction. According to Climate Action Reserve, a major North American carbon offset registry:

Due largely to the combustion of fossil fuels, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas, are at a level unequalled for more than 400,000 years. As a result, an enhanced greenhouse effect is trapping more of the sun’s heat near the earth’s surface and gradually pushing the planet’s climate system into uncharted territory. . . .

. . . Global average temperatures have risen both on land and in the oceans, with observable impacts already occurring that foretell increasingly severe changes in the future. Polar ice is melting. Glaciers around the globe are in retreat. Storms are increasing in intensity. Ecosystems around the world already are reacting, as plant and animal species struggle to adapt to a shifting climate, and new climate-related threats emerge. . . .

Scientists predict that if the increase in greenhouse gas emissions continues unabated, temperatures will rise by as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of this century, potentially causing dramatic—and irreversible—changes to the climate.

The consequences, both anticipated and unforeseen, will have profound ramifications for humanity and the world as a whole. Water supplies in some critical areas will dwindle as snow and ice disappear. Sea levels will rise, threatening coastal populations. Droughts and floods will become more common. (“Climate Change Facts,” on the website of Climate Action Reserve)

This fairly typical litany of predicted devastation is as familiar to thoughtful individuals throughout the world in 2015—and just as frightening, if we take it to heart—as the blessings and curses of Leviticus likely were to our ancestors. Were the Torah’s warnings heeded by ancient Israel? It is hard to know. Will we heed those of the scientists? This too is hard to know. There is one big difference between them: The Israelites are promised a second chance by God, after the Land observes the Sabbaths that it had been denied. The scientists hold out no such hope.

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