



Torah from JTS

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

Walking Together with God

I saw a strange thing on my walk to minyan the other morning. At a quiet side street with no crosstraffic in sight, a woman stood still, waiting for the walk sign. All around her people bustled by, peeking quickly to make sure no truck was barreling down the street before crossing, but she patiently waited for the light to indicate that it was her turn to walk. She wasn't setting an example for a toddler, and she didn't look like a tourist. This woman was content to obey a sign that others, myself included, blithely ignored.

If you don't live in New York City, perhaps you won't find my story strange, but let me assure you, one doesn't see this every day. Yet with pedestrian casualties a stubbornly persistent statistic in our city, perhaps more of us should heed her example. I am often alarmed by people staring intently into their phone screens as they cross busy Broadway. We could all stand to pay more attention to how and when we walk.

Walking is a recurrent metaphor in Parashat Behukkotai. In the first 10 verses, the verb *to walk* occurs three times. If you *walk* in God's statutes, then many blessings will follow, culminating in God *walking* in your midst and causing you to *walk* upright. In the next, darker section, God predicts that the people will *walk* stubbornly (*keri*—an obscure word that could also mean “casually” or “coolly”), and in response, God too will *walk* stubbornly with them. What is it with all this walking?

Elsewhere in the Torah, we have read quite a bit about walking. Enoch is a saintly figure who “walked with God and then he was no more, for God took him” (Gen. 5:24). Noah is praised for *walking* with God (6:9). Abraham is the biggest walker of them all, covering many hundreds of kilometers in his dusty

you follow my ordinances'), Torah wishes to send the message, ‘*she te-yuamelimba-Torah*’ (‘that you will labor in the discipline of Torah’).” Accordingly, in the first verse, we have references to Torah, Divine Revelation, the Commandments (human), and action or movement from God to humans connected by the act of doing. Action becomes the bridge between God and man. Similarly, we find this harmonious structure in the second verse, the rains from the heavens, the land, and the trees of the field. Again, think spatially: the rains from the heavens, the produce sprouting from the land, and the trees that connect heaven and earth.

Just as action is the bridge between Torah and mitzvot, and the tree is the bridge between heaven and earth, so too do humans represent a link between heaven and earth. In so many verses throughout Tanakh, the human being is compared to a tree. Even in the haftarah of Behukkotai, from the Prophet Jeremiah, which declares, “Blessed is one who trusts in God, whose trust is the Lord alone, he will be as a tree planted by waters.” So what do we have in common with a tree? A tree derives its energy from a distant source, it needs water from heaven and earth, it needs nutrients, and it aspires heavenward. So too do we. We derive our lives from God, we need the “water” of Torah, we need nourishment, and we ideally aspire heavenward.

May each of us become a bridge between heaven and earth. May we learn Torah and mitzvot and follow them; and may we continually reap the earth's bounty. May we always be ‘*k'etzshatul al mayim*’ (as a tree nourished by bountiful waters).

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sandals. God commands him to “get up, *walk* around the land” (13:17), and “*walk* before me and be blameless” (17:1). In Exodus, God walks before Israel in a pillar of cloud, and in Deuteronomy, Moses promises that “God *walks* before you; he will not release you nor will he abandon you.” Prophets such as Jeremiah are told to walk on God’s command, and the Psalmist pleads with God, “show me your paths, that I might *walk* in your truth” (86:11). The people of Israel are expected to walk to Jerusalem on pilgrimages three times annually, and Moses famously teaches them to speak of their love for God “when you sit in your homes and when you *walk* on the way.” Furthermore, the prophet Micah sums up the religion of Israel as “*walking* humbly with your God.”

Is it any wonder that Judaism came to associate its method of religious practice with walking? The Rabbis created a normative world known as halakhah (“the walk”), and the Sage Ulla claimed that since the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One has no place in the world except for the four cubits of halakhah (BT Berakhot 8a). This could sound claustrophobic, but unlike the Temple, the halakhah is not enclosed on four sides. It has boundaries, but its origins stretch back to the mythical beginning of time, and its destination remains beyond our imagination. What matters about the Jewish walkway is not endlessly broad, but rather has defined edges that lend it coherence.

I like to think of the four cubits of halakhah as the width of the path. A cubit is said to be somewhere between 18 and 24 inches long, so a four-cubit path is six to eight feet wide. It is broader than a trail, but narrower than a proper road. It is just right for two people to walk side by side, engaged in an animated conversation as they cross the countryside.

This metaphor of walking and talking is a beautiful way to think of Jewish life. Our religion has seldom emphasized solitary meditation. The image of a monk in a cell staring at a candle and breathing deeply is not immediately recognizable as a Jewish ideal, though there is certainly room for such spiritual practices in our religion. Walking on a path together is a social, dynamic metaphor. And if you imagine, as our portion does, that God is available to join you for a walk, then religious life becomes an adventure.

I have the privilege of walking together with remarkable students every week at JTS. As we come to the end of our academic year, I will have the extraordinary honor of ordaining this year’s new rabbis. I feel blessed to have walked with them for a few fruitful years of their lives. Next week, we

will walk together yet again at Commencement, but then our paths will diverge. I cannot fathom where they will all journey in the coming decades, but I am confident that they will take the Torah with them, bringing its message of holiness to communities near and far. Mazal tov to our graduates; may they walk with God, and may God walk with them, keeping them upright and faithful for many years to come.

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A TASTE OF TORAH

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

Between Heaven and Earth

Fertility of humans and of the land is the essence of divine blessing. It is the theme of the first commandment of Torah—“Be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28).” It is the sacred wish of each couple in the Torah as they desire to see the next generation. It is the notion that also encapsulates the divine promise for the loyal observance of mitzvot. Parashat Behukkotai opens in this vein, with a condition and the promise of God’s blessing. The two opening verses of our parashah speak of the harmony between heaven and earth, the bridges between the two, and the necessity for each of us to view ourselves as a sacred link. Leviticus 26:3–4 teaches, “If you follow My ordinances, observe My commandments and do them, then I will give rain at their proper season and the land will give its produce and the tree will yield its fruit.” As one reads these verses, one is struck by the harmony of their content and the symmetry of their language. Note well that observance of the mitzvot is connected not just to our well-being, but also to that of the Land of Israel. Our environment responds to our spiritual behavior. If our spiritual lives are lived in accordance with the essence of Torah—according to the order of Torah—then the natural environment will mirror that same sense of order.

Even more striking is the spatial description in each verse connecting heaven and earth. Rashi, the great medieval commentator, points out a possible difficulty in the first verse: “You might think that the verse in its entirety is speaking of the observance of mitzvot, but when it states, *‘imbehukkotaitelkhu’* (‘if