

Remember the Land

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Spring is my favorite season because it draws me outdoors, enticing me to leave the city and enjoy the rivers, fields, and mountains of this glorious earth. Even near the city I often find myself in nature, biking along the Hudson and up the Palisades past waterfalls and nesting eagles. Returning to the land reminds me of the many blessings of our world, filling me with gratitude and awe. It also causes foreboding since the signs of stress on the natural systems that make our lives possible are everywhere evident. While this era of anthropogenic climate change may be new, the concern that human conduct could lead to ruin and exile from the earth is found already in our Torah portion.

“The Land” is a central character in Leviticus, receiving 23 mentions in the final two chapters, and 70 altogether in the second half of this central book of Torah. We think often of Leviticus as centered on the Sanctuary, and that it is, but the Land itself is a living character, offering blessings and curses to the people of Israel. If the people live faithfully, then the Land will receive blessed rains, produce its bounty, and provide security and satiety. But if the people act as if their title to the Land is absolute, if they fail to allow the Land to rest on the sabbatical year and recognize God’s ultimate title, then they will be forced into exile.

As Jacob Milgrom notes, the previous priestly account of pollution of the Land—the flood narrative of Genesis 6—requires ablution, the washing away of sin with water. (Milgrom, Leviticus 23-27, 2336) That solution is unavailable now for two reasons. First, God promised never to flood the earth again. Second, the sin that

occupies Leviticus is not really one of pollution but of over-extraction of natural resources. The people have ignored God’s command to observe the sabbatical year; the only resolution is for the people to be pushed off the land so that it can rest and recover. Hence, the dreaded punishment of exile.

Toward the end of the devastating reproach section of our portion, the Torah predicts a future reconciliation when the exiles will humble their hearts, and their sin will be atoned. “Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob, also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the Land” (Lev. 26:42). This verse has several unusual features. It reverses the order of the patriarchs; it records Jacob’s name “full” with an extra letter (יעקוב, rather the Bible’s usual יעקב); and it leaves out “remember” for the middle man, Isaac.

Each element is interesting, but let us focus on the finale of the verse, where the Land itself becomes something like a fourth patriarch. God announces, “I will remember the Land,” making it not only the destination of return but also the very foundation of the covenant. As Midrash Sifra observes, “the Covenant is linked to the Land” (Behukkotai 2:8). Thinking back to Genesis 17, we recall that the covenant that God establishes with Abraham is all about the Land: “Then I will give to you and your descendants after you the land where you have dwelt, the Land of Canaan as an eternal possession, and I will be your God” (Gen. 17:8). The Land is not only a place to live, but an intermediary through which to encounter God.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the Land of Israel stands as a symbol of the virtue or lack of virtue of Israel. In a time of physical exile, Jeremiah imagines the Land itself lamenting its abandonment and asking why. Let the wise come and explain, “Why is the Land in ruins, laid waste like a wilderness, with none passing through it?” (Jer. 9:11). A land that is abandoned, in ruins, is evocative of the absent human life that once flourished there. Isaiah depicts the Land pining for its people and rejoicing upon their return (Isa. 49).

The Rabbis imagine the Land of Israel to be something like a tough nanny. On the one hand, she is a disciplinarian, noticing the failure of the people to observe her commandments such as the neglected sabbatical, and calling these failures to God’s attention. On the other hand, she is their caregiver. In Midrash Vayikra Rabbah, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says that it is like a king who has three sons and a nurse for them. If he wants to know about his sons, he inquires about the nurse. So too does God care about the children—that is, Israel—but inquires only about the Land (Behukkotai 36).

This Midrash views the Land as an instrument of reward and punishment, but perhaps the truth is deeper still. The Land is more like a teacher or a parent, socializing its students to express gratitude, self-control, and respect for others. Like an anxious child who grabs more food than they really need, the people of Israel are inclined to ignore the Sabbatical. This undermines awareness of divine title and cedes self-control, so that fear guides their way, all the way into exile.

German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas argued that pre-modern ethics was limited to a range of proximate concern—it was always assumed that earth would rebound from any damage that we could cause. Therefore, responsibility was only for direct damage, not for the cumulative harm caused over the course of generations. (The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age, 5) That indeed seems to be the understanding in Leviticus: After a few years of exile,

the neglected sabbaticals will be made up, and the people will be welcome to return. Our fear is that this is no longer true. Our destructive powers have grown too great, and the land may not recover from the harm that we cause.

Enjoyment of the land requires us to tread lightly on it. A walk in the park, a hike in the hills, a dip in the ocean—these simple pleasures restore our relationship to the land, reminding us that we are not its owners, but rather its temporary inhabitants. More than this is required—real reductions in carbon emissions and the willingness to let the land rest. As with the ancient neglect of sabbaticals, our contemporary abuse of our home is having direct and dangerous consequences. Reading this portion alerts us to that danger and motivates us to make the changes required to live in health and joy on all the good land that God has given.

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