

## Environmental Justice: Blessings and Curses

### *Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai 5777*

May 19, 2017

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This week, we read not one but two Torah portions, the last two sections of the book of Leviticus. Tonight, Mark read from the first, *Behar*, detailing laws requiring the Children of Israel to grant the land a Shabbat, a year of rest, one year out of every seven. Tomorrow, Michael will teach us the latter portion, *Bechukotai*, which imparts a theology of blessings and curses: If the Israelites observe the commandments, God will bless them with rain, abundance, and safety. If, on the other hand, the people lack faith and ignore their responsibilities to God, they will be stricken with disease and famine, and they will be conquered by their enemies.

These two portions seem to have nothing to do with one another. Our ancient rabbis, though, insisted that they must be related. The principle is *smichut parshiot*, meaning “adjacent portions.” If two consecutive parts of the Torah seem to be disconnected, we’re missing something, and we need to find it. The two selections must really be one, somehow.

Many modern Jews don’t believe the theology that Michael is going to teach us tomorrow. Folks may wish to live in a world in which God punishes evildoers and rewards the righteous, but our experience tells us that life often doesn’t work out that way. For example, early Reform Jews rejected prayers for rain, reasoning that rain results from scientifically-explained weather patterns, not prayers or commandment-observance. Worse, retributive justice – blessings granted for goodness, and curses for wickedness – suggests that people who suffer must have brought their fate upon themselves through their own failures or misdeeds.

Mordechai Kaplan, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, dismissed “blessings and curses” theology when he wrote: “To most people, God is not really God, but a magnified demon.” I call this notion “God as super Santa Claus,” handing out gifts to good little children, while the sinners get a lump of coal.

Like Kaplan, my own theology isn’t of a God who grants favors to the righteous or afflicts the wicked. God works in mysterious ways, inscrutable to humans and not reducible to such simplistic blessings and curses. God works

through human beings. We bring God's blessings to the world when we feed the hungry, heal the sick, free the captive, and struggle for justice. Conversely, we bring curses upon the Earth when we lash out with verbal or physical violence, when we pollute the environment or our society, when we are indifferent to poverty; and when we discriminate against our neighbors on the basis of their race or ethnicity, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation or disability status. In other words, while I don't believe that God directly rewards goodness or punishes evil, I affirm that God has created the world in such a way that our righteousness and our wickedness naturally multiply.

No example could be more potent than the environment. Limitless use of fossil fuels – particularly in wealthier, more developed nations such as our own – has changed the climate of this Earth. Previous generations may be excused, not knowing any better. We do, though many choose to ignore that “inconvenient truth.” Living in a society that continues to burn untold tons of coal and barrels of oil, we must look at ourselves, when the whole world suffers the consequences: disappearing polar ice, rising sea levels, massive flooding; and increasingly frequent, devastating storms of every kind, all around the globe. And the problem is destined to worsen: The world's most populous nations, China and India, are rapidly developing, fueling their economies with coal and petroleum. Even the most restrictive climate pacts, strictly observed, would merely slow the increase of environmental devastation. As told in Leviticus, human action has indeed brought curse upon the land, even in some of the precise ways described in the final verses of the *Bechukotai*, that second portion for this Shabbat.

Now, then, let us turn to the first section, *Behar*, and the connection we must draw between the two. Most Americans hold to a philosophy that people have a right to do as they please on their own land. According to words of Torah that Mark shared with us tonight, God does not agree. God tells the Israelite farmer: You may have six crop-years out of every seven. In the seventh year, you must give the land a Shabbat, a year of rest. No planting. No harvesting. God does permit landowners – as well as the poor and strangers – to eat the “volunteers,” crops that grow of their own accord during that seventh year, promising that nobody will starve as a result.

What gives God the right to tell a landowner not to plant? The religious person knows the answer intuitively: The land's real Owner is God. We are merely tenants. The sabbatical year is written into the lease.

One of the blessings of the sabbatical year is that it teaches the observant Israelite to survive, and perhaps even thrive, with less. The connection between the two portions becomes clear: If we will treat the Earth as God's, willing to live with less for the benefit all the world, we will indeed be blessed. If we insist on treating the Earth as ours, chopping down mountains in a futile attempt to satisfy an insatiable appetite for coal, we will curse the Earth. If maximum fueling of our economy is our goal, we will continue sending billions of dollars to the patrons of terror who happen to possess a disproportionate share of the world's petroleum, bringing another kind of curse upon this planet.

*Parashat Behar*, Leviticus 25, which we read tonight, pays special attention to the poor. Seeing that they have enough to eat must be our greatest concern during the sabbatical year, when provisions are light.

Late in 2015, *National Geographic* published a World Bank study about the devastating impact of climate change on the world's poor. Men, women, and children who live in the world's poorest countries consume the least fossil fuels, but suffer the most from rising global temperatures. An outsized share of the world's poor live in low-lying coastal planes and river valleys, most vulnerable to intensifying flooding and devastating storms. We see that even in Arkansas: Who lives in the Delta? The World Bank forecasts that climate change will dramatically increase food prices, as farming conditions change and the world's subsistence farmers are least able to adjust. The World Bank projects rampant starvation, with food prices increasing by nearly 80%, adjusted for inflation.

The Earth is our birthright, our blessing. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, in its Resolution on Climate Justice, resolved, "We are taught not to imitate Esau, spurning the birthright for a mess of pottage. Instead, we are commanded to protect the birthright that is planet Earth, with eagerness to bear our blessed nation's disproportionate share of the short-term burden to stem the tide of global climate change."

*Livrachah v'lo liklalah*: For blessing and not for curse, let us curb our appetite for coal and oil.

*L'sova v'lo l'razon*: For plenty and not for famine, let us call on our nation to lead the world in reducing humanity's carbon footprint, lest fast-changing climate patterns devastate the world's poor.

*Livrachah v'lo liklalah*: For blessing and not for curse, let us live as humble tenants on the Earth that belongs to God.

Amen.