

LECH L'CHA—GENESIS 12:1–17:27

Deserving of the Land

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THE INITIAL CONVERSATION between the Creator of the world and Abraham, understood to be the father of the Jewish people, began not with pleasantries but with an order that Abraham leave his homeland and move to the Land of Israel. The one-sided conversation in the opening verses of *Parashat Lech L'cha* commences with God ordering Abraham to depart for Israel and Abraham obeying without question. The move from Babylonia to Canaan represents God's desire to relocate Abraham to a land that offered greater spiritual capacity to connect with the Divine and to foresee the homeland that his people would eventually inherit. Abraham is told that moving to what will eventually be known as *Eretz Yisrael* will effectuate an actual change in Abraham's spiritual being. As the text teaches, upon moving to Canaan, Abraham's name will "be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2); those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed (Genesis 12:3).

Though Abraham journeys to the land that God shows him, once there he is told that his immediate descendants will not be able to inherit the land; God has not yet decided that the people then dwelling there deserve to be exiled (Genesis 15:16). The text thus suggests something unique about the land: habitation there is dependent upon moral behavior. The Israelite descendants of Abraham are not eligible to claim sovereignty over the land so long as the current inhabitants have not worn out their welcome.

Later in the Torah, we learn which crimes warrant such expulsion. While the Torah mentions a whole array of sinful behaviors that

provoke God's wrath, the three cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality are noted as acts that pollute the Land and cause violators to be spewed from it.¹ We can therefore infer that the Canaanites, the inhabitants referred to in Genesis 15, ultimately become eligible to be conquered and removed from the land once their idolatrous, murderous, and sexually immoral behavior exceeds the boundaries of God's tolerance; then the sanctified Land can no longer tolerate their presence.

Nevertheless, our tradition records that the Canaanites are still given the opportunity to repent from their evil ways and remain in the Land. The midrash tells us that upon entering the land, Joshua sends three letters to the current population, informing them that their sovereignty has lapsed and that if they want to stay in the Land of Israel, their behavior will have to change. Joshua offers the Canaanites three options. The first is that if they would like to leave, they could do so unharmed. The second is war—which, they are promised, would be met with war. The third would enable the Canaanites to repent from their sinful ways and remain in the Land, albeit as subjects of Israelite sovereignty. While they would not be forced to convert to Judaism, they would be required to accept the Noachide Laws and thereby discontinue the particular sins that specifically pollute the Land.²

Once the Israelites assume the role of sovereign nation, the clock on their sovereignty begins as well; they are held to the same standard as the previous inhabitants. The Talmud teaches that violation of the cardinal sins was ultimately what led to the destruction of the First and Second Temples and the exiles that ensued.³ No matter the nation, performance of the three cardinal sins causes pollution of the Land. Once the threshold for sin is met, the current sovereign nation—even Israel—becomes vulnerable to attack and subject to exile.

Isaiah prophesies devastation on the Jewish nation as a result of its sinfulness during the period of the First Commonwealth, lamenting, "Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city, that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt—but now murderers" (Isaiah 1:21). Isaiah's commentary on the immoral behavior in his day

suggests a recognition of sins that pollute the Land, ultimately leading to destruction and exile. We see here the repercussions that materialize in the Land of Israel when justice is absent. For Isaiah, such an atmosphere develops when murder becomes commonplace and perpetrators are not held accountable. Ibn Ezra compares the behavior of the Jewish people to a woman unfaithful to her husband. Just as she pollutes the sanctity of marriage and negates the status that exists between two spouses, so too the Jewish people, by straying, make their relationship to the Land of Israel impure and unsustainable.⁴ Just as an adulterer is then removed from the spouse's home, so too Israel relinquishes its place in God's chosen home.

We can infer that unlike in other lands, exchange of authority in the Land of Israel became possible in the biblical and Rabbinic periods only when one nation reached its threshold of immorality and the Land could no longer tolerate its presence. With the return of Jewish sovereignty to *Eretz Yisrael* in our day, consideration of ancient precedent might be useful in assessing what Jewish sovereignty means today in terms of moral expectations and with respect to other nations living among the Jewish majority. In that sense, we could argue that the future of Jewish sovereignty in the State of Israel today is dependent on its own moral performance, and therefore it must take care to create a polity based on justice where immorality is not tolerated. On the other hand, that same state has the right to expect other nations living within its borders to behave in a similar fashion and to reject the three cardinal sins that pollute the Land, just as Joshua required the Canaanites who remained in the Land.

We should be very careful not to superimpose biblical and Rabbinic milieus onto present-day realities, but that does not mean we should not extract certain principles that are useful in assessing our contemporary situation. The State of Israel today implements many policies that emanate from its safety and security requirements. It is frequently argued that these policies infringe on the rights of the Palestinian people and are therefore unjust. Yet when infringements are the result of a people living within the borders of the Land who have not accepted the Noachide Laws, who have created a culture

that glorifies and rewards murder of innocent Israelis, and who have not officially accepted that the State of Israel is a country like any other that deserves a permanent and secure future, we cannot indict the State of Israel for the measures it takes to defend itself. Nor can we claim that Israel has failed to establish a fair and just society that is supported by an independent judicial system.

Therefore, we Jews living in the Diaspora—who recognize in the State of Israel “the first manifestation of the approach of the redemption,”¹ who believe that Israel has a right to exist and has established a vibrant democracy in a contentious region where human rights are systematically violated by its neighboring countries—can dream of a day when Israel’s adversaries inside its borders and under its rule repudiate violence, commit to peace, and accept that pollution of the Land disqualifies one’s right to inhabit the Land. While we recognize that the Palestinian people have every right to continue living within the borders of Israel and in territory Israel controls and that Palestinians are in no way responsible to follow Jewish law or principles, we can nonetheless hope that they will repudiate violence in the same spirit that Joshua hoped the Canaanites would renounce the violence and murder that the Torah contends pollutes the Land.

We can be grateful that our brothers and sisters living in and defending the State of Israel, despite all the challenges they face and the constant state of war that has shadowed them since independence, have endeavored to protect themselves and their state against all odds. Surely the means that are required are sometimes disturbing, but they are necessary so long as Israel’s adversaries continue to advocate violence and discord and thereby bring pollution into the Land. Our support for their efforts is well founded in our tradition, making our advocacy at every turn a social justice imperative.

NOTES

1. Leviticus 18:25; Numbers 35:33; Jeremiah 16:18; Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.
2. *Vayikra Rabbah* 17:7.
3. Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 55b–58a.

4. Ibn Ezra on Isaiah 1:21.
5. From "Prayer for the State of Israel" by Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi Herzog.