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Behar-Bechukotai

Torah and Topsoil

We've reached a period in our liturgical year when Torah becomes interspersed with topsoil. As we move towards Shavuot, an agricultural holiday that was transformed into the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, we read this week a double portion that concludes the book of Leviticus, *behar-bechukotai*: a double portion that sews together a covenant dependent on agriculture in the Land of Israel with a covenant maintained through knowledge of Torah.

Shavuot begins next Sunday evening. It is a day for renewing the covenant established at Mt. Sinai. The opening words of our portion return us to Sinai:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר:

God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them, “When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of Adonai” (Lev. 25:1).

This statement introduces two concepts related to the soil of Israel: the seventh-year fallow, and the jubilee year. In the first case, the land was to be left untilled for a year, every seventh year: a concept known as, “*shmitah*.” The second idea is known as, *yovel*. In every fiftieth year, the jubilee year, the land “rested” or was left untilled and all Israelite slaves were freed.

At the beginning of this week's second portion, *Bechukotai*, God promises the Israelites that when they arrive in the land of Canaan:

Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land (Lev. 26:5).

This verse envisions an incredible bounty, a harvest resulting from a community working hard and living with integrity by the terms of a covenant. But the promised bounty in our portion is conditioned by a pivotal protasis, an “if” clause, declared in the opening verse of *Bechukotai*:

אם־בְּהִלַּקְתִּי תִלְכוּ

If you follow my laws

וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ

and keep my commandments

וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם

And do them

Only *then* your threshing shall overtake the vintage and you will eat your fill of bread.

This “if – then” statement structures the content of this portion: it connects success in the land to adherence to the covenant. Repeatedly the text returns to the relationship between law and abundance, between knowledge and success.

If you keep, understand, and follow my laws, God states,
Then, this bounty can be yours.
Then, I will dwell among you.
Then, you shall live in peace.

To reinforce this connection between covenantal responsibility and material abundance, the portion describes, in a sharp change of tone, what will happen if the Israelites do not live by this covenant. Utilizing another if-then statement, the portion enters into a graphic description of punishment and exile:

וְאִם־תִּקְלְכוּ עִמִּי קָרִי

But *if* you are hostile to me, God states,

וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע לִי

and are not willing to listen to me,
then

Lev. 26:31 I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors.

Lev. 26:32 I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it.

Lev. 26:33 And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will un-sheath the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin.

If you do not heed me, then the land will experience *sh'mitah*, God insists, it will lay fallow, for you will not be there to till it. My land will experience rest, God declares, for you will be living in the land of your enemies.

This description of exile and punishment indicates the origins of much of our portion. The writers of these texts described exile, and a desolate land, for they knew of it. The composers of our Torah portion, the editors of the Book of Leviticus, were living in exile after the destruction of the first Temple. There, in Babylonia, these writers were caught between their reality and their aspirations for the world. Living in that space, that gap, they projected themselves both forward and back. With their words they conjured up, once again, Sinai: our portion begins with the phrase *Behar Sinai* and, this phrase, *Behar Sinai* is also used in the final verse of the book of Leviticus. Imaginatively placing themselves, once again, at that mountain, the writers created a world in words that they still aspired to construct: a world of abundance, security, and peace vouchsafed by an understanding of Torah.

The aspirations of the priestly writers of Leviticus, should serve us as inspiration: their ancient world-view is compatible with our own.

Throughout the book of Leviticus and in priestly additions to the Torah as a whole, we may discern a method for functioning as a priest, a method that transcends temple and time: a way of being and working that may move us forward.

The priestly goal was to create sanctity in the world. To do this, priests were taught how to make differentiations.

In the words of Leviticus, they were taught,

לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵין הַחֵלֵל
to differentiate between the holy and the profane.

These priests knew how to create separations, how to distinguish between certain foods, and other foods.

Between proper sacrifices and improper ones.

But they were also taught to know the difference between justice and injustice, between improper dealings in the marketplace, and proper care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

We are moving towards Shavuot, a day for renewing the covenant made at Sinai. And This week, the composers of the book of Leviticus emphasized that the setting for our Torah portion is Mount Sinai.

In the book of Exodus, when the Israelites first arrived there, God declared that Israel shall be, מְמַלְכָה כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קֹדֶשׁ
A **kingdom of priests** and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

More than any other movement of Jews, we have laid claim to the notion of being a kingdom of priests. The ideology of Reform Judaism ascribes to each of us the authority to determine sanctity: to differentiate between the holy and the profane. To declare some categories, practices within Judaism, as outmoded; and to describe new categories of *Qedushah*—of holiness.

And like the priests who created our double Torah portion—an abundance of Torah that promises an abundance—We stand here today, cognizant of the gap between our reality and our aspirations, an envisioned future of righteousness and peace.

We see Judaism as it is today,
but work for a stronger Judaism, a more vibrant Judaism, even a different Judaism for tomorrow.

We know of how our community functions and operates today, but we envision a better synagogue, an even more inclusive and dynamic congregation.

In our portion this week, at Mt. Sinai, God declares the stipulation for a covenant that will lead to security and abundance. It begins with the word *if*:

אם־בְּהִלַּקְתִּי תֵלְכוּ וְאִת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:
If you follow my laws and keep my mitzvot and do them, then you will have security and peace.

There's a midrash that asks: what does the phrase, אם־בְּהִלַּקְתִּי תֵלְכוּ, what does the phrase “if you follow my laws” mean? Does it mean to keep *mitzvot*? It can't, the midrash answers because as the verse continues, וְאִת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ If you follow my laws and *keep my mitzvot* and do them. So then what *is* the meaning of אם־בְּהִלַּקְתִּי תֵלְכוּ if you follow my laws? It means, the midrash answers, to toil at understanding Torah (Sifra 1:2).

To toil at understanding Torah, to toil in Torah.
To sift its words for new meanings.
To plant ourselves in it:
to grow, to flourish.

We move towards Shavuot— a day on which we imaginatively place ourselves, once again, at Sinai.

We are the inheritors of the covenant forged at Sinai and we possess the authority to innovate it. And how do we do this? Like the priests of old, we study our past, speak a world in words, and then we labor, intently, to construct it.