

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai
The Covenant with Eretz Yisrael
Sarah Rosenberg - Class of 2025

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai contains the infamous *tochecha*, the rebuke, by God. We read all the blessings B'nei Yisrael will merit if we follow God's word and also all the curses that will befall us if we fail to do so. The list is harsh, scathing, and theologically troubling, to say the least.

Yet, there is a mysterious line at the end of it:

(מא) אֶף-אֲנִי אֵלֶּה עִמָּם בְּקָרִי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיהֶם אוֹ-אֲזִי יִכְנַע לְבָבָם הָעֵרֶל וְאֲזִי יִרְצֻוּ אֶת-עֵוֹנָם: (מב) וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶף אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶף אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֲזָכֹר וְהֶאֱרַץ אֲזָכֹר:

(41) When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their uncircumcised heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity. (42) Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land. (Vayikra 26:41-42)

After the list of curses, God offers B'nei Yisrael the opportunity for *teshuva*, repentance. God mentions the covenant with our ancestors, as we might expect, but why does God include the land, הארץ? Why will God “remember the land” as well?

Exile from Eretz Yisrael is often described as a punishment for iniquity, thereby tying the land to our own actions. *Teshuva* prompts our return. Eretz Yisrael can only host morally pure inhabitants and will reject those guilty of *avodah zara* (idolatry) or sexual immorality. We see the land anthropomorphized as וְתִקֵּא הָאֶרֶץ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל “vomiting out” its inhabitants (Vayikra 18:25), as it cannot physically tolerate immorality on its soil.

So, the land is not passive. It serves as God's agent, acting as a gatekeeper against sin. Only those who keep God's *mitzvot* are worthy to dwell in Eretz Yisrael. S.Y. Agnon, Israel's Nobel Prize-winning writer, discusses this theme in his novella *Bilvav HaYamim, In the Heart of the Seas*. Agnon tells the tale of a small group of Chasidim from Eastern Europe who sojourn to Eretz Yisrael in the 1870s. After their perilous journey, they finally reach Yerushalayim, yet some of these pilgrims barely last a few weeks. Throughout his novella, Agnon emphasizes some people are found to be worthy while others are not. He describes a group of angels that surround Eretz Yisrael and permit only those morally fit to enter. Anyone considered unworthy is

driven away. Agnon illustrates that the sanctity of the land can supersede an individual's desire to settle in their covenantal home.

In these cases, we see a collaboration between the land and God. When the inhabitants sin, the land vomits them out, or even refuses to allow them to dwell in the land in the first place.

Yet, we also see an inverse relationship between land and people, with the land being punished for the sins of its inhabitants. God in the *tochecha* describes the desolation of the land once Bnei Yisrael is thrown out. The Kli Yakar notes in Vayikra 26:42 this odd detail and asks: What did the land do wrong? Did it sin as well? When Moshe recounts the *tochecha* in Devarim, he notes that God will devastate the soil with sulfur and salt, just like when He destroyed Sodom. When the nations of the world and future generations ask why this occurred, they will be told: because Bnei Yisrael abandoned the covenant with God and turned to *avodah zara* (Devarim 29:23-25). The land is devastated alongside the people.

Perhaps, then, the covenantal relationship is expanded to include not only God and B'nei Yisrael, but also Eretz Yisrael. When the nation sins, the land is also punished. The land does its best to keep only morally pure inhabitants, but at some point B'nei Yisrael may be too far gone, and the land is punished as well — perhaps for its failure to maintain its own moral purity. Unlike the previous Canaanites who were expelled and conquered with no effect on the land, when we sin the land suffers with us. Both B'nei Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael are chosen for a special purpose, and they depend upon each other.

From the beginning of humanity, we see this close relationship, as Adam in Bereishit is charged *לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ*, to work and guard the land, and when Adam is punished, so too is the land. God says in His curse to Adam: *אָרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרְךָ בְּעֵצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה*, כּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ, “Cursed be the ground because of you; By hard labor shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (Bereishit 3:17). This relationship between humanity and the land exists even before Avraham and long before the formation of B'nei Yisrael.

As Diaspora Jews, for better or for worse, we often neglect this aspect of the covenant. But a cursory glance at these last few *parshiyot* of Vayikra remind us of the land's importance and our interconnected relationship with it. As God's agent and gatekeeper, the land expresses God's favor or disfavor with the Jewish people, depending on our own behavior. But its fate is ultimately tied to our own. God remembers our ancestors, but God also remembers the land.



Sarah Rosenberg came to Yeshivat Maharat after working with high school students at the Tikvah Fund. She received her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University in International Relations and History. Sarah planned to enter the world of Washington, D.C. think tanks after completing internships at various policy research institutions but decided during her senior year to instead pursue further her Jewish education. She then spent a year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and discovered her love of beit midrash learning. Sarah lives in Manhattan and can be found baking challah, browsing used bookstores, and wrestling with Jewish texts.