

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai: Leaning In As A Biblical Commandment Jennifer Geretz

The parshiyot of Behar and Bechukotai, read together in the diaspora this week, showcase the eternal connections binding together God, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel as well as the moral responsibilities and obligations which serve as the relationship's scaffolding.

Parshat Behar, Leviticus 25:23 states:

*...But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is **mine**, you are but strangers resident with me.*

וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמָּכַר לְצִמְתָּת כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ
כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי:

Although the Jewish people are given the land of Israel in which to *live*, we are not given the land of Israel to *own*. The Jews are God's at-will tenants. What are the rental contract's terms? Leviticus 25:17-19 makes clear that it is a behavior-based tenancy:

Do not wrong one another, but fear your G d; for I the LORD am your God. You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security...

(יז) וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת־עַמִּיתוֹ וְיִרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי
יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (יח) וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי
תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְיִשְׁבְּתֶם עַל־הָאָרֶץ לְבִטָּח:

Parshat Behar states explicitly that we must treat people with honesty and consideration, we may not take advantage of those fallen upon hard times, and we are mandated to treat fairly the strangers and foreigners living with us. The obligation to treat our fellow humans morally is unconditional, and the only way to live securely in the land.

If we do not abide by our covenant, if we oppress others and act in a cruel, dishonest, or corrupt fashion toward each other or toward the foreigners and strangers who live in our midst, Parshat Bechukotai tells us that our tenancy will be revoked:

But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant...I will wreak misery upon you... I will set My face against you: you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you. You shall flee though none pursues. (Leviticus 26:14-17)

(יד) וְאִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת
הָאֵלֶּה: (טו) וְאִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמְאָסוּ וְאִם־אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי
תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם
אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: (טז) אֲף־אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה־זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי
עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהִלָּה אֶת־הַשְׁחָפֹת וְאֶת־הַקְדַּחַת מְכֻלֹּת עֵינַיִם
וּמַדִּיבֹת נֶפֶשׁ וְזִרְעֹתֶם לָרִיק זִרְעֶכֶם וְאָכְלוּ אֹיְבֵיכֶם:
(יז) וְנָתַתִּי פָנִי בָכֶם וְנִגַּפְתֶּם לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְרָדוּ בָכֶם
שׁוֹנְאֵיכֶם וְנִסְתֶּם וְאִין־רָדְף אֶתְכֶם: (ויקרא פרק כו)

Not only will our tenancy in our land be terminated upon the event of our moral failure, but God makes clear that our fate even as exiles will be grim:

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they

(לו) וְהִנָּשְׁאָרִים בָּכֶם וְהִבְאֵתִי
מֶרֶךְ בְּלִבְכֶם בְּאַרְצֹת אֹיְבֵיהֶם
וְרָדְף אֹתָם קוֹל עֵלָה נִדְף וְנָסוּ:

shall fall though none pursues. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies, but shall perish among the nations; and the land of your enemies shall consume you. Those of you who survive shall be heartsick over their iniquity in the land of your enemies; more, they shall be heartsick over the iniquities of their fathers.
 (Leviticus 26: 36-38)

מִנְסֵת־חֶרֶב וְנָפְלוּ וְאִין רִדָּף: (לז)
 וְנָשְׁלוּ אִישׁ־בְּאָחִיו כְּמִפְנֵי־חֶרֶב
 וְרִדָּף אִין וְלֹא־תִהְיֶה לָכֶם
 תְּקוּמָה לִפְנֵי אֲבִיכֶם: (לח)
 וְאִבְדֶתֶם בְּגוֹיִם וְאָכְלָה אֶתְכֶם
 אֶרֶץ אֲבִיכֶם: (ויקרא פרק כו)

We can either live as successful, moral tenants of a holy land, or live elsewhere as insecure refugees tormented by our failure, cursed eternally to bear the seeds of our own destruction. There is no nuanced way to approach the binary choice given us in Behar- Bechukotai. We succeed, or we fail, as a people in our own land. If we fail, we fail not just in Israel, but everywhere. There is no limit given on how many times we may have to go through this cycle, how many times it may take us to get it right.

The land will always be ours if we merit it, but it can never be ours when we do not. There is not an option to live in the land of Israel and engage in corrupt, destructive, or immoral behavior. God only allows Jews to live in the land of Israel as our best selves.

Anytime we fear we may again be failing our moral mandate, Torah law obligates each and every Jew, in the land of Israel or in chutz la'aretz, to passionately "lean in" and invest our efforts in the land of Israel and the welfare of all its inhabitants. The more we fear that we are failing to fulfill God's requirement to live as our morally best selves in the land of Israel, the harder we must push to change our trajectory. G-d makes it very clear that the cost of failure is disaster not only for the Jews living in Israel, but for the entire people of Israel, wherever they may live, throughout the generations. Turning away from that task is to reject the Divine.



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