



Canfei Nesharim

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Parshat Devarim: Belonging to the Land

By Matthew Mausner

*“...You have dwelt long enough at this mountain. Turn and journey, and come to the mountain of the Amorites and to all its neighboring places, in the plain, on the mountain, and in the lowland, and in the south and by the seashore, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, until the great river, the Euphrates River. See, I have set the land before you; come and possess the land which the Lord swore to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them and their descendants after them.”*¹

The idea of belonging runs deeply throughout the Torah, and particularly in this week’s Torah portion, Devarim. For the Jewish people, belonging is not only manifested in the sense of belonging to a people, but also a very deep sense of this people belonging to a land. We belong to *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel), and only here can a deep aspiration for wholeness in our homeland be fulfilled, and can we truly manifest as a nation. While being a light unto the nations may sometimes require us to bring messages of healing from slavery and spiritual brokenness and exile to the farthest corners of the earth, the essence of our *tikun* (repair of ourselves and of the world) is strong Jewish life in the Jewish homeland.

Reading Torah as an organic whole, a message stands out: This is how the world needs to be fixed — You, the Children of Israel, need to live according to the *mitzvot* (Divine commandments), not just anywhere, but “*in the land which I will show you.*”² That is to say, the world will be fixed by the Jewish people doing G-d’s will in the land in which G-d gave us to live.

One such expression of G-d’s will is caring for the Land of Israel. To live in exile is to live a contradiction. If a person does not live in his or her homeland, if one has no concrete expectation that his or her descendants will be living on the same land, then what reason is there to treat the land right, to live sustainably, and to ensure that the resources and health of the land will be there for future generations? Human beings are hard-wired with instincts to protect and feed our children; these instincts can and should reinforce our attitudes towards our land. We should feel just as strongly that our land and its health must be protected. We should know in our bones that they are one and the same. But when we do not live in our land, when we are separated from that deeper commitment, then we are disconnected from the wholeness of our instincts.

To do the 'right' thing according to Torah, and to do the right thing according to secular morals or science, are often seen in opposition.³ But even to make a separation between the environment and

¹ Deuteronomy 1:7-9.

² Exodus 12:25, Exodus 13:6, Leviticus 23:10, Leviticus 25:2, also see Genesis 12:6, Genesis 15:7, Numbers 33:53.

³ See “The Genesis of Faith: The Depth Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel” by John C. Merkle, pp. 3-18, or Spinoza, “Principles of Cartesian Philosophy”, pp. 28-41.

society—or to separate nature from the world of human interaction, speech, morals, and behavior—is a classic example of the mentality of dualism so prevalent in Western culture.⁴ Yet as Jews we know that the spiritual environment is not separate from the natural environment. People who treat other people horribly while seeking to protect land or sustainability are not doing anything laudable; the Nazis, for example, were big proponents of organic gardening.⁵

American Indians have a saying: decisions should be made for the 'seventh generation'. Conduct in a land, the way one treats the environment, is best determined by having in mind what will be best for one's descendants.⁶ One's great-grandchildren, it is presumed, will be living in and dependent on that very same land. Deep ecology from the family outward: the only truly responsible way to make decisions is to have the seventh generation in mind—and the many, many generations of microorganisms, plants, insects, and animals who constitute the web of life on which all depend. In Devarim, the Torah is trying to clue us in to this logic, but is rightly placing a deeper rationale above any simple self-interested rationalism (or nationalism).

We learn that not only our own health and prosperity, but the health of the land, depends on our conduct: “And it will be, if you hearken to My commandments that I command you this day to love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give the rain of your land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated. Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you.”⁷

This is really an environmental concept: our national moral conduct helps make it rain, helps the soil be healthy, helps bring the blessings of the Divine on all life in the land. This is a holistic prescription: if we fulfill our role, *shalom* (peace) will envelop Israel—its land, its people—and the entire world.⁸ The fabric of life on earth is interwoven and interdependent. Our conduct—our self-control over the numerous collective human efforts that create and pollute—is essential to maintaining the health of this fundamental web of life on which we all depend.

Jews are meant to be a light unto nations: by living in an exemplary way, by fully and proudly manifesting our mission in our national homeland, by conducting ourselves in ways that respect both the eternal laws revealed in Torah, and the natural laws on which life on earth depends. To be ecologically responsible, to be spiritually responsible, and to be politically responsible: these are all really the same thing at root. The Torah teaches us again and again how must treat trees, plants, animals and individual people. In Devarim, we learn how we must relate as a nation to our land.

⁴ See Robert Godwin, “One Cosmos Under God: The Unification of Matter, Life, Mind and Spirit”, pp. 12, 156 for example.

⁵ See George L. Mosse, “Nazi Culture, pp. 104-130 for example.

⁶ See, for example, John Gneisenau Niehardt *Black Elk Speaks*, pp. 94-103, or Jerry Mander’s *In The Absence of the Sacred*, pp. 211-220, or Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, pp. xi, 308, etc.

⁷ Deut. 11:13-21; this passage is the second paragraph of the Shema prayer. (translation from chabad.org).

⁸ Both Rav Kook and Rav Ashlag discuss this in depth.

Suggested Action Items:

- Live in or visit Israel.
- Keep *Shemitta* and *Trumas/Maiser* in Israel.
- Walk around *eretz Yisrael* (every four *amot*—every few steps—is a mitzvah).
- Plant or tend a garden—get your hands dirty in your own land!

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