Deirdre Gabbay Bechukotai 5774

Good evening.

As a person who has always felt both cared for by, and caring towards, the earth, I found myself deeply moved by reading Bechukotai, and at the same time filled with questions. The words of it sang out to me of relationship between God, human beings, and the earth, and more precisely, of an earth which mediates the relationship between God and human beings.

In Bechukotai, we are instructed by God regarding the commandments we have been given. We are told that if we keep them, we will enjoy ***rains*** which come for our benefit at the correct times, the ***earth*** will yield abundant produce, the ***tree*** of the ***field*** will bestow its ***fruit***, and we will be granted ***peace***. When we stick close to the rules we have been given for how to treat one another and the earth, we are strong and healthy, our enemies do not threaten us, and there is peace within the land. In this world, God’s presence abides in our midst and moves about amongst us. We walk in God’s ways, and there we encounter God’s presence.

Conversely, if we spurn the commandments, then we will suffer from disease, starvation, and ravaging enemies. The earth will no longer be benevolent towards us. The heavens will become like iron, the earth like copper. The earth will not yield its produce, and the tree will not give its fruit. As we become increasingly casual toward the responsibilities that God has given us, God becomes casual with us, delivering us into the hands of our enemies. Finally, our land becomes be desolate; our enemies who settle there will be appalled by it. God’s spirit will reject us.

Now it is not surprising that many of the classical commentaries dwell on the question of cause, effect, and miracle in this text. They also dwell on the accusation from outside the Jewish community that this text shows that the reward of the Jews is material and earthly, and therefore inferior to the spiritual rewards promised for others in the afterlife. Nachmanides counters that in fact, the soul “naturally” lives forever. “It is punishment which bring about the extinction of the guilty souls, whilst the others, by their very nature, live forever.” In this view it is the greater miracle to achieve such perfection on earth as this text describes. Abravenel asks, “How can [they] flourish their reward after death, seeing that we Jews (may) attain that (spiritual) bliss and communion with the Divine in this life.”

But the question of cause and effect is what holds the greatest interest for me. As a modern person, fully invested in science, I read these passages with wonder. Rather than insisting on reading this text so as to view God as bringing about the promised blessings or admonitions through otherwise unexplainable miracles for purposes of reward or punishment, perhaps there is another lesson here.

Might this text be teaching us that the commandments themselves, and the specific limits they impose and imperatives they require, enfold important insights about how to “operate” the earth, so as to bring about the blessings that God desires for us – that we should be healthy and at peace, and intimately in relationship with God? And conversely, might be able to bring to bear our deepening scientific insights into ecology and earth science to help us understand important aspects of intention latent within the commandments themselves?

In a great deal of what I have learned about Torah in the past few years, I have come to see the relationship between myself and the Divine Other as mediated, if you will, by my relationships with the human other. I can learn a great deal about how to be in relationship with human beings by deepening my understanding of and attachment to God’s intention. And conversely, I can try to deepen my understanding of the intention of religious texts when I bring to my reading of them some of what I know about how it feels to be a human being in relationship with other human beings. If we can say that in the human “other,” we find embodied an aspect of the indwelling presence of God in our midst, an aspect of the Shechina, then we may find ourselves exploring a numinous space between internal and external, between face and image.

I wonder if these relationships, between one person and another person, embody our individual relationship with one another, via God’s intention for us. And if so, might we be able to understand our relationship with the earth, both what it gives to us (communally) and the care that we are in turn enjoined (collectively) to demonstrate towards it, as embodying some sort of analogous relationship between the **community** and God. Might it be that the **community’s** relationship with God is mediated through the ***earth***, through which God bestows specifically ***communal*** blessings? If we can read this text to suggest that our communal relationship with God is mediated by the earth, we might then encounter another aspect of the Shechinah in the earth itself. As we look out upon the “face of the earth,” are we seeing another face of the Shechinah? What should be our response?

The clue that the text **deliberately** gives us permission to look closely at the “causality” linking the commandments and the blessings lies in plain sight. After the elaboration of the blessings, and the still more graphic elaboration of the admonitions regarding collective fidelity to the commandments, God asserts that even so, God’s relationship with Israel is enduring. God states “When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity. 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. For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its Sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws.”

Its Sabbath years! The Sabbatical, or Shmita years that had been neglected along with the rejection of the other commandments will, in the end, be required, so that the land can rest! Only then **will? can?** the earth bring forth blessings again. This t’shuvah is doubly literal, that is, literal in both senses of its meaning: repentance (for spurning the commandments) and return (to the land which had been left uninhabited and uninhabitable). It is a spiritual and material t’shuvah, and it involves B’nai Israel, God, and the earth itself.

I am not suggesting, in emphasizing the importance of the Shmita years to this story, that the text gives us permission to ignore the other commandments. There are many preconditions for peace and social justice – the health of the earth may be foundational, but I find it impossible to read into the text any notion that God envisions the earth’s well-being as an end in itself. However, and provocatively, there **are** those who suggest that one can find expressions of many other mitzvot encapsulated within the Shmita laws. And indeed Rabbi David Seidenberg of NeoHasid goes so far as to assert that:

“The whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a ***society*** that observed Shmita … The Sabbatical year was the guarantor and the ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life, and it was a justice that embraced not just fellow human beings, but the land and all life…. In modern parlance we call it “sustainability,” but that’s just today’s buzzword. It’s called Shmita in the holy tongue, “release” – releasing each other from debts, releasing the land from work, releasing ourselves from our illusion of selfhood into the freedom of living with others and living for the sake of all life…. This is what is meant to “choose life so that you may live, you and your seed after you.” (Deut 30:19) This is what is meant to “increase your days and your children’s days on the ground for as long as the skies are over the land.” (Deut 11:21)

The Shmita laws extend far beyond letting the land rest, although rest is such an important concept within our tradition that we should in no way underestimate its significance.

In the words of the 7 Seeds Project, an organization dedicated to creating a contemporary set of educational tools for comprehending and interacting with the Shmita concept, “Shmita, the final year of a shared seven year calendar cycle, marked a period when all debts would be forgiven, agricultural lands would lie fallow, private land holdings would become open to the commons, and staples such as food storage and perennial harvests would be freely accessible to all. The Shmita year had a depth which reached into every aspect of society and culture, transforming the way we related to land, food, money, and time.”

To function, Shmita must be as much about how we live in the six years leading up to it as it is about the Shmita year itself. Our weekly Shabbat is intended to infuse our week, and requires preparation. So to, the Sabbatical years.

We find ourselves reading this text today, in the months leading up to a Shmita year, 5775. Given the dire condition of our earth, the strife, the lack of justice on so many levels, at home and abroad, I am drawn to look for inspiration, wisdom, and community in our texts, and in the opportunity to study them with you. That is why, in a few weeks’ time, at Shavuot, when we celebrate receiving the commandments at Sinai and spend the night engaged with them in study, I am looking forward offering the chance to explore the Shmita laws together. We will try to understand these laws as they were written, and discuss how they might be given meaning in a contemporary context. I hope you will join me.

Shabbat Shalom.