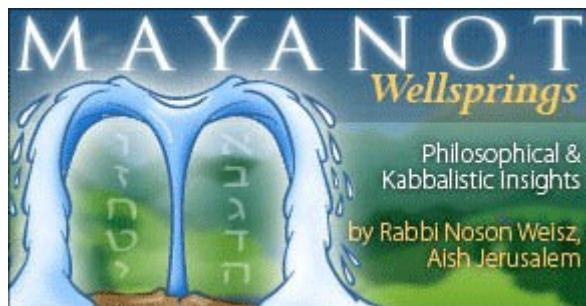


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## Believe It Or Not

In the eyes of many commentators, the Book of Vayikra, which we finish reading this Sabbath, occupies a very special place among the Five Books of Moses. It is the midpoint of the Torah, surrounded on each side by a pair of holy books. It deals specifically with the topics most related to holiness and contains some of the most sublime commandments of the Torah such as "*Love your neighbor.*"

This climactic portion of God's Torah ends on a particularly negative note, with the curses of Bechukotai. The Maharal taught us centuries ago that there are no coincidences in matters of the spirit. If this is the rule regarding spirituality in general, how much more applicable must this be to the Torah itself. The Chumash was laid out and edited with the utmost care by the Great Editor Himself. It is therefore fair to

ask why God chose to end this most special book of His Torah on such an ominous and discouraging note.

### THE ETERNAL TRUTHS OF JUDAISM ARE CONFIRMED BY TRAGEDIES

One of the remarkable aspects of Jewish history is the fact that the eternal truths of Judaism are verified by its multiple tragedies. Even non-Jewish thinkers have employed the incredible phenomenon/feat of Jewish survival as the prime indication of Divine providence. For example, when Louis XIV asked for proof of God's controlling hand in the historical process, the great Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal responded, "Why, the Jews, your Majesty, The Jews!"

Mark Twain, himself a self-acknowledged skeptic penned these words (Harper's Magazine, 1899):

"The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away. The Greek and Roman followed, made a vast noise and they are gone. Other peoples have sprung up, and held their torch up high for a while, but it burned out and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains.

What is the secret of his immortality?"

### **THE NEED TO PROVE JUDAISM TO JEWS**

Ironically, demonstrating the truth of Judaism to the descendants of Abraham, the very people who have miraculously survived these tragedies, whose own grandparents stood at Mt. Sinai and heard the commandments from God Himself, has become a difficult task in our modern post-industrial world. Wherever we lived scattered in exile until the beginning of the twentieth century, we were mainly among believers. But the turmoil of the past century and the rigorous separation of church and state practiced by modern democracies have marginalized the religious life style. The Bible testifies that we have always found it extremely difficult to resist the pull of the outside world. As the culture became secular, so did we.

Despite the miraculous rebirth of the Jewish state, an unparalleled event in human history, fully equivalent to an actual encounter with a singularity in physics, most Jews currently living have lapsed into indifference or outright agnosticism and the survival of the Jewish people is threatened by assimilation.

### **JEWISH HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF**

In the Jewish homeland, Israel, which has served as the spiritual center of the Jewish people from the moment of its re-establishment and which will also house the majority of Jews according to demographers within the next decade or so, we have reproduced the religious tensions

prevailing in the second Temple period. The internal history of Israel in the second Temple era was dominated by the fierce and sometimes even bloody battle between Jewish Hellenists, who perceived themselves primarily as citizens of the modern world and only secondarily as Jewish, and the followers of traditional Judaism who believed in the unique destiny of the descendants of Abraham.

### **A SECOND CHANCE**

Tradition tells us that the destruction of the second Temple and the subsequent exile was caused by our failure to reach unity and solve our ideological divide. God has given us a second opportunity in the same locale and in much the same circumstances. Once again we are a divided people surrounded by enemies that we can overcome only by reaching internal unity. This time we must not fail.

Under the circumstances, it is important to present the fundamentals of Jewish belief in a language that will impact on the modern secular mindset with which a large portion of our fellow Jews confront the world. We Jews are all in the same boat and will share a common destiny in spite of the diversity of our ideological outlook. Our most important task is to learn to stand united so that we can release the incredible might latent in our people. The Torah states and history confirms that we can only unite around our common heritage. It is crucial for us to reach out to our fellow Jews with love in language they can relate to so that we can attain this desired union with as little conflict and pain as possible.

As a first step, let us make an observation that is entirely self-evident but one that shocks most people when they first encounter it. A good way to make the point is to examine why/how thinking people choose their careers. We shall adopt journalism as a typical example. Let us assume that people who enter the field choose the career of journalism not only for the security and financial rewards that it offers, but because they relate to what they are doing as being significant and meaningful.

### **HOW TO CHOOSE A CAREER**

What makes the potential journalist think that journalism is significant and meaningful? We all know the answer.

Journalists keep the public informed, and it is important for the public to be well informed. Why?

The public needs to be informed so that it can make intelligent decisions regarding its representatives. Are they doing a good job, or should they be thrown out? Not only is information important in the selection of representatives, it is also crucial to keep politicians honest. Without accurate news there is no accountability. Without accountability there is no honesty.

Now let us ask ourselves, how do the potential journalists know that these assumptions on which the importance of their careers rest are true? They are certainly far from being self-evident.

Are people in general, whose doings never make the news, honest? The answer is obviously that they are. Does anyone report

on what they are doing? Obviously not. If public reporting is such an essential factor in the maintenance of honesty, what keeps most people honest?

Perhaps you will say it is their bosses and families. The employers who pay them make sure that their employees are honest and productive. In personal life, the watchdog of integrity is the fact that dishonest people tend to be rejected by their spouses and families. That is why they do not need the scrutiny of journalism. But politicians pay themselves. They have no political spouses or bosses to keep them honest. They need the journalist.

But isn't this merely a belief? Perhaps people will always throw out the incumbents when the economy doesn't function well, and they will always keep the incumbents when they prosper, even if they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that their politicians are dishonest, as many people indeed argue. That would make the career of journalism irrelevant except as entertainment.

### **WHEN WE SAY WE KNOW WE REALLY ONLY BELIEVE**

What is the true response? The potential journalist will answer the following. "It is true that I haven't thought through all these questions carefully. But there are people who have. Who are these people? The professors and intellectuals who write the books on political science. When I say I know that journalism is important, I am really accepting their conclusions."

This answer is perfectly reasonable and correct. The intellectuals and philosophers who have studied the political process have clearly stated over and over again that honest journalists are the essential watchdogs of democracy. Without free access to information democracy will die.

What the potential journalist is really doing is placing his trust in the intellectuals who spend their lives researching and thinking about abstract questions. In effect, he has delegated the need to think about something that is very central to his life to the experts whose conclusions he accepts on the bases of trust and belief.

### **IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO TRUST THE INTELLECTUALS**

There is nothing unreasonable about any of this. There is no reason to distrust the political scientists who came up with these conclusions regarding the importance of journalism. Most people that we meet are reasonably honest. There is no reason to think that intellectuals are any different and that they are misrepresenting the truth in their conclusions. It is obvious that just as this scenario applies to the potential journalist, it applies to any other career. Only the experts have the information that establishes the importance of any activity that is not clearly necessary to bare survival. We all place our trust in the intellectuals.

But if we grant the reasonableness of this process, shouldn't this equally apply to the study of Judaism? There is a fairly large group of very bright Jewish intellectuals who spend their working lives immersed in

the study of Torah in every generation. The vast majority of these intellectuals invariably conclude that the Torah and all its teachings are absolutely true and relevant. Do we have any reason to mistrust their conclusions, when we are so willing to accept the conclusions of the experts in every other field?

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF VERIFICATION**

Perhaps you will object and say, in all these other areas the conclusions actually work! We can look around the world and see that everything functions substantially as predicted by the experts! This amounts to objective proof that the conclusions of the experts are trustworthy, but in the case of the Torah and Judaism, how can we verify the conclusions of the Torah experts?

It was to meet this objection that God offered us the dire predictions contained in Bechukotai and in the rest of the books of the Bible. In a manner that is unique among all the world's religions, God put Himself out on a limb and made predictions. In effect He gave us the means to test if Judaism works or not. Have the predictions of Bechukotai worked? The answer is clearly in the affirmative.

We Jews are still here vigorous and strong, just as predicted. We have suffered just as predicted, when we have behaved in a manner that triggered the dire predictions offered just as predicted. Yet, in the case of Judaism we are not prepared to trust either the experts or the objective evidence of the predictions that have been historically verified. Why not?



## **FAITH VS. REASON, A FALSE DICHOTOMY**

At first glance this question sounds naïve. We have been so brainwashed by our society, that our instinctive reaction to religious questions is to dismiss them on the grounds that religion is based on faith, whereas the important portions of secular life are the products of reason. It is startling to discover that actually everything in life is based on faith.

Jews should be especially aware of this just by glancing at our situation in the world. I reside in Israel where I am subjected daily to the arguments between the left and the right. The left claims very strongly that there is no possible military solution to the current Mid-east problem. The only possible resolution is to reach a political accommodation with the Palestinians.

There are weekly demonstrations against the 'occupation' and strident calls for us to take the army out of the occupied territories.

The right answers that there is no one to negotiate with, and until there is, we have no other choice but to protect ourselves militarily against the terrorists. The left answers that as long as we oppress the Palestinians through our 'unjustified' military occupation, they will never negotiate. We must demonstrate our good will by leaving first, and then the 'peaceful element' among the Palestinians will force the rest to respond. The argument always ends in a standoff.

## **THE PREPAREDNESS TO BET YOUR LIFE ON YOUR BELIEFS**

Aren't both sides merely expressing their unverified beliefs? No one actually knows what will happen if we actually gave up our military option, dismantled the 'settlements' that most favored of mantras in the leftist lexicon? Presumably if someone could prove scientifically that there would be no response to such a grand gesture on the part of the Palestinians other than to resume the terrorist attack with greater force, the leftists themselves would agree that such a course was suicidal. In other words, these most intelligent people are willing to bet the collective survival of the people of Israel on their belief in Palestinian human nature.

But perhaps they believe in the sympathy of mankind. Perhaps they think that in this worst-case scenario, we could turn to the world for protection and say, "You see, we are such upright humanitarians, it is your moral duty to protect us." Isn't this also a belief? Looking at the history of the Jewish people, can any one honestly maintain that the world has ever shown its willingness to prevent the slaughter of innocent Jews? Perhaps it would be different this time, perhaps not, but is this anymore than a belief?

## **JEW'S CANNOT AVOID BELIEF AS THE BASIS OF LIFE**

Why is the belief in God any less sensible than the belief in people? If we believed in God we would attribute the source of our problems to the predictions of Bechukotai. We would know how to fix them instantaneously by simply returning to God

and His Torah. Would believing in Bechukotai be any more unreasonable or naive than placing one's trust in Chairman Arafat's good will? How can someone who is willing to risk his life on Palestinian good will patronize the religious believer who prefers to place his trust in God on the grounds of naivete?

### **WE WANT THE WORLD TO MAKE SENSE**

But the matter goes deeper. Thinking human beings have set up societies that are based on the dictates of reason. We legislate against the world that natural reality would produce if it were left to its own devices. We protect the weak against the strong, and extend everyone equal rights under our laws, a clear reversal of the situation that would prevail under natural law. We absolutely abhor all types of oppression and pat ourselves on the back for having eliminated to the best of our ability the horrors of slavery, of the oppression of women, of racial discrimination, and of the heartless exploitation of child labor and the sweatshop. We obviously feel very strongly that the world should be based on reason rather than naked physical strength.

Yet, we choose to believe that we live in a universe where every life form is the product of the dog-eat-dog process of natural selection, where actions are devoid of natural moral consequences without a shred of evidence to support this proposition. Whoever has the slightest expertise in the sciences knows that there is no evidence to support the theory of evolution, or the fact that the universe

brought itself into existence through some sort of Big Bang. At best, the position might be described as a standoff.

There is no evidence that God created the world as written in the Bible, and there is no evidence for the position that it could have come about spontaneously through the blind forces of nature. In such a situation, the choice of which type of world one chooses to accept is a matter that rests entirely on belief.

### **A WORLD OF REASON**

Parshat Bechukotai presents us with a world that is run according to the dictates of reason. Actions have moral consequences and the human values we treasure are built into the design of nature itself. Secular science presents us with a world that runs according to the morally indifferent rules of physical force. If there is no proof on either side, and the choice of the world we choose to accept has to rest on the power of belief, why would any reasonable person choose the morally insensitive world of the scientist as his reality?

As there is absolutely no reason not to, let us accept the world presented by Bechukotai as the real one just for the sake of argument. When you strip away all the trimmings what is the real difference between that world and the one in which most of us have chosen to live?

### **WHAT IS OUR DESTINY**

Where is the world going? What is the secular vision of Utopia that the Western world is striving to actualize? Those who are at all into science fiction know that the

most common projection of the world of the future comes in two forms in the imagination of writers.

Science has overcome the problems of scarcity and population control. The world has finally unified into a single political entity where everyone has civil rights. Robots and computers manage everything. There is no need for anyone to struggle or work. Staving off boredom is the greatest human problem. Everyone is plugged into a machine that keeps him fed and stimulated and in a state of pleasure. In short, according to this common vision, we are facing a destiny as glorified couch potatoes should we manage to solve all our problems.

The second common projection found in works of science fiction is related to exploring the universe. We will leave this planet and tame new horizons galaxies, and explore new eco-systems. There we will have new problems to solve before reaching the local Utopia and will be able to revive the challenging world of our pasts. This projection of the future is really reliving the past which is obviously more appealing than the here and now.

**DOES THE FUTURE HAVE A PURPOSE?**

Is there any purpose to such existence in either view? Is there any wonder that God rejects it?

What does God really want of us in the vision of Bechukotai? He wants us to accept that we have a purpose in life that leads to something more glorious than these scenarios. The world is vastly richer

and more complex than the one that can be discovered by exploring the aftermath of the Big Bang. There is a wonderfully rich world of spirituality that we have not yet even entered to look forward to.

The truth is that nothing has changed very drastically since Bechukotai was written at Mt.Sinai. Human beings are still a race of believers just as they were back then. The nations still believe in God but also in the sun the moon and the stars. God may exist but nature runs according to natural law. We Jews still believe in the transcendental God who created a world that makes sense and functions according to moral rules. The beliefs haven't changed, only the words. It's time to wake up and smell the coffee.



**You Can Get Satisfaction**

Most of Parashat Bechukotai deals with the disastrous consequences of rebellion. If the Jewish People fails to obey God's commandments, pain, death and exile will follow. However, this stern warning is prefaced by a description of the utopic existence that awaits us if we fulfill the laws of the Torah. This bright future, and the new society that we are to build, are described in remarkably simple language:

"...you will eat your food (bread) to the point of satisfaction, and [you will] live securely in the land. I will grant peace in the land so that you will sleep without fear" (Leviticus 26:5-6).

The most prominent feature of this vision of the future is peace, and it has been the hope and prayer of Jews for millennia. Surely, the promise that the day would come when they would live as free people in their homeland is a message that empowered and motivated, uplifted and energized not just the individual, but the nation as a whole.

The specific expression of peace, though, speaks to the individual: "You will sleep without fear." The emotional or psychological state it addresses is intimate, almost visceral - the terror in the night which gives no respite. At times, fear is irrational, the product of a psychological pathology; other times, fear is the logical reaction to the realities at hand. Throughout Jewish history, one of the most debilitating aspects of exile was fear itself: The Jew in exile often wandered, but more often feared wandering. Our people often had the collective sense that we were building on quicksand, our fate dependent on the largesse of a fickle despot. As if our lives were subject to the changing winds of an impending storm, the Jewish experience was that of a driven leaf, in constant expectation and dread of being uprooted, of wandering in search of shelter. As the social historian Jacob Katz noted, "It is not a listing of the number of expulsions, whether few or many, which sums up the period, but

rather the ever-present dread and possibility of eviction."

The antithesis of this dread is the ability to sleep without fear. It is the certainty, as one puts one's head down at night, that they have reached a place of permanence and security. The blessings which will accrue to us if we follow the commandments demonstrate the fascinating interplay between the political health of a society and the psychological health of the individuals living in that society: The blessings of peace on the national level trickle down to the individual and create tranquility on the most personal, intimate level. This is real peace.

Which leads us to the final element of this utopian vision: satisfaction. This blessing seems so simple, yet its implications are far-reaching. Again, the experience is literally visceral: to be satisfied by our food. To any person who has ever experienced deprivation, this blessing is no trivial matter. For all the world's hungry children - and, for that matter, adults - such a blessing would be literally life altering: "May you never go to sleep hungry. May your food satisfy and satiate you."

Satisfaction, or the lack thereof, may depend upon two disparate causes, one objective and the other subjective. One cause of dissatisfaction stems from the physical realm of the body's basic needs. If there is simply not enough food to supply the body's energy requirements, it is not satisfied. The other cause lies in the realm of the mind, which is not happy with what it has, despite objective reality.



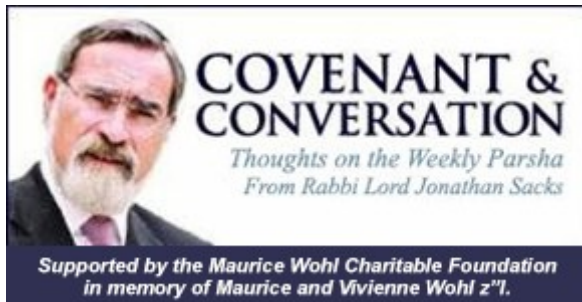
Western man suffers acutely from this sort of dissatisfaction, despite an unprecedented abundance of goods. Perhaps it is simple jealousy; perhaps someone else has more, perhaps theirs is better, or perhaps we simply want what we do not have. Whatever the cause, modern man's dissatisfaction causes him pain that is often as profound as the pangs of hunger experienced by the child in a drought-stricken third-world country. Psychological pain can be just as debilitating as physical pain, if not even more so; the blessing contained in the verses of Parashat Bechukotai addresses both.

Some years ago, I sat down to a meal with a colleague. Before we began to eat, he blessed me, not with the customary "*bon appetite*" or the Hebrew equivalent - *bte'avon*. Instead, he said "*la-sovah*": May your food satisfy you. When I noted this somewhat unusual expression, he explained that this was a blessing he received on a daily basis from his employer, the Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Shlomo Goren, based on the verses of Parashat Bechukotai: May you find your food physically and psychologically satisfying.

In addition to the three layers of blessing found in our parasha, there is an additional element that should not be overlooked - an element that we mention after every meal: "And you shall eat, and be satiated, and you shall bless God for the land He has given you." In this verse, found in the Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy), we are commanded to go beyond physical satiation, beyond psychological satisfaction, and to consider the spiritual aspects of the

food we eat. We must not forget that the source of our sustenance is God.

The Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years must have had a very unique perspective on this important lesson. Each day they would lift their eyes and watch as their food descended from heaven. This food was perfect in every way- nourishing, satisfying, perfectly suited to their needs, and effortlessly available in unlimited quantities. When they finally entered the Land of Israel and established an agrarian society, they were called upon to retain the absolute certainty they had achieved in the desert, that sustenance comes from God, despite having to work for their daily bread. In their new agricultural society, the Israelites would become partners in their own destiny. They would share responsibility for their sustenance, and effectively become partners with God. This partnership is the source of blessings that they could not experience when they survived on manna - the blessings of Parashat Bechukotai. This partnership is the source of true satisfaction, true stability - and true peace.



## On Leadership: "We the People"

In Bechukotai, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

I will bring despair into the hearts of those of you who survive in enemy territory. Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! *They will stumble over each other* as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26: 36-37)

There is on the face of it nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the sages said: "They will stumble over each other" - read this as "stumble because of one another": this teaches that all Israelites are sureties [i.e. responsible] for one another." (1)

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses

speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked: this could have been found in the Torah's blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another's fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another's aid, there is a general sense of well-being. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the

Jews of Spain were enjoying their golden age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How - as the author of Psalm 137 put it - could they sing God's song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, "to the most distant lands under heaven." There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves-both male and female-but no one will want to buy you.  
(Deut. 28: 68)

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am

the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the LORD. (Lev. 26: 44-45)

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people would never be destroyed. Nor would God reject them. The covenant would still be in force and its terms still operative. That meant that Jews would still be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they had in the land - for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they would still be bound by mutual responsibility. They would still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament" as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the

Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with this difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson's Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama's Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics - words never used by British politicians - namely, "We the people."

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, "Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens." In Obama's words, "You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course." That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of 'absolute responsibility':

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for

himself as a way of being.(2)

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] his household. [If he can forbid] his fellow citizens [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] his fellow citizens. [If he can forbid] the whole world [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] the whole world.(3)

This remains however a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of a covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout these essays: that *we are all called on to be leaders*. Surely this cannot be so: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow?

The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant. Leadership is, I have argued, the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore



if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence, be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what "my people" had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's twenty-three primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had along with other international aid agencies sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running wild.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular

to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish people" - Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies - were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of *hessed*, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help and achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size. When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility they become a formidable force for good.

1. Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.
3. Shabbat 54b.



## The Connection between Israel and the Jewish People

**Vayikra, 26:32:** “And I will make the land desolate, and your enemies who dwell on it will be desolate.”

**Rashi, 26:33: Dh:**

**VehashimoTi:** “This is a good measure for Israel, that the enemies will not find satisfaction from their land, in that it will be desolate for its dwellers.”

**Ramban 26:16: Dh: V'eileh:**

And that which it says, ‘the land will be desolate for your enemies is a good tiding and teaches that in all of the Exiles, our land will not receive our enemies. And this is a great proof and promise for us, that you will not find anywhere a land that is as good and open...and it is now as desolate as it is, because from when we left, It does not accept and nation or language, and they all try to settle in it and they do not succeed.”

The devastating curses are outlined in this week’s Torah Portion. In the midst of these curses, the Torah relates that the land will remain desolate while our enemies inhabit it. On superficial analysis, one may think this is also a bad thing, yet the Sages point

out that this is actually positive. Rashi and the Ramban both cite sources making this point, and the Ramban notes that this is a proof of clear Divine Providence in that the land is incredibly fertile when the Jewish people inhabit it, but totally desolate when they are in Exile.

Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch<sup>1</sup> elaborates on this point and notes that throughout the centuries, the non-Jewish nations have fought for the land, but none were able to successfully cultivate it. He adds that this is a great proof to the truth of the Torah, that this prediction was made thousands of years ago, and it came true.

Indeed, Aish HaTorah have a class called the ‘Seven Wonders of Jewish History’<sup>2</sup>, and one of the wonders is the interdependence between Eretz Yisrael and the Jewish people. They point out that Eretz Yisrael was part of the area known as the Fertile Crescent because of its fertility. Yet, as soon as the Jewish people leave the land, it becomes a desert and none of the many nations that have inhabited it have succeeded in cultivating it. The degree to which this is the case is demonstrated by an account written by the famous author, Mark Twain, when he visited the land in 1867.

“We traversed some miles of the desolate country, whose soil is rich enough but is given wholly to weeds, as silent, mournful expanse. A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tavor safely. [Tavor is in the north, in the

Galilee, the most fertile part of the land.] We never saw a human being on the whole route. We pressed on towards the goal..., renowned Jerusalem. The further we went, the hotter the sun got, the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became. There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country. No landscape exists that is more tiresome to the eye than that which bound the approaches to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is mournful, dreary and lifeless. I would not desire to live there."<sup>3</sup>

Taking this idea even further, the Mei Daat<sup>4</sup> notes that around the same time as Mark Twain, expert English agriculturalists analyzed the actual ground of Eretz Yisrael and concluded that it impossible to grow anything on it, except perhaps potatoes. Imagine how they would have reacted had they seen the land several decades later and how only the Jewish people manage to successfully grow all kinds of produce from it, and at the same time, the areas owned by non-Jews in Eretz Yisrael remain barren.

In the Aish HaTorah class, they note the phenomenon and rhetorically ask:

“Has this ever happened anywhere else in the world? The white men came to this country and took it over from the American Indians. It had amber waves of grain. Did the land suddenly become a desert? Of

course not! It doesn't make a difference who's living in the land. If a land is fertile, it's fertile; if it's a desert, it's a desert.”

When we discuss ‘proofs’ of the veracity of the Torah, this idea is often overlooked, but there are really two aspects to why it is so powerful – the obvious one is the fact that this never happened anywhere else, but the second is the fact that the Torah itself predicted it. Only a Divinely-written document could so confidently make such a bold prediction that, if proven wrong, would disprove its veracity. In addition to the proof aspect of this phenomenon, it should also strengthen the Emunah in all believers in that it clearly demonstrates God's Providence over us and our relationship to the land.

1. Taam V'Daat, cited by Mei Daat, p.200.
2. For a written version of this class, see: <https://aish.com/48965856/>.
3. Mark Twain, Innocents Abroad, Vol. II, Harper and Brothers, 1922, NY.
4. Ibid, p.201.

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