

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Bechukotai, Leviticus, Chapters 26-27 | June 1, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

FDR, Truman, and the Resurrected Land

Let us begin with a bit of trivia: what book was Franklin Delano Roosevelt reading when he died?

The answer is given to us in *Let There Be Water*, a remarkable book by Seth (Yossi) Segal. FDR had been reading a recent work by Walter Clay Lowdermilk, a soil scientist from America who had been sent by the Department of Agriculture to survey soil all around the world. Segal explains:

The point of the project was to see what could be learned from the soil of these old civilizations for application in American soil conservation efforts. In February 1939, with war in Europe still more than half a year from erupting and the White Paper [restricting Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine] still a few months away, Lowdermilk arrived in the Land of Israel.

Lowdermilk was appalled by what he saw. Ancient terraces and topsoil had been largely eroded, washed to the Mediterranean Sea by millennia of neglect. But he was also “astonished” by the soil reclamation efforts of the Zionists. Having just nearly concluded his fifteen-month tour visiting twenty-four countries, Lowdermilk described the agricultural restoration in the Land of Israel as being “the most remarkable” work he had seen in his long journey. He extended his stay to visit many of the three hundred farms, settlements, and outposts of the *Yishuv*. He drove more than twenty-three hundred miles within the Land of Israel and another thousand in Trans-Jordan. The more he saw, the more he became enamored with the Zionist mission.

While many had doubted that the Holy Land had the natural resources necessary to provide for the world’s Jews, Lowdermilk saw the exact opposite. Publishing a book on the subject, he made his case that the land could be totally resurrected. Segal writes:

Lowdermilk’s book made the case for a massive public works reclamation project in the Jordan River Valley that would marshal water supplies for irrigation, rebuild the topsoil, develop hydroelectric power, and reforest a land last heavily wooded about two thousand years earlier during the last Jewish Commonwealth in the Second Temple era. With all of that implemented, Lowdermilk believed that the Land of Israel would have adequate developable natural resources and could soon absorb four million Jewish refugees.

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“The absorptive capacity of any country,” Lowdermilk insisted, “is a dynamic and expanding conception. It changes with the ability of the population to make maximum use of its land, and to put its economy on a scientific and productive basis.” And the Zionist project in the land of Israel, he further argued, “may well be the leaven that will transform the other lands of the Near East. Once the great undeveloped resources of those countries are properly exploited, twenty to thirty million people may live decent and prosperous lives where a few million now struggle for a bare existence.”

Lowdermilk’s book on this subject became a bestseller, and FDR had it on his bedside when he died. He had this book not because he was a passionate Zionist, but because, as Segal notes, it was well-known, with a copy given to every member of Congress.

The resurrection of the Land of Israel, predicted by Lowdermilk, is, rightly understood, a central subject of our reading. And it is with this in mind that we can fully appreciate the profound political and providential connection between last week’s *parashah* and this week’s; usually read together, they must be taken in tandem to understand the wonders of our age.

One of the central themes of last week’s reading, *Behar*, is the way in which the unique vocation of each tribe and family in Israel is linked to the portions of the land designated for it by Joshua. Thus, even if the land is sold, at the end of a 50-year cycle it is returned to the family that owned it originally:

It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property. (Leviticus 25:10)

Similarly, if a person is forced to sell property, the Bible grants his extended family the right to buy it back:

If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. . . .

But if he has not sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the year of jubilee: in the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property. (Leviticus 25:25, 28)

Similarly, the Levites, given only cities throughout Israel—cities surrounded by fields—must have eternal rights of buying back their houses; and their fields must *never* be taken from them,

for the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. But the fields of common land belonging to their cities may not be sold; for that is their perpetual possession. (Leviticus 25:33–34)

It is with this in mind that we ponder the terrifying predictions of our *parashah*, which describes the sins of the Chosen People leading to destruction and exile from the land:

And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do all my commandments, but that ye break my covenant. . . .

And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you. (Leviticus 26:15, 17)



If the covenant is broken, then, according to Leviticus, not only the people but also the land will know punishment; egregious sin will also bring about the destruction of the sanctuary, the desolation of the soil, and the exile of Israel itself:

And I will make your cities waste, and bring your sanctuaries unto desolation, and I will not smell the savor of your sweet odors.

And I will bring the land unto desolation: and your enemies which dwell therein shall be astonished at it.

And I will scatter you among the nations, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. (Leviticus 26:31–33)

[E]ven as the empires of the ages fight over the Holy Land, seeking to conquer and control it, the agricultural abundance of the area known as the “Land of Milk and Honey” will for them be anything but. The land will lie fallow in wait for the Jews to return to it.

This is indeed a terrifying description, and for Jewish tradition, these prophecies were fulfilled in the exiles experienced by the Jewish people and in the destructions of Jerusalem and its two Temples. And yet, Rabbi Moses Nahmanides famously saw in this dire declaration not only the prediction of destruction but also a source of consolation. The destruction of the land, we are told, will astonish the nations. What this means, for him, is that even as the empires of the ages fight over the Holy Land, seeking to conquer and control it, the

agricultural abundance of the area known as the “Land of Milk and Honey” will for them be anything but. The land will lie fallow in wait for the Jews to return to it. Thus God declares in conclusion that no matter what, His Chosen People will endure:

And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God.

I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 26:44–45)

The eternity of the Chosen People will be made manifest as well in its relationship with the land.

Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land. (Leviticus 26:42)

We are now able to understand the profound connection between the two readings that are usually joined. God is saying that just as an Israelite’s access to his tribal and familial portion shall never be eternally given away, so too will He ensure that the collective connection between the Chosen People and the Holy Land will never be given away by Him. Moreover, just as in the Jubilee, “each man shall return to his heritage,” i.e., to his familial land, so too, despite exile, persecution, and devastation, will the Chosen People return to its heritage, to its familial and national land.



Thus the promise and miracle of the resurrection of the land is itself a sign of God's people outlasting its enemies. In a poignant story, Segal describes in his book how in 1946 the Yishuv worked against time to establish farms in the Negev so that the land could be considered by the United Nations viable enough for inclusion in the Jewish territory of a partition plan. Eleven farms were secretly established under British eyes. But the farms were not yet viable, and a water supply had to be found by Simcha Blass, a compatriot of Lowdermilk, and one of the heroes of *Let There Be Water*. Segal describes what unfolded:

Despite this overnight success, all eleven farms were missing one essential ingredient: water. Each of the convoys came with a water truck, but that was only a stop-gap measure. Without significant amounts of water, these farms would soon wither. Water trucks might be enough for daily life, food preparation, and sanitation. But any crops they hoped to plant would not survive long without water for irrigation. . . .

[Simcha] Blass had been part of the planning team for the eleven settlements, helping to select their locations in places either most likely to have water underground or within a pipeline's distance from a source. Now, it would be up to him to see if these farms could endure. Blass knew that he would have to drill wells in the Negev—likely to significant depths—in search of local water supplies. He began exploration and at Nir Am, one of the eleven new farms, water was found.

Blass had a problem, though: He needed hardware to move the water. World War II had created massive shortages of metal and machinery with most industrial goods allocated to the war effort. In the Land of Israel, many of Blass's projects were hindered by a scarcity of pumps and pipes. In the aftermath of the war, shortages continued as there was a seemingly endless demand by the civilian sector in the US and the effort to rebuild all of war-ravaged Europe. Anticipating the need to pump water to these eleven farms, Blass had quietly made arrangements to purchase a large consignment of steel pipes from an unlikely source.

During the war, a special set of pipes had been laid to help put out fires caused by the Nazi blitz of London. With the war over, and the Nazi threat gone, this parallel London water system was superfluous. Blass quietly arranged to purchase all of those pipes. The expense was enormous, but high-quality pipes were hard to find. With his new trove of hardware, Blass was able to arrange for the desert farms to be linked up to Nir Am. Blass had established a regional water system that would have long-lasting impact on the Zionist cause and also on the to-be-formed nation's approach to water.

It was an episode filled with irony. The discarded British pipes first used to frustrate Hitler's effort to terrorize the people of London now served to undermine British efforts to stymie Jewish settlement construction.

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The scriptural symbolism provided by these pipes is as powerful as the water they provided was necessary. The Jewish link to the land, reflected in its resurrection, is a sign of the Jewish people's outlasting of the many fires of hatred that it has faced throughout history.

The man who replaced FDR, Harry Truman, did not doubt that the Jewish people could find the resources it needed for a self-resurrection in the land of its fathers. Speaking about the larger Middle East in an interview after his presidency, and about his fascination with the region due to his reading of the Bible, Truman reflected:

The whole history of that area of the world is just about the most complicated and most interesting of any area anywhere, and I have always made a very careful study of it.

Musing about the potential for successful development of the land in the Middle East, and the success of the Jews in creating a revived Jewish state, Truman then added:

I have always thought that the Jews would, and of course, they have. But what has happened is only the beginning of what could happen, because potentially that is the richest area in the world.

What has happened in the Holy Land since then only confirms this prediction. What Jews have produced in the Holy Land in our age is indeed remarkable, and the resurrection of the land, as predicted by our reading, is one of the ultimate signs of God's hand in history. This fact enrages many, but their rage does not make it any less true. And in this difficult time, the miracle will remain for us a source of fortitude and of faith.

Additional Resources

Seth Siegel on the Story of Simcha Blass, "EXCLUSIVE: *Excerpt From Let There Be Water: Israel's Solution for a Water-Starved World*," *The Algemeiner*, September 17, 2015. [Click here to read.](#)

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