

## Parshat Behar-Bechukotai 2017

There was a recent broadcast article on NPR that interviewed upstate NY farmers regarding crop rotation. As I remember being taught in grade school, farmers change which crops they plant in the same patch of land because some plants exhaust the nutrients, especially nitrogen sources, whereas other crops are good at replenishing soil nitrogens. The advantages are many including keeping what agriculturists called bio-mass in the soil, but crop rotation also suppresses the growth of weeds, which besides being not a sellable crop, are nasty in that they use up a lot of nitrogen biomass.

This practice goes back thousands of years, and indeed, during the Middle Ages, farmers routinely rotated wheat, turnips, barley and clover on the same land during different seasons of the year. In some cases, grasses were used as the fourth rotation crop because they are both nitrogen-fixing and nutrient scavenging, and so, once they grew, they were simply mowed back into the soil as co-called "green manure".

What is happening less and less nowadays, though, is using the fourth rotation to leave the field fallow, to NOT plant anything for a season. For example, Hugh Bronstein wrote in *Scientific American* that the Argentine Pampas, long known as a very fertile ground that was the foundation of that country's immense beef business, is slowly turning into sand, literally into desert. This is because there is a larger and larger demand for soy farming, a great cash crop, so farmers are not rotating their fields with other lower-paying, yet soil regenerating crops. If this is happening in Argentina, which has benefitted from decades of modernized farming techniques, one could only imagine how the lack of crop rotation or allowing fields to enjoy a fallow season has impacted farming in India and Africa.

So, you know the character, Gus Portokalos, from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? He was prone to say, "You give me a word, any word, and I'll tell you how it comes from the Greek root." And then he would say, "So there you go."

So here I go: having respect for the life-blood of one's agricultural fields has its roots in the Torah, and in our *parsha*, *Bechukotai*.

But respect for the earth is so central, so fundamental in the mind of the creator that it is said that if we as a society do not give the land its *shmita*, its sabbatical every seventh year, we will be scattered amongst our enemies, our skies will be “like iron, and your earth like copper, so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose; your land will not yield its produce, nor shall the trees yield their fruit.” As Jeffrey Dekro, the Senior VP at the Jewish Funds for Justice, sees it, not respecting the earth is akin to humanity’s *yetzer harah*, in that it is based on society’s lustful urge to serve itself, to fulfill its unlimited appetite, even if it means ruining the life-sustaining covenant G-d gave to us in the form of arable land.

Dekro quotes from Rabbi Arthur Waskow’s book, *Jews, Money and Social Responsibility*, who says that now, as the earth itself is endangered, now is that time to give the earth a rest, a *shmita*, to re-energize.

One of the arguments made by big corporate agriculture, and it’s a valid one, is that the impending boom in earth’s human population means that we will need to produce and provide 30% more than we do now. Thus, we need that each acre produce more and more output. This makes it less likely that any farmer will choose to leave his or her field fallow for a season. But the good news is that scientists have improved that types of crops that can be worked into rotations, crops that can help with reinvigorating the soil’s biomass. It may not be a real Shabbat, a real *shmita*, but it would prevent future Pampases from becoming Saharas.

The good news is that G-d also gave us the brilliance to think our way out of this dilemma, and the brilliant scientists to solve these problems with real solutions. The real problem now is whether these smart scientists will have the time to take for themselves their own sabbatical, their own *Shmita*, to recharge their brains.

Shabbat Shalom.

My friends