

Dispossessing the People of Israel

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The most fascinating moment of editing *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* came when I read Rabbi Jeremy Barras's first draft for *Parashat Lech L'cha*, a piece called, "Deserving of the Land." Rabbi Barras begins by reminding us that neither Abraham and Sarah nor their immediate descendants possess the land promised to them. As Rabbi Barras writes, "The Israelite descendants of Abraham [and Sarah] are not eligible to claim sovereignty over the land so long as the current inhabitants have not worn out their welcome."ⁱ He points to a distant verse in Leviticus 18ⁱⁱ, in which "three cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality are noted as acts that pollute the Land and cause violators to be spewed from it."ⁱⁱⁱ Inferring that "the Canaanites...ultimately become eligible to be conquered and removed from the land once their idolatrous, murderous, and sexually immoral behavior exceeds the boundaries of God's tolerance,"^{iv} Rabbi Barras goes on to suggest that contemporary Palestinians risk expulsion from the land as a result of homicidal violence directed at Israelis.^v

I had already received a submission from Rabbi Jill Jacobs, entitled "The Land is Mine." The title of Rabbi Jacobs' piece is taken from *Parashat B'har*, the Leviticus portion on which she bases her argument: "The Jewish people, God warns, should never take for granted the right to dwell in the land of Israel. *Ki li haaretz*, 'for the land is mine,' says God."^{vi} Like Rabbi Barras, she quotes the verse from Leviticus 18, that the land "spews out" immoral inhabitants. What's fascinating, though, is that, while Rabbi Barras applies the warning to Palestinians, Rabbi Jacobs applies those words to the Jewish State itself. She worries that the "warning, that Zionism must not accept bloodshed or invalid means to achieve the dream of a national home in the Land of Israel, has gone unheeded as the State of Israel has prioritized land over human life in carrying out an occupation that has lasted more than half a century."^{vii} Rabbi Jacobs is worried that the land of Israel will spew out the people of Israel. However, she concludes with hope: If Israel will prioritize "God and the divine commandments—including those regarding how to live ethically in our land," the Jewish people may dwell there permanently.^{viii}

From an editor's point of view, this diversity of opinion, even of how to apply the same biblical verse, makes for a more compelling book. However, for those of us concerned about the wellbeing of the land and people of Israel, the two conflicting viewpoints may lead us to opposing conclusions about what's best for

Israel. Is the Jewish State at greater risk because of the misdeeds of Palestinian terrorists or as a result of Israel's harsh West Bank occupation?

The two opposing viewpoints may also be gleaned from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Eikev*.

Conservative and Orthodox Jews are very familiar with one section, because they recite it every evening and morning as what they call the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. This excerpt will give you an idea: "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Eternal your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season...Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Eternal's anger will flare up against you...Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart...and teach them to your children...to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Eternal swore to your ancestors to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth."^{ix}

Like Rabbi Jacobs, Torah here insists that adherence to God's commandments is a precondition for the Children of Israel to retain sovereignty in their land. However, Deuteronomy's concern is idolatry, not compassionate regard for neighboring people. In fact, earlier in the portion, we read, "You shall destroy all the peoples that the Eternal your God delivers to you, showing them no pity."^x

Confusing matters further, another part of this week's portion suggests that God alone is responsible for dispossessing other people of the land on behalf of the Israelites, who don't deserve it at all. This section suggests that the land belongs to the people of Israel simply because God loves us and chooses to give it to us—not that inheriting the land depends on Israel's righteous behavior. Echoing Rabbi Barras's argument, though, Torah here says that the other nations' wickedness leads them to be dislodged from the land. We read: "Know then this day that none other than the Eternal your God is crossing at your head, a devouring fire; it is [God] who will wipe them out—subduing them before you, that you may quickly dispossess and destroy them, as the Eternal promised you. And when the Eternal your God has thrust them from your path, say not to yourselves, 'The Eternal has enabled us to possess the land because of our virtues'; it is rather because of the wickedness of those nations that the Eternal is dispossessing them before you."^{xi}

My own tentative conclusion is that Rabbi Barras and Rabbi Jacobs are both right. Terrorism and failures of Palestinian leadership and those of Arab nations, across nearly a century, are largely responsible for the fact that there is no Palestinian State today. None of that, though, excuses unequal rights for Arab citizens of Israel or inhumane treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied West

Bank, which are immoral, and which also weaken Israel by alienating much of the world, including progressive North American Jews, from the Jewish State.

In the final analysis, I pray with faith that God loves the Children of Israel, indeed all human beings created in God's image, unconditionally. May the Children of Israel, twice conquered and expelled, then persecuted and even subjected to genocide in lands of our dispersal, never again be dispossessed of our land. And may all the people of that sacred land learn to live in peace, in harmony, and in security.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Jeremy Barras, "Deserving of the Land," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 15.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Barras correctly notes that similar words are found, not only in Leviticus 18:25, but also in Numbers 35:33 and Jeremiah 16:18 and are reinforced in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barras, p. 16.

^{iv} Barras, p. 16.

^v Barras, p. 18.

^{vii} Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "The Land Is Mine," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, p. 191.

^{viii} Jacobs, p. 192.

^{viii} Jacobs, p. 193.

^{ix} Deuteronomy 11: 13.21.

^x Deuteronomy 7:16.

^{xi} Deuteronomy 9:3-4.