

## Parshat Behar-Bekukotai • Torah Reading for Week of May 2 - May 8, 2010

### "For the Land is Mine"

*by Rabbi Nina Perlmutter*

*Rabbi, Temple Heichal Baoranim (Flagstaff, AZ)*

Across the spectrum, more Jews are talking about “environmental issues.” They’ve come to these concerns for many reasons, from many backgrounds. Simultaneously, some still maintain that the environment is not really a Jewish issue--given our tradition’s passion for human justice, and for emphasizing our relationship with each other and with G-d. Fortunately our double *Parsha* this week can help us all think more “Jewishly” when we wrestle with these matters, and relate to the rest of creation.

*Behar* opens with G-d instructing Moses outside, on Mount Sinai. He’s given rules for *Shmittah*, “a Shabbat for Adonai (G-d)”. Every seventh year, the land in Israel is to have a complete rest. We learn, too, about *Yovel*, the Jubilee year. Every 50th year, neither the land nor vineyards can be worked; liberty must be granted to Israelites enslaved during the preceding 49 years; properties purchased during those years return to their original owners. America’s Liberty Bell declares one of many quotables here: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, for all its inhabitants.”

*Bekukotai* then reports the consequences of obeying and disobeying these mitzvot for our relationships with each other and the land. Notably, many are expressed in agricultural terms. For example, if we obey them, rains will come, grain and food will be provided for our animals and us. We are reminded of these consequences daily in our prayer service, following the *Shema*. Clearly our ancestors’ theology and science insisted that natural earth cycles are tied to how ethically we relate to

each other and to earth and to our covenant with Hashem. (Interestingly, Rebbe Nachman saw these words showing that nature supports our *tefilah*.)

Early on, Rashi and others asked, “Why *Shmittah* and *Yovel*?” He concluded they are for the land’s sake. Samson Rafael Hirsch disagreed. For him the land’s “Shabbat unto Adonai” is another way for us to express homage to Hashem. Rambam saw benefits both for us and the land. The land rejuvenates, and we learn “empathy to others” when we free slaves, cancel debts, share profits and produce.

With these ancient comments in mind, our *parsha* yields wise counsel for facing contemporary concerns. We can disagree on particular environmental policies and decisions, but all benefit from the *parsha’s* insights including these:

We must not care only for either human issues or environmental ones. Our portion, sages and liturgy intimately intertwine them.

This week G-d declares “the land is Mine.” In our theocentric (G-d centered) tradition we must not base decisions only on what humans want.

G-d wants us to consider what’s good for creation—indeed, insists on it. I suggest that as First Cause, our G-d is also First Ecologist. On day six in *Bereishit*, we are placed within the whole of creation. Only then is the whole declared “very good”. Without us, it would not be so. Were we not within the whole, it would not be so. In the image of G-d, we, too, must be ecologically sensitive as we tend and work and guard creation.

To conclude, our personal “Jewish Environmental Ethics” will always differ. But in our respectful, dialectical conversations about details, we can all remember this week’s underlying principles for relating to each other, earth, animals, trees and more.

No, Judaism does not worship “Mother Earth.” Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that “Earth is not our mother, but earth is our sister.” As with other familial bonds, this relationship demands close attention and ethical responsibility. May we live up to Torah’s teachings as we serve our Source with humility and gratitude for the beauty and goodness that surround us.