

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bechukotai
May 28, 2022 **** Iyar 27, 5782

[Bechukotai in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2098/jewish/Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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G-d promises that if the people of Israel will keep His commandments, they will enjoy material prosperity and dwell secure in their homeland. But He also delivers a harsh “rebuke,” warning of the exile, persecution and other evils that will befall them if they abandon their covenant with Him.

Nevertheless, “Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the L-rd their G-d.”

The Parshah concludes with the rules on how to calculate the values of different types of pledges made to G-d, and the mitzvah of tithing produce and livestock.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Jeremiah 16:19-17:14.](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/671843/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The haftarah discusses the punishments that await those who disregard G-d's law, and the blessings that are the lot of those who follow the Creator's wishes. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading which details at length the blessings and curses.

The prophet Jeremiah rebukes the people of Israel for their idolatrous ways and for not having faith in G-d. He conveys G-d's words of wrath towards those who do not put their trust in Him — foretelling exile as their punishment — and of blessings for those who do.

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and relies on mortal flesh for his strength, and whose heart turns away from the G-d. He shall be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when good comes, and will dwell on parched land in the desert, on salt-sodden soil that is not habitable. Blessed is the man who trusts in the G-d, to whom G-d will be his trust. For he shall be like a tree planted by the water, and which spreads its roots out into a stream, so it will not be affected when heat comes, and its leaves shall be green, and in the year of drought will not be anxious, neither shall it cease from bearing fruit."

The haftarah ends with the following poignant verses: "G-d who is the source of the hopes of Israel, all that forsake You shall be shamed, and they who turn away from me shall be marked out on the earth that they have forsaken G-d, the source of living waters. Heal me, O G-d, then shall I be healed; help me, then I shall be helped, for You are my praise!"

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Politics of Responsibility by The Rabbi Sacks z”l Legacy Trust

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bechukotai/the-politics-of-responsibility/>

The twenty-sixth chapter of the book of Vayikra sets out, with stunning clarity, the terms of Jewish life under the covenant. On the one hand, there is an idyllic picture of the blessing of Divine favour: If Israel follows God’s decrees and keeps His commands, there will be rain, the earth will yield its fruit, there will be peace, the people will flourish, they will have children, and the Divine presence will be in their midst. God will make them free.

“I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.”Lev. 26:13

The other side of the equation, though, is terrifying: the curses that will befall the nation should the Israelites fail to honour their mission as a holy nation:

“But if you do not listen to Me and do not carry out all these commands... I will appoint over you sudden terror, wasting diseases, and fever, which will make your eyes fail and your spirit languish. In vain shall you sow your seed, for your enemies will eat its yield... And if, in spite of all this, you will still not listen to Me, I shall punish you seven times over for your sins... I will make your sky like iron, your land like bronze... I will turn your cities into ruins... I will lay waste the land... As for the survivors, I will bring such insecurity into their hearts in their enemies’ lands that the sound of a windblown leaf will make them run as if they fled the sword; and they will fall, though no one is chasing them.

Lev. 26:14-36

Read in its entirety, this passage is more like Holocaust literature than anything else. The repeated phrases – “If after all this. . . If despite this. . . If despite everything” – come like hammer-blows of fate. It is a passage shattering in its impact, all the more so since so much of it came true at various times in Jewish history. Yet the curses end with the most profound promise of ultimate consolation. Despite everything God will not break His covenant with the Jewish people. Collectively they will be eternal. They may suffer, but they will never be destroyed. They will undergo exile but eventually they will return.

Stated with the utmost drama, this is the logic of covenant. Unlike other conceptions of history or politics, covenant sees nothing inevitable or even natural about the fate of a people. Israel will not follow the usual laws of the rise and fall of civilisations. The Jewish people were not to see their national existence in terms of cosmology, written into the structure of the universe, immutable and fixed for all time, as did the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians. Nor were they to see their history as cyclical, a matter of growth and decline. Instead, it would be utterly dependent on moral considerations. If Israel stayed true to its mission, it would flourish. If it drifted from its vocation, it would suffer defeat after defeat.

Only one other nation in history has consistently seen its fate in similar terms, namely the United States. The influence of the Hebrew Bible on American history – carried by the Pilgrim Fathers and reiterated in presidential rhetoric ever since – was decisive. Here is how one writer described the faith of Abraham Lincoln:

We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world. Those principles and commitments are the core of American identity, the soul of the body politic. They make the American nation unique, and uniquely valuable, among and to the other nations. But the other side of the conception contains a warning very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.[1]

Covenantal politics is moral politics, driving an elemental connection between the fate of a nation and its vocation. This is statehood as a matter not of power but of ethical responsibility.

One might have thought that this kind of politics robbed a nation of its freedom. Spinoza argued just this. “This, then, was the object of the ceremonial law,” he wrote, “that men should do nothing of their own free will, but should always act under external authority, and should continually confess by their actions and thoughts that they were not their own masters.”[2] However, in this respect, Spinoza was wrong. Covenant theology is emphatically a politics of liberty. What is happening in [Vayikra 26](#) is an application to a nation as a whole of the proposition God spelled out to individuals at the beginning of human history:

The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you act well, will you not be uplifted? If you fail to act well, sin is crouching at the door; it longs to have you, but you must master it.”

Gen. 4:6-7

The choice – God is saying – is in your hands. You are free to do what you choose. But actions have consequences. You cannot overeat and take no exercise, and at the same time stay healthy. You cannot act selfishly and win the respect of other people. You cannot allow injustices to prevail and sustain a cohesive society. You cannot let rulers use power for their own ends without destroying the basis of a free and gracious social order. There is nothing mystical about these ideas. They are eminently intelligible. But they are also, and inescapably, moral.

I brought you from slavery to freedom – says God – and I empower you to be free. But I cannot and will not abandon you. I will not intervene in your choices, but I will instruct you on what choices you ought to make. I will teach you the constitution of liberty.

The first and most important principle is this: A nation cannot worship itself and survive. Sooner or later, power will corrupt those who wield it. If fortune favours it and it grows rich, it will become self-indulgent and eventually decadent. Its citizens will no longer have the courage to fight for their liberty, and it will fall to another, more Spartan power.

If there are gross inequalities, the people will lack a sense of the common good. If government is high-handed and non-accountable, it will fail to command the loyalty of the people. None of this takes away your freedom. It is simply the landscape within which freedom is to be exercised. You may choose this way or that, but not all paths lead to the same destination.

To stay free, a nation must worship something greater than itself, nothing less than God, together with the belief that all human beings are created in His image. Self-worship on a national scale leads to totalitarianism and the extinction of liberty. It took the loss of more than 100 million lives in the twentieth century to remind us of this truth.

In the face of suffering and loss, there are two fundamentally different questions an individual or nation can ask, and they lead to quite different outcomes. The first is, "What did I, or we, do wrong?" The second is, "Who did this to us?" It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the fundamental choice governing the destinies of people.

The latter leads inescapably to what is today known as the victim culture. It locates the source of evil outside oneself. Someone else is to blame. It is not I or we who are at fault, but some external cause. The attraction of this logic can be overpowering. It generates sympathy. It calls for, and often evokes, compassion. It is, however, deeply destructive. It leads people to see themselves as objects, not subjects. They are done to, not doers; passive, not active. The results are anger, resentment, rage and a burning sense of injustice. None of these, however, ever leads to freedom, since by its very logic this mindset abdicates responsibility for the current circumstances in which one finds oneself. Blaming others is the suicide of liberty.

Blaming oneself, by contrast, is difficult. It means living with constant self-criticism. It is not a route to peace of mind. Yet it is profoundly empowering. It implies that, precisely because we accept responsibility for the bad things that have happened, we also have the ability to chart a different course in the future. Within the terms set by covenant, the outcome depends on us. That is the logical geography of hope, and it rests on the choice Moses was later to define in these words:

I call Heaven and Earth as witnesses against you today: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live.
Deut. 30:19

One of the most profound contribution Torah made to the civilisation of the West is this: that the destiny of nations lies not in the externalities of wealth or power, fate or circumstance, but in moral responsibility: the responsibility for creating and sustaining a society that honours the image of God within each of its citizens, rich and poor, powerful or powerless alike.

The politics of responsibility is not easy. The curses of [Vayikra 26](#) are the very reverse of comforting. Yet the profound consolations with which they end are not accidental, nor are they wishful thinking. They are testimony to the power of the human spirit when summoned to the highest vocation. A nation that sees itself as responsible for the evils that befall it, is also a nation that has an inextinguishable power of recovery and return.

[1] John Schaar, *Legitimacy and the Modern State*, p. 291. [2] Benedict deSpinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 2004, ch. 5, p. 76.

[Parshat Bechukotai: The Blessing of Rain by Rabbi Yonatan Neril](#)

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/25-parshat-bechukotai-the-blessing-of-rain>

Tefillah for rain is a key part of the spiritual life of a Jew. For almost half of the year, our daily prayers include praise of Hashem as the One “Who makes the wind blow and the rain descend” and a request that Hashem will “give dew and rain for a blessing.”[1] A special blessing for rain appears in the liturgy on Shemini Atzeret, at the beginning of Israel’s rainy season. We pray that Hashem brings beneficial rain, which falls at the right time, to nourish our crops and fill our reservoirs. As the Talmud says, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created.”[2]

The Torah teaches that our actions impact the rain as well. At the beginning of this week’s parsha, Parshat Bechukotai, we read that rainfall is a function of our doing Hashem’s will. If we keep the Torah, Hashem says, “I will give your rains in their time, the land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit... you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land, and I will grant peace in the land.”[3] This promise of abundant rains and prosperity is followed by a warning that, should Israel ignore the Torah, Hashem will “make your skies like iron,” the Midrash defining this as ceasing all rains and bringing drought. [4] Conversely, the fact that we specifically ask that the rain be “for a blessing,” acknowledges that too much rain is just as dangerous as not having enough. In a number of instances in the Tanach, Hashem sent rain that was a curse, not a blessing. The Flood came to punish the generation for transgressing Hashem’s will. Rashi explains that the rains of blessing only became a destructive flood when the people refused to do teshuva.[5] In the time of Shmuel Hanavi, Hashem brought thunder and rain to chastise the people.[6]

For centuries, it was a core principle of Jewish faith that the natural world was a domain within the spiritual world, not an entity outside its purview. With a modern scientific understanding that human actions affect the quality and quantity of the rain, the warning of Bechukotai warrants our attention. We must reawaken the awareness that our actions impact the entire planet.

The effect of industrialized society on rain through pollutants has been well-known for decades—we've all heard of acid rain. In the 21st century, our impact on the rain is becoming even more pronounced. A consensus of scientists states that human-caused climate change is increasing storm intensity and raising the seas. By burning fossil fuels in our cars, homes, factories, and planes, we are increasing the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere.

We not only affect how rain descends, but also how that rain impacts the land when it does fall. With increasing urbanization in the world, land that once soaked up rainwater is being covered in pavement, which prevents the rainwater from replenishing underground aquifers (also referred to as "groundwater" or "the water table"). Aquifers directly provide more than one-third of drinking water in America, and contribute, in some part, to all drinking water sources.[7] In some places, like Florida, aquifers provide 100% of the drinking water as well as the majority of clean water for industrial and agricultural use.[8] When rainwater is prevented from replenishing the water table, one of our most necessary resources—clean drinking water—is compromised.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the amount of U.S. land covered by sprawling urban development increased by 50% during the 1980s and 1990s.[9] Increased building covers the land with impervious paving, which prevents the land from absorbing rains back into the water table. Unabsorbed rainwater becomes runoff, flowing through drainage systems (or causing floods when drains and sewers are overburdened), picking up pollutants along the way, which are then dumped into lakes, streams and oceans. Atlanta, which was struck by a major drought in 2007, leads American cities in lost rainwater, with up to 132.8 billion gallons lost per year.[10] The volume of water lost in the United States each year would provide tens of millions of people their annual water needs.

Impacting large urban areas like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Toronto,[11] this new reality is also quite pronounced in Israel. In a matter of decades, a near-continuous urban settlement will stretch from the northern coast to the southern coast, from Nahariya to Tel Aviv to Ashkelon to Gaza.[12] Another urban belt extends for miles from north, south, and east of Yerushalayim. Travel to any population center in Israel today and you will see the massive infrastructure work being done on roads and highways, adding more impervious paving to a land that is already living at the edge of a water crisis. Israel's water resources are so limited (and disputed) that we cannot afford to deprive the coastal and mountain aquifers of precious rainwater.

Today we have an unbelievably complex understanding of how the earth's systems work, and how we impact them. In viewing the connection between humans and the environment through scientific analysis and statistics, we must be careful not to forget the true lesson of Bechukotai—Hashem has created the world in such a way that when we contradict Hashem's will by living out of balance, our lives are thrown out of balance in response. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag (Ba'al Hasulam), a leading kabbalist of the twentieth century, wrote that Hashem established the laws of nature in the world, and a person or society that transgresses one of these laws will be punished by means of nature.[13] We see from this that we cannot ignore the connection between our actions, both those of the general mitzvot and of caring for Hashem's earth, and the physical conditions which surround us.[14] Scientific explanations of storm patterns, aquifer absorption and rain toxicity should not obscure the influence of the HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Rather, they reveal to us the true greatness of Divine wisdom, and confirm that we really are obligated to live in balance with and be stewards of Hashem's Creation, as the Torah requires. Praying for beneficial rain and then ignoring the problems of climate change and unchecked urban development is like praying for good health and then continuing to eat poorly and avoid exercise. We are acting against our own expressed interests when we excessively burn fossil fuels and contribute to unchecked urban expansion.

Our prayers for beneficial rain are extremely important, and our actions should be consistent with the emphasis of our tefillot. We must live as earnestly as we pray. By doing so, we can give our children the gift of a world that is blessed, as Hashem promises, with rains of abundance, prosperity and peace. (*Jonathan Neril is the project manager of the Jewish Environmental Parsha Initiative. He is a rabbinical student in his fourth year of Jewish learning in Israel. He received an MA and BA at Stanford with a focus on global environmental issues.*)

[1] Translation adapted from Artscroll Siddur [2] Talmud Bavli, Mesechet Ta'anit 8b, Artscroll translation. [3] Vayikra 26:4-6. All translations of verses from the Torah are from Judaica Press, [4] Torath Kohanim 26:28, as cited by Rashi to Vayikra 26:19. Ramban on Vayikra 24:4 discusses how beneficial rain improves human health and increases produce. He calls this blessing of the rains "the greatest of all blessings." [5] Based on the Midrash Hane'elam and the Zohar Chadash 28a. Translation by Artscroll Rashi Chumash [6] I Shmuel 12:17-18 [7] "Paving our way to water shortages: How sprawl aggravates drought." [8] See the report on Florida's aquifers [9] According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Inventory. (see footnote 8) [10] Co-operative study [11] See, for example, a series on Toronto's urban sprawl. [12] See "Open Space in Israel," Israel Environment Bulletin, vol. 29, Sept. 2005 [13] From "The Need for Caution in the Laws of Nature," (in Hebrew) in Matan Torah, publisher Da'at Ohr HaGanuz, year unknown, p. 96-99. In Gematria (a mystical numbering system), the letters of the word 'hateva' (the nature), add up to the same amount (86) as G-d's name that connotes judgment—Elokim. Rabbi Ashlag teaches that

this implies that the laws of G-d can be called by the name 'commandments of nature.' He does not write about transgressing the 'laws of nature' in the context of ecological issues, but in the context of an individual isolating themselves from society. The application of Rabbi Ashlag's teachings here to ecology, a discipline that developed after Rabbi Ashlag lived, is by the author of this dvar Torah and not by Rabbi Ashlag himself. I would like to thank Rabbi Adam Perlman for pointing me to this source and teaching the linkage to environmental issues. [14] In this vein, the emphasis of Bechukotai on the linkage between keeping the Torah and beneficial rains is different than Rav Ashlag's understanding of a connection between proper action and 'the laws of nature.' Nevertheless, a similarity does exist in both the Torah portion's and Rav Ashlag's emphasis on the relation between human action and what happens in the natural world around us. [15] The following suggestions are taken from Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz, "Water Conservation and Halacha: An Unorthodox Approach." Compendium of Sources on Halakha and the Environment. Canfei Nesharim, 2005.

[Anxiety: A Jewish Telegram by Rabbi Noah Arnow](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/anxiety-a-jewish-telegram/)

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/anxiety-a-jewish-telegram/>

When I was a teenager, I liked horror movies. Maybe because there was nothing in the world I was really scared of. I enjoyed the thrill of fear. But as an adult, and especially as a parent, I don't need horror movies to experience fear. The world today is scary enough. I'd much rather a movie with a happy ending.

So, when approaching the horrible curses and punishments that are laid out in two sections of Torah (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28) I'm inclined to stick to the first ones in each section, which are tamer than the horrors of the later curses that will befall us if we still don't repent after the first punishments. These punishments explicitly employ a theology of reward and punishment — God will reward us collectively if we follow God's commandments and punish us collectively if we do not. If this does not sound exactly to you like the way the world you experience works, that's OK. We do not need to subscribe to this kind of theology to be attentive to the messages the Torah and its interpreters may be teaching from these texts.

"I will appoint beh-hala over you" is the very first punishment the Torah threatens in the Leviticus edition of the curses (Leviticus 26:16). Beh-hala is variously translated as misery, terror, panic or shock. It has the sense of being scared, suddenly, without knowing what to do, suggests Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089-1164). This terror and confusion makes it hard to understand, to listen, to heed, adds Rabbi Moshe Alshich (Turkey, 1507-1593). When we're scared, our fight-or-flight response kicks in. We may freeze or run or lash out, but when we're scared, we're bad listeners. We can rarely even understand what's going on around us and inside us.

Study and meditation can settle our restless minds, observes Rabbi Chayyim

Study and meditation can settle our restless minds, observes Rabbi Chayyim ibn Attar (Morocco, 1696-1743) in his Torah commentary, “Or HaChayyim.” But this curse is the opposite of that settled state of mind, he points out. This curse of terror corresponds to the blessing 10 verses earlier that says, “You shall lie down untroubled by anyone” (Leviticus 26:6), argues Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach (aka Chizkuneh, France, 13th century). Because of this terror, we won’t be able to get a good sleep.

Alternatively, this curse may correspond to the upright, erect way God made us walk when we left Egypt (Leviticus 26:13) — a way of walking that embodies security, suggests Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888). This curse is about feeling helpless, dominated, and lacking self-confidence, Hirsch explains.

Notice what each of these rabbinic interpretations has in common — nothing has actually happened to us — we only have these feelings of terror, anxiety and confusion. But as anyone who experiences anxiety regularly knows, regardless of the basis in reality for the anxiety, the feeling is all too real and paralyzing. But we probably would rather have the feeling only, without actually having anything of which to be scared. That’s why this is but the first of the curses, the classic joke about the Jewish telegram: “Start worrying. Details to follow.”

Picture a line, a continuum, with the blessings on one side and the curses on another side. This curse is the first on the bad side, and yet, we may not have the perspective to realize we’ve crossed over, that we’re not still receiving blessings. In fact, the panic and confusion of this curse is often misinterpreted and misunderstood as a blessing, writes Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (Eastern Europe/Israel, 1881-1966) in his Torah commentary *Oznaim LaTorah*. The impatience we have with everything — for him, in his day, with wagons and increasingly with trains, and eventually, he predicts, rather presciently, with air travel, is a symptom of this curse. All the things that allow us to do things faster while decreasing and depleting our attention span and patience are not a product of human ingenuity, but rather, a manifestation of this curse.

And don’t worry—Rabbi Sorotzkin diagnoses a cause for this curse. It’s because of impatience and perfunctoriness in worship of and service to God and God’s commandments. Put slightly differently, if we lose our patience in paying attention to the things that really matter, we’ll become increasingly distracted and unable to pay attention to anything. We’ll flit from task to task, window to window, screen to screen. It sounds a lot like my experience of trying to write this d’var Torah!

Our confusion, our anxiety, our impatience and inability to focus may be a warning, the canary in the coal mine, the very first indication that something is not quite right. The drift and momentum will continue to push us further down this path, onward toward the next curse. Maybe though, with some effort, some focus and attention, and crucially, some slowing down, individually and collectively, we

can start moving in the other direction, toward blessings. (*Rabbi Noah Arnow serves Kol Rinah, a Conservative congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, and previously served Congregation Beth El in Voorhees, New Jersey.*)

Science Vs. Sabbath by Jeffrey Dekro

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/science-vs-sabbath/>

The environmental destruction intended as a punishment for failing to observe the sabbatical year raises contemporary questions of how to prevent environmental devastation.

Bechukotai concludes the Book of Leviticus and details the blessings or curses that will befall the people as a consequence of following (or not following) “the commandments that the Lord gave Moses . . . on Mount Sinai.” A particularly strong link is established between the sabbatical year — the rest from economic activity — and the fate of the people.

A disobedient people, Bechukotai warns, will be scattered among its enemies and “then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years.” The Torah portion’s portrait of devastation could serve as a modern environmentalist’s worst nightmare. The skies will become “like iron, and your earth like copper, so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.” Armed enemies, pestilence, cannibalism — Bechukotai has all the ingredients of post-apocalypse sci-fi in which the social and natural order utterly break down.

From the biblical perspective, all of this is the outcome of unrestrained greed — of humanity’s yetzer hara, the evil or lustful urge, slipped loose from the yoke of the covenant. The power of this urge is held in high respect by Rabbinic Judaism as the motivating force underlying all economic development: “[W]ere it not for the yetzer hara,” says one midrash, “a person would not build a house, marry, create children, or engage in commerce.”

But for civilization to endure and justice to reign, the yetzer hara must be restrained, based on the fundamental understanding that the earth belongs to God. We are living as tenants with a lease, the terms of which include the weekly Sabbath and the sabbatical year, as well as the Levitical laws about not harvesting to the corners of the field, about sacrifices and tithes, about caring for the widow and the orphan, etc. Without these restraints, the yetzer hara engulfs the world.

Do we need a latter-day version of the sabbatical year to fend off environmental devastation? Rabbi Arthur Waskow argues as much in the book we edited, *Jews, Money & Social Responsibility*, when he suggests that “every seven years, we should give one year off to all of the people who specialize in research and development...Now, when the earth itself is endangered...when better to reconnect the liberation of humankind with the resting-time of the earth?”

Waskow expands on this in his two-volume collection, *Torah of the Earth*: “Today, when ecologists say, ‘If you insist on pouring carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and never letting the atmosphere rest from that overdose, there is going to be global warming and your civilization is going to be knocked awry if not shattered,’ they are simply saying what Leviticus 26 said.”

Faith-based environmentalism, however, raises thorny issues of its own—particularly when it leads to a “deep ecology” sensibility that regards material progress itself as the enemy.

Norman Levitt notes this in his 1999 book, *Prometheus Bedeviled: Science and the Contradictions of Contemporary Culture*:

“[E]nvironmentalism,” he writes, often “harbors a strong edenic strain, the desire for the whole of humanity to revert to a purportedly ‘natural’ lifestyle...the practical implications of this propensity are serious and unsettling. Consider...the changes necessary to meet the global-warming threat. It is unlikely that these will be accomplished if we insist at the same time that human values worldwide have to be made over in the image of the ecological ideal.”

Our challenge may be less to grant a “rest and recreation” sabbatical year for scientists than to adopt measures that would increase their independence from corporate power structures. Only by granting scientists this autonomy, Levitt argues, will society start to measure environmental impact realistically—motivated not by the possibility of profit, nor by the biases of politics or religion, but by the objective, expert opinions of scientist-citizens. In the U.S., some sort of extra-constitutional authority, similar to the Federal Reserve, might serve.

Levitt’s proposal will no doubt push many alarm buttons, as we of the post-bomb generations too easily conflate science with corporate malfeasance and hold a Frankensteinian, rather than a Promethean, view of scientific progress. Yet our environmental future certainly depends as much upon the ongoing ability of scientists to increase the carrying capacity of our planet as it depends upon the ability of our religious leaders to awaken the Sabbath-consciousness of humanity. Perhaps a meaningful dialogue between the “Waskowites” and the “Levittites” would lead to renewal of Bechukotai’s blessings. (*Reprinted with permission from SocialAction.com.*) Jeffrey Dekro is the senior vice president at the Jewish Funds for Justice.

[Faith in Difficult Times by Rabbi Andrea Steinberger](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/faith-in-difficult-times/)

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/faith-in-difficult-times/>

Our Torah portion this week, Bechukotai, is the last portion of Leviticus. Bechukotai ends with the *tokhahah*, a warning, promising defeat, massacre, and the pain of exile if one disobeys God.

Jeremiah, a prophet who wrote during the closing days of the Kingdom of Judah struggled to find meaning during the time of the destruction of the Temple. We hear his words in our Haftarah portion (reading from

the Prophets or Writings that follows the Torah reading) this week. In his bitterness he cried: The guilt of Judah will be inscribed with a stylus of iron...

(Jeremiah 17:1).

Despite all that he saw, Jeremiah expressed deep faith that God is the living water that sustains us all. He wrote, "He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream: It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh; it has no care in a year of drought, it does not cease to yield fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8).

The following text, expanded, became one of the 19 blessings in our Amidah (silent benediction, a central prayer). Jeremiah saw much of life. Still, the Haftarah ends with a hopeful note, "Heal me, O Lord, and let me be healed; save me, and let me be saved; for You are my glory" (Jeremiah 17:14).

A Word

This is indeed a sobering text. Jeremiah understood Jewish suffering as something that was deserved. A rebellious people are finally punished by a God whose patience has finally run out.

Thousands of years after Jeremiah, we human beings still experience these evils: defeat, pain, suffering. We experience the devastation of illness, the pain of a breakup of a family. Today, though, most of us do not see these tragedies as punishment for our sins.

Conversely, many people wonder at these moments of pain and disappointment if God is indeed there at all. The question of today is different. We ask ourselves, "How does one continue to believe, to let God in, when such devastation surrounds us at times?" Pain can harden one's heart. It can make a person cynical, mistrustful of others.

These days are the in-between days — days of reflection and sadness between Passover and Shavuot. Why? Because during these days we commemorate the wandering in the wilderness. The time between our freedom from Pharaoh and our receiving the gift of Torah at Mount Sinai.

During that time we were lawless. We had no Torah. We had too much freedom. Instead of it being a wonderful party, it was awful. We complained bitterly. The law, as the midrash teaches, brought true freedom to the world, a freedom that we could sustain.

For those of us in the northern hemisphere, this season also means that the summer warmth is coming. Some of us feel relief, now that the academic year is ending, granting us a liberation from the constraints of imposed order. Now, as summer approaches, we experience the freedom without laws. We feel rootless. Maintaining faith in difficult times is a struggle for each of us. And yet, Jeremiah's beautiful, poetic words strike a chord for us, who want so desperately to feel God's presence beside us as we struggle. Jeremiah offers these words of consolation and hope, describing that a person who has faith in God can survive even the

toughest times.

Lag B'Omer, a holiday day that is a reprieve in our 50 days of mourning between Passover and Shavuot, also occurs during this time. In the spirit of Lag B'Omer, let us feel the reprieve of the water around us, soothing our roots, caring for our leaves. And may we soon yield fruit again. As Jeremiah says, "Heal me, O Lord, and let me be healed. Save me, and let me be saved. For you are my glory."

Parshat Bechukotai ends the book of Leviticus. When the Torah reading is completed, it is customary for the congregation to chant, "Chazak, chazak, v'nithazek." Be Strong. Be Strong. And let us be strengthened by one another. So may it be. *(Rabbi Andrea Steinberger serves as a rabbi at the Hillel Foundation at the University of Wisconsin. Rabbi Steinberger received her ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1997 and her BA from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.) ******

Yahrtzeits

Marty Fine remembers his mother Edith Joan Fine on Tues. May 31 (Sivan 1).

Elaine Berkenwald remembers Stan's mother Elaine Klughaupt on Wed. June 1 (Sivan 2).

Mike Schatzberg remembers his mother Marion Schatzberg on Fri. June 3 (Sivan 4).

COMING UP AT KOL RINA

****Attention Kol Rina Members** Save the date for our Annual Meeting!**

Our Annual Meeting will take place on **Wednesday, June 22, beginning at 7:30 pm, via Zoom**. More details will follow. We will need a quorum of VOTING MEMBERS (full members) in order to vote on officers and board members, adopt a budget and conduct other business. Please save the date and plan on attending!

Shabbat morning services, live and in person

Kol Rina will have in-person Shabbat morning services this coming Shabbat, May 28, 2022, beginning at 9:45. Please note that masks and full vaccination are required. We hope to see you there!

Brunch and Learn: Prof. David Fishman on the History of the Jews of Ukraine, June 26, 10:00 am via Zoom

On the morning of June 26 (the same day as our 10th anniversary celebration), the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation B'nai Shalom of West Orange, will present Professor David Fishman, who will speak on the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of the history of the Jews of Ukraine. **SAVE THE DATE** for this fascinating and timely program, which is free and open to the entire community. Further details to follow.

