

# Dvar Torah for Shavuot: For the land is Mine

by Rabbi Rachel Goldenberg • May 17th, 2007

If you live in a neighborhood like mine, or in a city or a suburb like mine (Dallas, TX) you probably have had this experience. You come home from work one afternoon, and suddenly the house across the street is gone. And then the next day the house two doors down has been torn down. And so on and so on until most of the smaller more affordable homes and apartment buildings are gone and have been replaced with much larger much more expensive new homes.

In the days and weeks leading up to the festival of Shavuot (which begins this Tuesday evening,) Jewish tradition impels us to focus on issues of land and harvest. Most of us reading this blog do not live in the Land of Israel, and the vast majority of us are not living in an agrarian society any longer. That said, I believe that our tradition's teachings about land and bounty communicate values that are relevant today in terms of how we treat the resources that we have – especially the resources of land and of neighborhood.

Our tradition teaches that on the second day of Pesach our ancestors were commanded to bring an offering of the first sheaf of their grain harvest to the Temple. And from that day, they were to count off seven weeks and then bring another offering of new grain. During those seven weeks, there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether the harvest would be plentiful. That might be one of the reasons that our ancestors counted the days – they were anxious. They brought the Pesach offerings as a way of asking God to give them a bountiful harvest. And the Shavuot offering was one of gratitude for what the land had produced in those seven weeks.

These Pesach and Shavuot grain offerings teach us that we can't depend on the land to automatically produce what we need. It is important to cultivate a sacred relationship with God and with the land. We need to treat the land and its resources as holy – only then might we be able to trust that the land will sustain us.

In last week's Torah portion, B'har-B'chukotai, God instructs the people on how they are supposed to use the land that they will receive once they enter the Land of Israel. They are commanded to work their land for six years at a time and let the land lie fallow every seventh year. During that seventh year the land is given a Shabbat to rest and recover and to in a sense return to God. We call this the Sabbatical year. The people also receive instructions about the Jubilee year. Every 50th year, all land that has been sold in the meantime reverts to its original owners.

There are several principles at work here. The major underlying value is that all of the earth belongs to God and that we are merely tenants or temporary residents on the land. Just as we are God's people and are commanded to rest every seventh year, God's land must rest every seventh year. We know the practical benefits of this practice for people and for land – rest, fallow time allows for recuperation and renewal. We learn from this commandment that we can't claim ownership of the earth that we inhabit – it belongs to God, and we need to treat it as holy. On a global level, this means not allowing our earth to turn into a wasteland. On a more personal or

local level, this means not treating land wastefully or relating to land as a commodity - a source only of monetary wealth.

The system of the jubilee year communicates a value of not allowing society to become polarized into wealthy landowners on the one hand and permanently impoverished tenants on the other. If a family finds itself in dire straits and needs to sell its land in order to survive, they have a sense of security that they will be able to reclaim their land after a period of time. They will never be permanently landless or poor. This almost utopian passage imagines communities in which you don't have poor sections of town or rich sections of town. Everyone lives together in dignity.

Over the past few months I've been watching two parallel pictures emerge here in Dallas with respect to how we use the land in our communities. On the one hand, I walk the streets of my neighborhood in North Dallas and watch as bulldozers level perfectly nice modest homes and apartment complexes to make way for expensive mansions and luxury condos. The developers don't give much thought to making space and opportunity for at least some affordable housing, and the city doesn't do enough to regulate this process of development. Soon my neighborhood will only be affordable to the very wealthy.

Nearby in the Vickery Meadow neighborhood, where my synagogue has lots of wonderful mitzvah projects taking place, this kind of wasteful development is occurring as well. Recently a new elementary school was finally built to serve an extremely densely populated area of Vickery Meadow. Almost immediately, entire complexes of affordable apartments were demolished near that elementary school to make room for more spacious and expensive condos for empty nesters and retirees. All of the young families that were supposed to be sending children to that school have been forced to find affordable housing elsewhere. What a waste!!

These are stories and examples of mistreating the land in which we live. We do not treat the land as God's land when we see development only as making money and not as developing good, quality living communities for all people.

At the same time, I've been watching a different neighborhood develop in another part of Dallas. Last year and this year our congregation built houses through Dallas Habitat for Humanity in a section of town called West Dallas. Bulldozers are leveling homes there as well. But these are abandoned, boarded up homes that are disappearing. And in their place, volunteers are working alongside the future homeowners to construct beautiful and modest, affordable homes. These Habitat families would otherwise never have the opportunity to be home owners. They pay a low interest mortgage which provides funds to build even more Habitat houses in the future.

Last Sunday as our community dedicated the two new homes that our congregation built in West Dallas I believe I was witnessing holiness. Habitat is doing the kind of development that is not only for the sake of making money - it is true development in that they are re-creating entire neighborhoods and communities such that people can live in dignity and safety.

Even though we are no longer living in an agrarian society, our harvest festivals and our Torah's principles of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee have value for us today. Maybe we don't bring

sheaves of wheat to the Temple in Jerusalem anymore, but we should certainly have a sense of anxiety about how we relate to our earth and its resources. We need to treat those resources as holy – as though they are only lent to us. Maybe we don't need to let our fields lay fallow every seventh year, but perhaps every seventh home in every neighborhood should be affordable. It is certainly not practical to observe the jubilee year and return every family to their original holdings every half century. But when we create plans for neighborhoods and cities, we need to work to close the gap between rich and poor rather than continue to ghettoize the poor in underdeveloped crime-ridden areas.

As our communities engage in direct service, such as building homes for Habitat for Humanity, we also need to find ways to advocate for thoughtful development in our own neighborhoods.

The Torah describes how the jubilee is to be celebrated in the following way: on the fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, you shall have the shofar sounded throughout your land. And in this way you shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. The word for "release" in Hebrew is "dror." Some commentators derive the word "dror" from the Hebrew root "dar," which means to dwell. In this way, we can understand that we are to proclaim freedom for everyone to be able to live where they want or need to live. It might take fifty years; it might take more than that. But I do hope that we will someday hear that shofar of release and of freedom to live in homes of dignity proclaimed throughout our cities and everywhere, for all people.