



5 thoughts

on 'listening to the earth'

Our Torah portion finds resonance with aspects of contemporary ecological movements. We learn that nature is productive for six years then rests. In God's design there is a harmony that arises from the sabbath rest of the people, and that of the land. Human practice and the wellbeing of the earth share a vital relationship. How well do you 'listen to the earth' as part of your listening to God? Here are five Torah-based thoughts to stimulate your reflections:

1. "When you enter the land **that I assign to you**" (Lev. 25:2). The land belongs to God and is *given* by God. As God-given gift, the land must be allowed to observe its sabbaths.
2. In the Torah the earth is an expressive organism. When Miriam dies, the wells dry up; the people are without water (Num. 20:2). It is as if the earth itself is in mourning.
3. "All that breathes praises God" (Psalm 150). Our lives are to be lived as praise to God. The earth too must speak its gratitude to its Creator. To hear the earth's voice is a blessing.
4. "Do not wrong one another but fear your God" (Lev. 25:17). Underlying the laws of the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee Year is an obligation of care and the willingness to share the earth and its produce.
5. This duty of care for all is not restricted to the seventh year. As the Talmud says: "Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace" [TB Gitin 61a].



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2010

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 25:1—26:2

B'har:
'at the mountain'

Why reflect on Torah?

In the Book of Leviticus we read:

"You shall keep my laws and my rules, by the pursuit of which human beings shall live"
(Leviticus 18:5).

The Jewish sages of old noted that this verse uses the Hebrew 'adam' [human being]. In other words, the insights of the Torah are not for an elite, but for *any* person. As the Talmud teaches in the name of R'Meir:

From where do we know that an idol worshipper who engages in Torah study is regarded like a High Priest? The verse states: "Which if a man do, he shall live in them" (Lev. 18:5). It does not say 'kohanim [priests], Levites, Israelites,' but rather 'adam' [a man]. Thus, you learn that even an idol worshipper who engages in Torah study is regarded like a High Priest. [Bava Kama 38a]

Such an encouraging thought: that any ordinary person can reach great heights through the study of Torah! And what a fitting statement of the goal of *Light of Torah*: that this leaflet series might encourage Christians to open unfamiliar parts of their bible and discover the joy of Torah.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 25:1—26:2

In previous Torah texts we heard that every seven days the Jewish people observe the *Shabbat* ('sabbath'), a holy day given over to the Lord when the people cease from work.

Now here in Leviticus we learn of another kind of sabbath: the *Shemittah*, 'Sabbatical Year.' Every seven years the land is to be left untilled. No plowing, no sowing, although the people may share in eating whatever produce the land brings forth. The people rest from working the land, and the land too rests for one year.

Tasting Torah

"The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord" (Leviticus 25:1-2).

Read what our Torah portion says about the Sabbatical Year in 25:1-7. The text makes a point of saying that this commandment was given by the Lord to Moses on Mt Sinai... so it must be important! In *havrutah* (in conversation with a friend) share your ideas about the possible meaning, significance and benefits of the Sabbatical Year.

Touching Torah

In Jewish tradition we find a variety of interpretations of this text. The *Sefer HaChinuch*¹ poses a moral reasoning: the Sabbatical Year is a reminder that the soil alone cannot produce its bounty. Ultimately, the Creator is master of the land and source of its gifts.

The Sabbatical Year is also said to increase trust in God and to curb greed; for it takes courage to abandon one's agricultural work for one year, relying on Providence. The Torah itself acknowledges this in verses 20-22, "*And should you ask, 'What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?' I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years."*

Depthing Torah

Maimonides² offers an agricultural perspective: by allowing the land to lie fallow, its fertility is restored. Some sages oppose this view, preferring a religious reason. According to Ibn Ezra³ the Sabbatical Year allows people to study Torah for a whole year. A 20th century voice, Rav Kook,⁴ describes it in terms of spiritual renewal. Freed from the 'sacrilege of excessive worry' associated with the pursuit of one's livelihood, the soul blossoms in the seventh year.

Other Jewish commentators point to elements of generosity, gratitude, tranquility and goodwill. No one—rich or poor—has directly contributed to the produce of the seventh year, therefore strictly speaking no one owns it. Since quarrels usually develop from the insistence that "This belongs to me!" the Sabbatical Year brings an equalizing factor which is a recipe for peace.

There are more Jewish views, including messianic and cosmological perspectives. But let's pause here for your own voice to mingle with those of the sages. As you ponder this Torah text, how does the Word of God speak to you, call you, challenge you, reassure you?

Doing Torah

The idea and practice of sabbath rest is ingrained in the life of an observant Jew. In what way does sabbath rest, to which the Torah attests in different ways, find its place in your own Christian life?



Who's who

Our Jewish voices this week are:

[1] **Sefer HaChinuch**. A famous medieval education book.

[2] **Maimonides** (1135-1204). His full name: Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as *Rambam*). Born in Spain, settled in Egypt. A giant of a scholar whose teaching also influenced the non-Jewish world and was known to Thomas Aquinas.

[3] **Ibn Ezra** (Born 1092, Spain). Renowned bible commentator, astronomer, poet.

[4] **Rav Kook** (1865-1935). Orthodox rabbi passionately devoted to the revival of a Jewish state. Emigrated from Russia to Palestine in 1909; appointed Chief Rabbi in 1921.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra* (NY, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, (NY, 2006). Scripture: NJPS.