



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

What do we own?

LECH LECHA • 5767

“If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.”

It was the first, but certainly not the last, quarrel over the land. Abraham and Lot have returned to Canaan after their brief exile to Egypt. Abraham

“had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” Lot too had accumulated a large entourage of servants and flocks and herds. The result was conflict:

“The land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they could not stay together. Quarrels broke out between Abram’s herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. Abram said to Lot, “Let there not be quarrels between you and me, or

between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let us part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left.”

Genesis 13:6-9

Lot makes his choice, a bad one as will later become clear. He chooses the Jordan valley because of its fertility and prosperity (“like God’s own garden, like the land of Egypt”). However, what is interesting is what happens after the two men separate:

God said to Abram after Lot had parted from him: “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever . . . Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it [all] to you.”

Genesis 13:14-17

What is the sequence here? What is the logic of the Divine promise then, after the conflict and Abraham’s resolution of it? What is at stake here is

not a simple incident in the life of the first of the patriarchs but something far more general and enduring. It is an utterly counter-intuitive answer to the question, “What do we own?”

Solomon won a reputation as the wisest of Israel’s kings. One decision in particular ([I Kings 13:16-28](#)) made a great impression and is one of the most famous passages in Tanach. Two women came before him, each claiming that a child was their own. Both had given birth. One had accidentally suffocated their child by rolling over on it while she slept. Each attributed the accident to the other and argued that the living child was theirs.

Solomon, in a masterpiece of lateral thinking, ordered his servant to take a sword and cut the child in two, giving each woman a half. One protested in horror. Let the child be given to the other woman, she said. I abandon my claim. You,

said Solomon, are the mother and you shall have the child. How did Solomon know? Because she was willing to give the child away rather than see it die. We truly own what we are willing to give away.

Much of the sacrificial system in the Torah is about offering to God the first of what He has given us: the firstborn of animals, the first grain of the harvest (the Omer), and the first-fruits of the crop (eaten under conditions of sanctity in Jerusalem). After the tenth plague in Egypt, firstborn Jewish males were scheduled to spend their lives dedicated to the service of God. That arrangement was cancelled by the sin of the Golden Calf. From then on, priesthood ceased to be a function of the firstborn and became instead the right and duty of Aaron's sons. To this day,

however, parents redeem their firstborn, if it is a male, in acknowledgement of that historic destiny.

The sacrificial system in Israel is hard to understand. Sacrifices made eminent sense in the worldview of pagan antiquity. The gods were capricious. They could strike at any time, bringing drought, famine, storms, floods, military defeat or other disasters. To avoid this, the ancients sought to propitiate them by bringing them offerings (not unlike the offerings Jacob sent Esau when they were about to meet again after their long estrangement). The God of Israel, however, was not like that. He sought justice, not sacrifice; righteousness, not burnt offerings; structures of societal grace, not the elaborate rites of shrines. What then is the meaning of these offerings of the first of flocks and herds and harvests?

The Talmud contains a fascinating discussion of the logic of making blessings over the things of this world that we enjoy:

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: To enjoy anything of this world without making a blessing is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, as it says: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” ([Psalm 24:1](#)).

R. Levi contrasted two texts: It is written, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” and it is

written, “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the children of men” (Psalm 115: 16). But there is no contradiction – the first verse refers to the situation before one has made a blessing, the second applies once one has made a blessing.

Brachot 35 a-b

The world belongs to God. He owns it because He made it, and without Him it would cease to exist. It follows that there is no concept in Judaism of absolute human ownership. We are God’s guests on earth. All that we possess, we do not ultimately

own. We merely hold it as His guardian or trustee. A blessing is therefore an act of acknowledgement of God's ownership. If we do not make one prior to enjoying the things of this world, it is as if we had made secular use of God's property. Once we have made a blessing we have, as it were, redeemed the source of pleasure (buying it back for private use by our offering of words). Once we symbolically give something back to God, He gives it back to us ("the earth He has given to the children of men").

This is the logic of the offerings of first-fruits and firstborn animals. It is a symbolic renunciation – an act of giving back to God what we rightly acknowledge as His. Once we declare Him the owner of nature and the land, He empowers us to act as His trustee. Nowhere is this stated more clearly than in the laws ([Vayikra 25](#)) relating to

Shemittah and *Yovel*, the sabbatical and jubilee years.

There are inalienable conditions to Israelite residence in the land. Some of its produce must be shared with the poor. Slaves and debts must be released every seven years. Every fifty years, land must return to its original owners. There must be, in other words, periodic redistributions precisely because (as we know from the economics of globalisation) the free market does not ensure equality of outcomes. The key word *tzedakah* does not mean “charity” or “justice” but a combination of both – and it exists as a concept only because Judaism sees property not as ownership but as guardianship. What we give to the poor is not “charity” but one of the conditions God makes to our possessing property at all, namely that we share some of what we have with others who have

less. Hence the great verse, “The land must not be sold in perpetuity, because the land is Mine; you are but aliens and My tenants.” We are entitled to possess only that whose ownership we renounce. We truly own what we are willing to give away.

That is the deep meaning of Abraham’s offer to Lot. It is only when he is willing to give part of the land away (“If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.”) that God tells him the whole land will be his (“All the land you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever”). We only own what we are willing to share.