



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Bechukotai 5768

By Carol Towarnicky

May 24, 2008

*Parshat Bechukotai* is one of the Torah portions that makes me cringe. Like chapter 28 of the book of *Dvarim*, it promises abundant blessings to those who obey God's commandments and ghastly disasters for those who do not. So when bad things happen to good people, as they always do, some good people assume that the punishment is divine retribution for sin.

These sections of *Vayikra* and *Dvarim* follow a pattern of legal codes from the ancient Near East: A statement of laws is followed by a promise of blessings for those who obey them and curses for those who resist. This also was the pattern for treaties made by powerful rulers with the vassal kings whom they "protected." If the vassal kings did not live up to their oaths, their rulers exacted terrible punishments, not only on the kings, but also on the people they ruled.<sup>1</sup>

To me, *Parshat Bechukotai* makes more sense when read as a code for communities and their leaders rather than for individuals. When a nation's leaders enact wise and just policies, their communities regularly reap prosperity, contentment and peace. In contrast, corrupt leaders often bring unmerited suffering on their people.

In the *parshah*, God promises to reward obedience to the covenant with good crop yields, good health and freedom. Resistance to the moral law will be punished first with disease and famine, then with increasingly terrible disasters. "I will wreak misery upon you," God says.<sup>2</sup> "Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin."<sup>3</sup>

As modern translator Robert Alter notes, "The section of curses is structured as a sequence of downward spiraling disasters. After each set of punishing blows, God, as it were, pauses to see if Israel will correct its ways. When this does not happen, He intensifies the catastrophes..."<sup>4</sup> These include pestilence, environmental degradation and the scattering of the people.

Recent history holds many stories of citizens who suffered the consequences of the ignorance, greed and belligerence of their leaders. Over the past decade, for example, the people of Zimbabwe have experienced poverty, hunger and violence due to the misguided and unjust policies of their longtime president, Robert Mugabe.

In recent years, Mugabe's policies have devastated the country. In a move hailed by Mugabe as reclaiming Zimbabwean lands from colonialists, he expropriated white-owned farmland, but gave it to his cronies rather than to native Zimbabwean farmers, contributing to the destruction of the nation's once prosperous agricultural system. Mugabe's program to "clear out" slum communities destroyed the homes and livelihoods of 700,000 people, and affected the lives of an additional 2.5 million. For many years now, Mugabe has resisted international calls for reform and has engaged in violence against those who opposed him. As a result, descriptions of modern-day Zimbabwe

<sup>1</sup> Plaut, Gunther W. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, p. 953.

<sup>2</sup> Vayikra 26:16

<sup>3</sup> Vayikra 26:33

<sup>4</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: The Five Books of Moses, 2004, p. 663.

resemble the punishments warned of in this *parshah*. “I will direct panic against you, consumption and fever wasting the eyes and making the throat ache, and you shall sow your seed in vain...,” warns God.<sup>5</sup> Zimbabwe has 80 percent unemployment, an incomprehensible level of inflation (100,000 percent) and critical food shortages. With AIDS rampant, the people of Zimbabwe have the lowest life expectancy in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Zimbabwe’s corrupt leadership has presented a challenge for international aid and human rights organizations to form partnerships with ordinary people. The government of Zimbabwe has used food and other humanitarian aid as political weapons, to shore up its own support and threaten its opposition with starvation.<sup>7</sup>

Now Zimbabwe is engulfed in a new crisis. Despite years of government-sanctioned intimidation, a majority of Zimbabweans voted in elections on March 29 to oust Mugabe from power. But instead of stepping down, he is demanding a runoff election, which most observers believe will be used to continue violent repression.<sup>8</sup>

As a global community, we should see the current crisis as the “pause” that Robert Alter mentions. In it, the global community has an opportunity to help end the downward spiral of disasters wrought by Robert Mugabe’s policies. We should call on members of Congress to support current efforts by the United States and the United Nations to establish an arms embargo against Zimbabwe and to pressure the Mugabe government to heed the will of its people for a fair democracy. In addition, we should support policies by public and private aid organizations to ensure that aid gets to the people for whom it is intended—in Zimbabwe and other countries in the developing world.

In *Parshat Bechukotai*, even the most terrifying visions of destruction are accompanied by hope. With reform, God promises to “remember the land.”<sup>9</sup> Support for the actions of the United States and the United Nations to protect those who suffer from corrupt leadership is the way to turn toward a new beginning.



**Carol Towarnicky** is a freelance writer in Philadelphia who recently retired after 31 years as an editorial writer and columnist with the Philadelphia Daily News. She is a founding member and former president of Mishkan Shalom, an activist Reconstructionist synagogue with a mission to integrate prayer, study and action for social justice. In a regular column she continues to write for the Daily News called “Common Good,” she tries to “pray with the news,” to apply progressive religious values to current events. Carol can be reached at [towarnicky@aol.com](mailto:towarnicky@aol.com).

---

<sup>5</sup> Vayikra 26:16

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, Alertnet, “MEDIWATCH: Life in election-time Zimbabwe,” March 23, 2008. [http://www.alertnet.org/db/an\\_art/47985/2008/02/26-081600-1.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/db/an_art/47985/2008/02/26-081600-1.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Not Eligible: The Politicization of Food Aid in Zimbabwe,” October 24, 2003. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/zimbabwe1003/>.

<sup>8</sup> Washington Post, “Mr. Mugabe’s Violence,” April 30, 2008, p. A18.

<sup>9</sup> Vayikra 26:43

©2008 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/parshah](http://www.ajws.org/parshah).

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.