



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Vaera 5772

By Liel Leibovitz

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For most of us, land is an abstraction. Growing up in cities and towns, we feel the earth only in tiny backyards or small neighborhood parks, or when, once or twice a year, we make an effort to seek out nature for a day or two of camping and hiking. We have smartphone apps to help us identify leaves and plants, and Facebook games like Farmville to give us a touch of that old agricultural spirit our ancestors had lost a century or more ago, when America leaped into industrialization and left its fields and trees and brooks behind. Our thoughts of land focus on real estate—a utilitarian commodity to buy and sell—not on a spiritual connection to the earth itself.

This remove comes at a price. Whereas our great-grandparents, most likely, occupied the same swath of the planet that they were born in, leaving it infrequently, if ever, we are far more likely to collect our belongings and shuffle off in search of a different spot to call home. The average American, according to the latest census data, moves more than 11 times in a lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Land, then, never comes to define us, never becomes a part of our identity.

Which is why any talk of land as a spiritual entity may be a bit hard for us to fully comprehend. *Parshat Vaera* is a case in point: As the story begins, God speaks to Moses and assures him that the Israelites will soon be freed from the house of bondage to begin their relationship with the Divine. It's a stirring speech—"And I will take you to Me as a people," the Lord thunders, "and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians"<sup>2</sup>—but its ending is a bit strange. After promising redemption, God promises Moses something far more concrete: "I will bring you to the land," God says, "concerning which I raised My hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as a heritage."<sup>3</sup>

We landless moderns—who believe that "home" or even "God" rest wherever we happen to dwell or worship—are free to raise an eyebrow at this last promise. Why was the detail of something as mundane as where to settle presented together with the promise of freedom and Divine election?

To the Israelites, of course, as well as to most of humanity throughout the course of history, such questions would have been moot. For the most part, human beings lived not in societies—large and impersonal systems—but in communities, where families and clans clung to their land and were not only sustained by it but shaped by it as well.

In this way, the specific land of Canaan—as both a promise and a reality—was essential to Israelite peoplehood and spirituality. Their ancestral land shaped them, and us, and remains such a strong force in Jewish consciousness that it continues to do so even as generations of Jews lived and died without ever having seen it. Without the land, the promise of peoplehood—to Israelite ears—lacked its substance.

<sup>1</sup> Kristin A. Hansen, "Geographical Mobility," *U.S. Census Bureau*. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/geomob.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 6:7.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 6:8.

A similar yearning, partly practical and partly spiritual, defines scores of modern-day communities that find themselves at risk of losing their land. With many developing nations undergoing hyper-expedited industrialization, and with regulation and legislation frequently cast by the wayside, these communities must struggle to hold on to their fields and their livelihoods—not to mention their religions, languages, spiritual sites, grave sites and cultures.

Take, for example, the indigenous communities of the forests of northern Cambodia, who have lived for centuries off of the abundant natural resources but are now losing their land rapidly. While a 2001 law grants communities the right to register their land, it hasn't been enforced. In recent years, logging, industrial agriculture and infrastructure projects have encroached on indigenous lands and threatened the traditional way of life. The people have not only lost their ability to grow food, but are in danger of losing all that differentiates them from mainstream Cambodian culture.<sup>4</sup>

Together with a network of 94 communities in the province, representing the seven vulnerable ethnic groups, a grassroots NGO called Highlander's Association is working to defend indigenous land rights and preserve their cultural identity, which is intimately tied to the "spiritual forests" and the earth beneath their feet. The organization seeks enforcement of land laws by the provincial authorities and works with local people and youth to maintain language, tradition and identity.

Similar struggles are occurring worldwide, and while some communities have succeeded in securing their land rights, others are still struggling against mighty forces—from the invisible hand of the market to the arms of hostile militiamen—all reaching out to grab the land and dispossess the people who had lived on it for centuries. It is our duty to learn from *Parshat Vaera's* connection of liberation and land and to help them in this worthy effort,<sup>5</sup> thus acknowledging that for those who sow and reap and toil, every land is a promised land.



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<sup>4</sup> Indira Simbolon, "Law Reforms and Recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Communal Rights in Cambodia," *Land and Cultural Survival: The Communal Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Asia*, ed. Jayantha Perera (Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2009) 63-91. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Land-Cultural-Survival/chap03.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> To learn more of American Jewish World Service's efforts in this important field, kindly refer to *Promoting Natural Resource Rights*, American Jewish World Service, June 2011. [http://ajws.org/who\\_we\\_are/publications/strategy\\_papers/0711\\_promoting\\_natural\\_resource.pdf](http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/strategy_papers/0711_promoting_natural_resource.pdf).

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