



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bechukotai 5771

By Lisa Exler

May 21, 2011

We are pleased to welcome guest writer, Lisa Exler, senior program officer at American Jewish World Service.

Walking—putting one foot after the other—is, for many of us, our most basic vehicle for navigating the world. Yet we probably don't put much thought into it. We're more concerned with where we're going than how we're getting there; and unless we're on a hike, we rarely think of walking as an end in itself, or count it among our blessings.

But walking takes on new meaning in *Parshat Bechukotai*, which is perhaps best known for its list of blessings and curses that God vows for the Israelites—blessings if they observe the commandments, and curses if they fail to do so. The blessings are curiously framed by the image of walking. The passage opens with God stating the condition for receiving these blessings: “*Im bechukotai teileichu*—If you *walk* in accordance with My laws and observe and do My commandments.” And the section concludes with God's promise to walk, in return: “*V'hithalachti b'tochechem*—And I will *walk* in your midst, and I will be your God and you will be My people.”¹

The section of blessings could have ended there, with the final inspiring blessing being one of reciprocal relationship and intimacy between God and the Israelites. But it doesn't. Instead, it ends with the following verse, a seemingly superfluous description of God's role in the Exodus, which, significantly, also includes the image of walking: “I am Adonai your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from being their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you *walk upright*—*va'olech etchem komemiyut*.”²

A *midrash* explains that the word *komemiyut*, upright—which appears only this once in Torah, means “with a straight spine and unafraid of any creature.”³ In other words, God reminds the Israelites that they are no longer oppressed slaves living in fear; but rather, dignified people who can stand tall and walk proudly and are free to choose their own paths. The Israelites' ability to walk upright, which they attained through their experience of the Exodus, was the necessary precondition for the other “walkings” described previously in the text—walking in accordance with God's laws and God's reciprocal walking among the people, bestowing upon them the blessings of rain, food, peace and fertility.

These biblical “walkings” are clearly metaphors for dignity and the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites; but around the world today, there are many who are literally walking—to school; to fetch water and firewood; to escape conflict, persecution or natural disaster—in search of blessings like those God promised to the Israelites. Unfortunately, many of those who go on foot in the world face significant obstacles. Not yet liberated from their own Egypts—poverty, marginalization and oppression—they struggle to walk “upright.”

¹ Leviticus 26:3 and 26:12.

² Leviticus 26:13.

³ Sifra Bechukotai 1:7.

In South Africa, many children walk over 30 minutes each way to school, often encountering violent crime and unsafe roads and pedestrian paths.⁴ More than a year after Haiti's devastating earthquake, over one million people still live in camps for internally displaced persons, where women and girls are regularly attacked while walking along unlit paths to latrines at night.⁵ In Darfur, women face similar dangers as they walk long distances to procure water and firewood for their families. In the words of a resident of Kuma Garadayat village in North Darfur, "For years we have been afraid of being attacked while fetching water and collecting firewood; it is not always possible to move in groups and we are often escorted by men or UNAMID peacekeepers."⁶

Despite these challenges, people are finding ways to walk with dignity. In Haiti, for example, AJWS partners Earthspark International and KONPAY have distributed thousands of solar flashlights to women in IDP camps. The women have used them to light the paths to latrines and other vulnerable areas, thus reducing the incidence of violence and rape in the camps. The flashlights have also led to community organizing, as the women have initiated safety patrols and peer-counseling programs and are teaching each other income-generating activities.⁷

As we seek to support people around the globe who are walking amidst all kinds of challenges, we should be guided by the lesson of *Parshat Bechukotai*, that the ability to walk upright and unafraid is a precondition for attaining life's blessings. As Peter Uvin, Professor of International Humanitarian Studies at Tufts University, explains: "When people are deprived of their freedom, live in constant fear, cannot move or work as they wish, and are cut off from the communities and the lands they care about, development has emphatically *not* taken place."⁸

Let us work to secure the human rights of all, honoring the Divine image in which each person was created. In this way we will truly achieve the final blessing promised to the Israelites—God will walk among us.



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⁴ UNICEF and The Presidency, Republic of South Africa. *Situation Analysis of Children in South Africa*, April 2009. p. 69.

http://www.unicef.org/sitan/files/SitAn_South_Africa_2009.pdf

⁵ Amnesty International. *Aftershocks: Women Speak Out Against Sexual Violence in Haiti's Camps*, 2011.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR36/001/2011/en/57237fad-f97b-45ce-8fdb-68cb457a304c/amr360012011en.pdf>

⁶ "North Darfur Water Project Helps Protect Women From Sexual Violence." *IRIN*, 27 April 2011.

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=92597>

⁷ Haiti One Year Later: Grassroots Response to Tragedy. AJWS. http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/special_reports/111_haiti_slideshow.pdf.

Also see: "Gender-Based Violence Against Haitian Women and Girls in Internal Displacement Camps." *MADRE*, 7 April 2011.

<http://www.madre.org/index/press-room-4/news/gender-based-violence-against-haitian-women--girls-in-internal-displacement-camps-611.html>

⁸ Uvin, Peter. *Human Rights and Development*. Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2004. p. 123.

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