

THE RURAL CRISIS: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

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The Hebrew Bible is the world's oldest agricultural textbook. Indeed, the very name of the first human being, Adam, is derived from the Hebrew word for soil. There are many specific Biblical references to the land and its care, to agricultural themes. There are verses dealing with the need for rain in its season, seedtimes and harvests, Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The three major pilgrim holidays of the Hebrew Bible, Pesach(Passover), Shavuot(Weeks), and Sukkot(Tabernacles), are all harvest festivals.

Yehezkel Kaufmann, a distinguished Biblical scholar, has written: "When the people(the ancient Israelites) became rooted to the land...the sanctity of the land overshadowed the tent(the nomadic existence)". W. D. Davies, another great Biblical scholar, has noted: "...there is a kind of 'umbilical cord' between Israel and the land. It is no accident that one third of the Mishnah(the post Biblical legal code) is connected to the land...this is no accident, because the connection between Israel and the land was not fortuitous, but part of a divine purpose, or guidance."

We are still stirred by the Biblical images describing the sublime hope for the human family: "Everyone shall sit under

their vine and under their fig tree, and none shall make them afraid", and " They shall beat swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks." Time does not permit me to cite every Biblical reference to this profound, inextricable link with the land of Israel, and to the fact that agriculture was the basis for the national life of the ancient Israelites.

The system of public welfare, especially concern for the poor was based on an agricultural foundation. The Biblical laws claimed the gleanings of the field, the vineyard, and the olive grove for the stranger and the poor. The Sabbatical year set aside the land's produce for the poor, and the Jubilee year, with its restoration of the ancestral possessions, was linked to agriculture.

Jewish post Biblical literature graphically shows the high esteem that was given to the farmer and to agriculture. Several examples taken from many will illustrate the point: "In the time to come all handicraftspeople(non farmers) will turn to the working of the soil; for the soil is the surest source of sustenance to those that work it; and such occupation brings with it, moreover, health of body and ease of mind", "A man may not sell his field and put the money in his purse or buy a beast or furniture or a house except he be a poor man", and "He who who has a little garden of his own and fertilizes it, digs it, and enjoys its produce is far better off than he who works a large

garden as a tenant."

And finally, my favorite story tells of a very old man who labored all his life planting fruit trees. The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, is said to have taunted and teased this old man. The Emperor reminded the nurseryman that he was too old to enjoy the fruits of his planting; he would be dead before the trees reached full harvest. The old man responded to the taunts by reminding Hadrian that even though he would not live to see the harvest, humans are bound to till the soil and to plant trees. When we entered the world, the men and women of the earlier generations had subdued and cultivated the land for us. Just as our parents planted for us, so we must plant for our children.

In the chill winter of 1987, these ancient Jewish sayings still speak to us across the centuries, across the oceans of time and space....Nearly 2,000 seedtimes and harvests have come and gone since they were written, but they still have an eerie, chilling, ring of recognition for us.

Tragically, as one invader after another conquered the land of Israel, the Jewish people was often expelled from their land, if they were, in fact, even permitted to remain alive. But throughout the centuries after their destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70, some heroic Jews managed to work the soil and to survive as farmers, producers of olives, cotton, barley,

silkworms, and wine.

Amazingly, they clung to their land never surrendering it to the foreign rulers who with their armies came and departed with such painful regularity. We know very few of their names, but these men and women of the land, kept the flickering flame of Jewish hope alive for 1800 years, until the rebirth of the modern State of Israel.

Wherever the Jews traveled, in whatever land they found themselves, their religious calendar was always geared to the agricultural cycles in the land of Israel. The Biblical laws of agriculture were studied with loving detail by people who were forced to live away from the land of Israel. Living in dank and dark quarters, unable to even own land, much less farm it, the Jews still pored over every agricultural reference mentioned first in the Bible and then later in the Talmud. They never forgot their agricultural origins, their roots, their belief that someday they would return to the land of Israel, and rebuild their life as a people on that sacred land.

And of course they did return. It was no accident that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the Jewish people began to return to the land in large numbers, they threw themselves into exhausting agricultural labor. They worked in the vineyards, swamps, and fields, believing that spiritual redemption can come only through AVODAH, the Hebrew term for

labor and the worship of God. For a people who were cut off from their land, for whom farming was often forbidden, there was, and still remains the profound belief that self liberation comes only with continuous contact with the soil, the land.

A. D. Gordon, an early Zionist leader, preached this religion of labor until his death in 1922. He wrote: "The Jewish people have been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within city walls these two thousand years. We have become accustomed to every form of life except a life of labor...labor for its own sake...we come to our homeland in order to be planted in our national soil from which we have been uprooted, to strike our roots deep into the life giving substance and to stretch out in...the sunlight of the homeland...What we seek to establish...is a new recreated Jewish people."

The very act of planting a tree in the land of Israel, or removing a stone or gathering in a harvest was sacred. One of the greatest achievements of the Zionist movement, the force that helped create the modern State of Israel, was to bring Jewish men and women back to the soil of the land of the Bible; not symbolically in poem or prayer or in sermon or song, but rather in flesh and blood reality. Soft hands became calloused through physical labor, white collars became covered with the sweat of agricultural labor. The cycle from Biblical times to today, was now complete. Once again there were Jewish farmers in the land

of the Bible.

Several central facts emerge from this all too brief survey. The Hebrew Bible has a profound agricultural foundation, and the tradition of honoring farmers and their difficult occupation runs through much of Jewish post Biblical writings. Unfortunately, the anti Jewish legislation that was enacted through the centuries in the Diaspora systematically removed the Jew from the soil, from farming. As a direct result of this wide spread practice of barring Jews from owning land, they were forced to reside in ghettos(the term was probably first used in the 16th century to describe a restricted, segregated Jewish area in Venice).

But with the renaissance of Jewish life in the land of Israel within the last 150 years, came the establishment of kibbutzim and moshavim(community owned farming communities). Today Israelis are in many parts of the third world acting as agricultural instructors for other developing countries. This is true especially in those lands that have little or no rainfall. The science of irrigation, of water conservation, of raising crops with minimum water....all these vital techniques are taught by Israeli agricultural specialists.

I have elsewhere written about the attempts to develop Jewish farming communities in this country during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I refer specifically to the colonies

in Hodgeman County Kansas, Bad Axe, Michigan, and Painted Woods, South Dakota. And there were other attempts as well, some of which were successful, and some not. When these attempts at Jewish farming settlements failed, it was for a variety of economic, social, and historic reasons.

My point, then is this: Jewish religious tradition and Jewish history are saturated with the theme of the importance and dignity of agriculture. But the cruelties of anti Semitic rulers, mass expulsions, and almost permanent alienation from farming nearly shattered the ancient Jewish link with the land.

That is one reason why the American Jewish community, once it became aware of the deepening agricultural crisis here in the United States, has resonated with so much empathy to the anguished cries that have emerged from our country's prairies and fields. Like other Americans, Jews have been stunned by the depth and the length of the agricultural crisis. Clearly, we are not dealing with a short term problem; there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel, only an onrushing tractor or some other farm machine that threatens to overrun and destroy the American farmer.

It is not that Jews over romanticize or over sentimentalize farming; on the contrary. Despite the romanticization stemming from children's songs, books, and motion pictures, most Jews know and appreciate the extraordinary efforts

that are needed year after year to purchase seed and fertilizer, to maintain farm machinery, to plant, nurture, and harvest crops in the face of the often brutal and fickle forces of nature. Most Jews understand the economic unpredictability and the psychological stress created by the constantly shifting global agricultural markets.

The Jew instinctively knows that the entire agricultural endeavor is not simply a way to make a living. Biblical verses, Biblical images, and religious values enter into any evaluation of farming. It is not merely that the gifts of agriculture allow us to eat and to survive, but there is always the spiritual dimension, the mystique of land, and the God Who created it.

Why did Jeremiah the prophet at the time of the siege of Jerusalem, at a moment when national life as he knew it was coming to a destructive end, why did Jeremiah purchase a plot of land, near Jerusalem? Because he knew that land and its ownership is a theological statement; that in the face of impending disaster, land and its fertile produce was a guarantee against oblivion, against the loss of personal and collective identity.

Why even in the darkest days of the Nazi Holocaust did Jews who were imprisoned in death camps try to plant gardens, pitiful gardens that were doomed to failure?

Why did little Jewish boys and girls in Nazi concentration camps draw pictures of farms and write poems about

planting seeds and watching "things grow"? Why indeed? Because embedded deep in the Jewish tradition there is a profound link with the land, and an awareness that farming, making the earth yield its fruits, is something special...AVODAH.

But there is something more at work. We instinctively know that when a once stable and productive segment of our society begins to break apart, then the entire society is put at risk. When in August, 1985 I visited Iowa and when I talked with owners of "Century Farms" who were about to lose their land, their very identity, my Jewish heritage helped shape my response. It sounded all too familiar.

People were being uprooted from their land, their children were fleeing the region in large numbers, once valued members of a society were being called "surplus people". A lifestyle, a cadence, a rhythm of life was not only being challenged, but it was being destroyed. As Andrew Malcolm of THE NEW YORK TIMES recently reported: "Around the clock through the year, 180 times a day now, another American farm disappears..." It had a familiar ring to it.

Like other observers of the agricultural crisis, I have seen farming families literally torn apart, husband against wife, parents against children, brother against sister, generation pitted against generation. Coming from a tradition that extolls farming, coming from a tradition that celebrates the agricultural

seasons of the year, with a Bible that is filled with agricultural images, I am pained to see people torn from their vine and from their fig tree, their corn field, their soybeans, their cotton, and their wheat: modern exiles plunging into an uncharted Diaspora.

As a Jew with a rich theology of the land, I shudder as the fabric of the agricultural community comes unravelled. Let the economists argue whether the family farm is economically viable or not. Whatever the merits of one economic theory or another, I am concerned by the seemingly inexorable destruction of the family farm. The result is a wrenching of a talented and gifted people, the American farmers, from the land, all taking place at an enormous human cost.

As a Jew with a long memory of anti-Semitism, I am outraged when I see political extremists, anti Semites, enter the agricultural scene, and sing their simplistic siren songs with false and easy answers for complex problems. Tragically, the scapegoat (another Biblical image!) that is offered to troubled and distressed farmers is the eternal scapegoat: the Jewish community. Yet, as I have pointed out, the Jews have had one of the world's oldest and longest love affairs with the land, soil, and farming. But sadly, at the same time, we remain the victims of one of the world's oldest social pathologies, anti-Semitism.

Let me close, as Jonathan Swift put it, with a few

"modest proposals", proposals that have emerged from the Jewish infatuation with the land and with some Jewish tactics of survival in the midst of crisis.

First, the Jewish and the Christian communities need to emphasize in their teaching materials a greater appreciation and understanding of both the dignity and the difficulty of the entire agricultural undertaking. Certainly there are rich spiritual resources that can be employed in this vital task. It is simply unacceptable for a generation of American young people to grow to maturity in this society without a love of the land and of the God who is the ultimate Owner of that land. Religious schools need to stress the Biblical roots of agriculture, and the concept of AVODAH, the link between physical labor and worship of God.

Second, one thing Jews have learned over the many centuries of crisis and trauma is not to suffer in isolation. Because of the entrepreneurial nature of family farming, there is often a tendency for farmers in trouble or in distress to "go it alone." By sharing the pain, and by establishing institutions and organizations of collective welfare, the crisis can be more effectively confronted and real solutions found. One can admire the traditional independence of farmers, but if Jewish history is any guide, personal independence alone is not a sufficient guarantee of group survival.

Finally, America is a collection of minority groups. No one profession, religion, race, ethnic group, or gender group can achieve its goals in isolation. Only by working together in pluralistic coalitions can real gains be made. This is our challenge here in Chicago.

The somber statistics, the shattering stories of human loss, the clear evidence that repulsive professional hate groups are at work in the agricultural community...all of this and more will be presented here in Chicago.

What is needed now, is for the Christian and Jewish communities to develop an effective coalition of concern and action. We did it once to end slavery in this country, we did once to alert America to the evils of racism, we did it once to help end a war in Southeast Asia, and we must do it again now to aid our suffering brothers and sisters in the agricultural community.