

Shalom Carmy

## Recovering the Land: Nehemiah 9 and Ramban

Our discussion will focus on two issues. The first has to do with Ramban's resolution to a question about the interpretation of Genesis 12-17, specifically the progression from chapter 15 to chapter 17. In the section of *Lekh lekha* (Gen. 12-17) God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham four times. Why the seeming repetition? What does each iteration of the promise add to the previous ones? Ramban responds to this question in his commentary to Genesis 15:14.<sup>1</sup> We shall be concerned with the third and fourth promises in Genesis 15 and 17, respectively.

The second subject is some noteworthy features of the prayer of the Levites in Nehemiah 9. To begin with, the phraseology of the rehearsal of the patriarchal period in this prayer seems more indebted to Genesis 15 (the *berit ben ha-betarim*) than to Genesis 17. In terms of content, one would have expected a post-exilic survey of Jewish history to stress the exile itself and the return to the land. Why does Nehemiah 9 omit such reference?

I suggest that one resolution to the questions raised by this prayer might fit well with Ramban's statements in Genesis. Let me make it clear at the outset that our question about Ramban is distinct from the analysis of Nehemiah. In other words, one may follow Ramban's approach and endorse my elaboration on it without tying it to my proposal about Nehemiah 9 and without holding that Ramban even thought about the prayer when he discussed Genesis 15 and 17. Likewise one may endorse much of what we say about Nehemiah, and much of what is proposed about the relationship of Nehemiah to Genesis 15, without adopting Ramban's view about the contrast between Genesis 15 and 17.

### I

Let us examine our first theme: Ramban's discussion of the promises in Genesis 12, 13, 15 and 17. According to Ramban, the first two promises (in chapters 12 and 13)

1 See Ramban on Genesis 15:18. Note also commentary on 15:7, where Ramban explains that although God had intended to give Abraham the land from the moment he left Ur, Abraham asked for assurance that sin would not cause the promise to be revoked for him or his descendants.

differ in terms of the geographical extent of the land. Genesis 12:7 (“to your seed I will give this land”) refers only to the areas Abraham had visited. Genesis 13:14 (“lift your eyes, north and south and east and west”) includes the entire land of Israel. God also promises the land to Abraham’s descendants who will be many.

The promises in chapters 15 and 17 are more nuanced and require more attention. What is new in chapter 15 (“the covenant of the parts,” *berit ben ha-betarim*) is the borders of the land, the list of ten nations occupying the land before Abraham’s seed and the covenant. The covenant ensures that the promise will not be annulled by the sin of Abraham’s children. The key phrase in chapter 17 (“the covenant of circumcision”), according to Ramban, is *ahuzat olam*, an everlasting commitment. It denotes that even if Israel is exiled from the land they will yet return and recover it.

Our present goal, in this section, is to present Ramban’s explicit and implicit support for his view about chapters 15 and 17 and to add other evidence from Genesis that he could have offered.

From the standpoint of content, the difference between the promise of chapter 15 and that of chapter 17, as parsed by Ramban is subtle. The promise of 15 is irrevocable, not vulnerable to the impact of sin. Nonetheless, an irrevocable promise can be forfeited. An employer, for example, may promise his protégé a position, and commit himself to stick to the offer regardless of what happens in the interim. Yet if the employee is subsequently terminated for whatever reason, especially for failure to meet requisite standards, the employer, having discharged his original commitment, is not bound to hire him back later. Renewed employment would require renewed commitment. According to Ramban, God makes both promises to Abraham and at two separate times.

This need for the additional promise of return to the land of Israel implies that the divine commitment to Abraham already includes the prospect of exile after Israel has inherited the land. Later the Torah anticipates the exile explicitly in Deuteronomy 4 and 28. When Ramban applies his principle of *maaseh avot siman la-banim* with respect of Isaac’s wells (Gen. 26) and Jacob’s encounter with Esau (Gen. 32) he alludes to the future after the exile.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Torah introduces in Genesis (according to Ramban on 15:14) not only the sojourn of Abraham’s offspring before they conquer the land but also the idea of subsequent exile and return, is significant. Yet we should also remember that even for Ramban the references to later exile from the land in Genesis, unlike Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy, are not in the foreground; they become visible only in the light of exegesis.

2 One may argue that Ramban’s use of this typological principle is homiletical, but I believe Ramban invokes it to solve *peshat* problems in the text, such as why the Torah recounts certain incidents at length.

How did Ramban derive his distinction from the text of chapters 15 and 17? He states or hints at three pieces of evidence. First, as we have seen, the phrase *ahuzat olam* in chapter 17 implies permanence beyond what is given in chapter 15. Second, Ramban, in his summary of chapter 15, refers to the ten nations preceding Israel in the land. This list is pertinent if the chapter is about the first inheritance of the land as fulfillment of God's irrevocable promise. The catalogue of nations is absent from chapter 17. If the promise attached to the covenant of circumcision applies later, after Israel has forfeited the original promise and gone into exile, then the identity of the inhabitants at the time of Abraham or Joshua is no longer part of the promise. Third, Ramban is aware of a grammatical change from chapter 15 to chapter 17. The grant of the land to Abraham in the former, is stated in the past tense (*natatti*), as something already achieved. The promise in chapter 17 utilizes the future tense (*ve-natatti*) which is appropriate if the promise refers to a later situation, after the people are exiled.

One might consider another possible philological ground for Ramban's conclusion. Chapter 15 speaks about "cutting the covenant" (*karat berit*) while in chapter 17 God "gives" His covenant (*natan*). Is there a difference between cutting the covenant, on the one hand, and "giving a covenant" or "establishing a covenant" (*hekim berit*) on the other hand? One might hesitantly suggest that "cutting" the covenant refers to the first inauguration of the covenant, and that "giving" a covenant means confirming or expanding commitments already initiated.

## II

As noted, Ramban does not mention the prayer of the Levites (Nehemiah 9). This prayer reviews the history of Israel from the election of Abraham, through the exile in Egypt, the redemption from Egypt, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the incident of the golden calf. He goes on to mention God's sustenance of the people in the desert, the vanquishing of Israel's enemies Sihon and Og before entering the land, the great increase in their numbers "like the stars of heaven," the conquest of the land and the long history of disobedience afterwards. They then lament the present situation, with the people deservedly subjected to the yoke of foreign rule.

Let us reflect on some of the references to Abraham in this prayer. One detail mentioned here that appears in Genesis 17 but not in chapter 15, is the change of name from Abram to Abraham.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, the parallels between Nehemiah and

3 This essay discusses only parallels between Nehemiah 9 and Genesis 15 that are germane to our subject. Scholars have compiled longer lists. See, for example, Mark Boda, *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9* (Berlin, 1999), 101-114.

Genesis all allude to chapter 15. God took Abraham from Ur Kasdim in Gen. 15 and in Nehemiah 9; this detail does not come up in Gen 17. When the Levites speak of God's covenant with Abraham, they use the verb *karat* that is found in Gen 15, not the alternative verb *natan* from Gen 17. Gen 15 and Nehemiah 9 compare the number of Abraham's offspring to the stars of heaven; this figure of speech is absent from Gen 17. Most interesting, Gen 15 and the prayer in Nehemiah 9 list the various nations that Abraham's descendants will supplant; Gen 17 omits the list. Yonatan Grossman found additional elements of chapter 15 in Nehemiah, which we discuss later. For now, one may guardedly submit that this prayer echoes Gen 15, not Gen 17.

If one accepts Ramban's explanation of the difference between the promise to Abraham in chapter 15 and that of chapter 17, the implicit conclusion is that Levites' prayer goes back to God's assurance at the *berit ben ha-betarim* that the promise to Abraham's seed is irrevocable rather than to the assurance in Gen 17 that Israel will return to the land even if they forfeit the original grant of *Eretz Yisrael*. There is no evidence that Ramban thought about the echo of Gen. 15 in Nehemiah, but readers who would adopt Ramban's position may seek support in it.

Offhand, however, this point presents a minor difficulty for Ramban. The situation of the Jewish people in Ezra-Nehemiah seems closer to that which Ramban identified with Gen 17 than that of Gen 15. A millennium has passed since God spoke to Abraham and many centuries since Israel first inhabited Canaan in Joshua's days. One would think that the people in Nehemiah 9 are enacting Ramban's comments on Gen 17, the eventuality that the people will lose the land of Israel and need reassurance that God will bring them back. If Ramban is right, one might expect Nehemiah 9 to be linked to Genesis 17 rather than 15.

This difficulty, however, leads to another difficulty in Nehemiah that is independent of our discussion of Ramban. There is a striking omission in Nehemiah 9. Although this prayer takes place after the return from exile, the words, which speak bluntly of the sins that led to Israel's current subjugation to foreign powers, make no reference to the exile from which they have returned. That part of the history which ought to have been most conspicuous has been left out. As readers of Nehemiah, we may not feel compelled to respond to every difficulty regarding the approach Ramban developed elsewhere. However, we cannot easily dismiss or marginalize a problem that goes to the heart of the prayer. If we understood why exile is omitted from Nehemiah 9 this might also explain why the prayer chose to quote Gen 15 rather than Gen 17.

Let me develop a line of thought regarding the silence in Nehemiah. It requires us to consider how the return of the exiles is treated elsewhere in Tanakh. For some of the prophets, most notably Isaiah 43:5ff: "I shall bring your children from the east and

gather them from the west,” the ingathering of the exiles is of the utmost significance.<sup>4</sup> The return plays a leading role in these prophecies of consolation; it is the cause of astonishment and jubilation. Similarly, Ezekiel 11:17-18 insists that the exiles in Babylon will be re-established and flourish in their land. Ezekiel’s prophecy explicitly rebuts the notions he cites in the preceding verses (15-16) where those who remained in Jerusalem are said to believe that they alone would inherit the land and that the exiles have lost their place. Again, after word reaches Tel-Aviv of the destruction, the prophet rebukes the inhabitants of the ruins who compare themselves to Abraham, who was solitary yet inherited the land (33:24). Ezekiel tells them that the land will be desolate because of their sins (33:25-29).

The post-exilic prophets of the return to Israel, Zachariah, who prophesied shortly after the fall of Babylon, and his contemporaries and near-contemporaries Haggai and Malachi, do not devote space to celebrating the return of the exiles, though Zachariah 2:11 calls upon the Jews to “flee Babylon and abandon the Chaldeans.” The reader who is not aware of the exile from other sources, would know from Zachariah and Haggai, that the Temple is to be rebuilt and that the political standing of the Israelites is in flux, but not that *kibbutz galuyot*, the ingathering of exiles, is at the center. Bearing this in mind, the omission of the exiles from the Levites’ prayer sometime after Zachariah is not as exceptional as it first appears. Moreover, Ezra’s confession, contemporary with Nehemiah (Ezra 9) also describes the community’s present subjugation to foreign nations due to their sin without referring to the history of exile and return. Hence the lack of attention to exile in the Second Temple prophets and in Ezra and Nehemiah is not as unusual as it might seem.

Why this change? We can now offer three explanations. One is chronological and geographic. For the populace exiled in Babylon at the time when the Babylonian empire was overthrown, the prospect of return to the land of Israel was of paramount importance. For that reason, the prophets who spoke about that generation (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zachariah) and were concerned with that group of exiles had much to say about their return to their homeland. The main preoccupations of Zachariah and his cohorts were connected to the situation in Jerusalem. Once we reach Ezra and Nehemiah the preoccupation with internal Judean problems is even greater. Therefore, the novelty and impressiveness of return after having forfeited the land fades from view in Ezra’s prayer.

4 See also Isaiah 11:11ff on the return from Assyria and Egypt and other areas in Mesopotamia and Africa, and 27:12-13, which refers to ingathering from the Euphrates to the Nile.

A second approach is formulated by Judith Newman. In her opinion, the prayer wishes to establish Israel's inalienable right to the land. She then argues: "How better to establish such a claim than to mitigate the aspect of the Exile having to do with the loss of the land as a punishment."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the prayer confesses that the people suffered great punishment for their sins but does not mention the Exile among the punishments.

I would like to propose another explanation. Like Newman, I believe the omission of the Exile is intended to fortify the claim to the irrevocable grant of the land. I would, however, concentrate on different implications of Nehemiah 9's focus on the narrative of God's promise to Abraham and the first conquest of the land to the exclusion of the return from exile. Let us go back to the time of destruction and exile to Babylon. Jeremiah 24 ("the parable of the figs") expresses a clear divine preference for the exile community over those remaining in the land. The "good figs," the Judeans whom God exiled to the land of the Chaldeans, He will recognize favorably and they "will be restored to this land" (24:5-6). As already noted, Ezekiel reports that the remaining inhabitants of the land of Israel deprecated the exiles. We see that the exiles were beleaguered by serious doubts about their future as part of Israel. Were they still God's people, having been expelled from His land? After the first exile of 597, which brought Ezekiel and many of his leading compatriots to Babylonia, those who remained in Jerusalem thought of themselves as the chosen inheritors of the land. They said of the exiles "they are distanced from God; to us the land has been given as inheritance" (11:15). After the destruction of 586 the remnant continued to consider themselves, and not the exiled Judeans, the true heirs of Abraham: "For Abraham was one, and we are many; the land has been granted to us" (33:24). It is as if the Jerusalemites whom Ezekiel castigates were preemptively rejecting Ramban's remarks about reacquiring the land after having lost it, while retaining their possession inasmuch as they had not been transported elsewhere. One of Ezekiel's tasks, strongly proclaimed in chapter 20 (32ff) is to assure the exiles that they could not disengage themselves from the divine covenant, that God would rule over them whether they wished it or not and that He would restore them to the land despite their transgressions. In this context one might say that the teaching about the future ingathering of the exiles was not only a message of consolation but a theological revolution. No wonder that the idea is not only present in books like Ezekiel but conspicuously so.

Babylon fell. Return to Eretz Yisrael became viable; some but not all the Babylonian exiles took advantage of the opportunity. What, or rather, who awaited

5 Judith H. Newman, *Prayer in Second Temple Judaism* (Atlanta, 1999), 99-100.

them when they returned? From Ezra-Nehemiah we know that many of the natives did not welcome the restoration; they complained to the Persian regime and resisted the rebuilding of the Temple by the returnees and Nehemiah's efforts to strengthen Jerusalem. We do not hear anything about the "regular" Judeans who happened to remain in the land after the various exiles. These people would be the descendants, in effect, of those who had claimed superiority over the exiles of 597 and 586.

It is plausible to think that the Levites in Nehemiah, painfully aware of local opposition, would not want to keep alive the century-old tensions between the exiles and those Judeans who remained in the land. They would not have wanted to remind their community that there had once been a dispute about the identity of Abraham's "true" heirs. For that reason alone, they might have chosen to treat their present subjugation to foreign rule as a direct continuation of the misfortunes and punishments from before the exile. In remaining silent about the story of exile and return, the prayer in Nehemiah 9 is like the contemporary prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9) which also describes subjugation to foreign rulers without discussing the exile. Both prayers differ from the confession of Daniel (Daniel 9:7) which speaks clearly about God having driven away his people for their sins.

Our suggestion would explain the silence of Nehemiah 9, about the exile. Secondly, if we wish to work with Ramban's view on the difference between Gen 15 and Gen 17, our suggestion yields an explanation of the fact that the prayer alludes to the former rather than the latter. Lastly, our understanding of Nehemiah provides one more piece of evidence consonant with Ramban's approach, although it was not cited by him.

### III

Let us examine one additional point regarding Genesis 15 and 17 and another respecting Nehemiah 9 that have come up in recent scholarship which are germane to our subject.

Yonatan Grossman assembled several parallels between Genesis 15 and Nehemiah 9.<sup>6</sup> Our analysis until now was based entirely on the promises found in the second half of the chapter—the enactment of the "covenant of the parts" (*berit ben ha-betarim*) and the accompanying divine promises. Grossman's primary interest is in the opening verses. The Levites's reference to God having taken Abraham from Ur Kasdim is based on God's statement (Genesis 15:7) to that effect. When the Levites say that "You found his heart faithful before you," their source is Genesis 15:6: "He trusted in God,

6 *Avraham: Sippur shel Massa'* (Tel Aviv, 2014), 110.



and He deemed it righteousness (*tsedaka*).” And when the Levites affirm that God sustained His word “for You are righteous” (*tsaddik attā*) they are relying on the same verse.<sup>7</sup>

I am not sure that linking the two parts of chapter 15 together is the only way to read the chapter. The opening verses seem dedicated to Abraham’s concern about an heir, while the latter part of the chapter is about inheriting the land. In fact, when Grossman advocates the unity of these two themes, he appeals to Nehemiah 9 as “the first source that relates to Genesis 15 as one unit.”

Adopting Grossman’s view regarding the unity of Genesis 15 would mesh well with the approach we have developed. If the prayer of the Levites is connected to the belief that the grant of the land is irrevocable, then recalling that Abraham merited the promise strengthens that conviction. God’s promise is assured because Abraham deserved it. Even if one does not follow Grossman on the unity of Genesis 15, one may still endorse this insight given the faithfulness ascribed to Abraham in Nehemiah 9.

Gili Kugler has recently written about the crises recorded in Tanakh where God threatened the destruction of the Jewish people: the incidents of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32-34) and the spies (Numbers 13-14).<sup>8</sup> The Torah highlights Moses’ intercession with God to prevent the annihilation. Kugler examines versions of these narratives elsewhere in Tanakh.<sup>9</sup> She notes that in the rehearsal of Israel’s sinful history in Nehemiah 9, there is no reference to the danger of annihilation. The reason for this omission, she proposes, is that the Levites prefer not to confront the real prospect of such punishment. This piece of evidence is hospitable to the view we are proposing, namely that the omission of exile in the prayer in Nehemiah seeks to secure faith in a permanent right to the land that is not endangered by sin.<sup>10</sup>

7 Is the righteousness in 15:6 imputed to God, as Ramban held, or to Abraham, like Rashi? I am not sure whether it is plausible to follow Grossman in adopting both readings. I will return to this question below.

8 Gili Kugler, *When God Wanted to Destroy the Chosen People* (Berlin/Boston, 2019).

9 On Nehemiah 9, see 125-144 and her previous article “Present Affliction Reflects the Representation of the Past: An Alternative Dating of the Levites’ Prayer in Nehemiah 9” (*VT* 63 605-626).

10 Kugler, following a line of scholarship going back to the early 20th century, juggles the date of Nehemiah 9 to explain the lack of reference to the exile. According to our approach there is no need to re-date the prayer. As indicated above, both Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 avoid explicit mention of the exile. Nor is there a contradiction between Ezra 9’s benign view of the Persian monarchy and Nehemiah 9; both texts bemoan subjugation to foreign power.



## IV

We began with Ramban's attempt to differentiate between the promise in Genesis 15 and that in Genesis 17. When we then moved to Nehemiah 9, our focus shifted from the contrast between the two promises in Genesis to the employment of Genesis 15 in Nehemiah. Returning to the passage in Ramban's commentary it remains to wonder: On Ramban's interpretation, why was the assurance that Abraham's children would receive the land, not subject to withdrawal of the promise due to sin, linked to the *berit ben ha-betarim*, whereas the assurance that his descendants would be able to re-inherit the land, despite sin, was tied to *berit mila*?

Grossman's approach to Genesis 15 would explain why Genesis 15 takes priority over Genesis 17. That is because Grossman treats the two parts of Genesis 15 as one unit, in addition to his claim that Genesis 15:6 ("And God considered [Abraham's faith] to be righteousness") testifies to the patriarch's merit. Linking the promise of the land to Abraham's merit increases the conviction that Israel has "earned" possession of the land and that reinforces the inalienable nature of the promise. Genesis 17 does not contain the affirmation of Abraham's prior merit and thus does not provide such reinforcement.

Grossman's approach does not fit well with Ramban's own view. According to Ramban, Genesis 15:6 is not about merit that God imputed to Abraham but about Abraham's gratefulness to God. According to Ramban, God's finding Abraham faithful before Him is not an allusion to Genesis 15. Is there an alternative approach to Ramban that explains why the covenant promising the land to Abraham in Genesis 15 would not be sufficient to guarantee the perpetuation of the covenant after Israel had forfeited it, therefore necessitating the covenant of Genesis 17?

Perhaps one could respond that the demands made by the two covenants are different. Gen 15 imposes exile and suffering; Gen 17 demands the painful act of circumcision. The exile and suffering that God ordains during the formative period of the nation do not require actions of religious commitment on the part of the people. The Torah does not ascribe to the people acts of merit that make them worthy of being redeemed. Their role is to suffer and to endure. In Gen 17, by contrast, keeping the covenant entails the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob taking upon themselves the divine commandment to circumcise. The initial covenant, promising the land to Abraham's posterity, is fulfilled by God, with the people experiencing a passive role. The second covenant, which for Ramban represents the recovery of the land after it has been forfeited, requires action on the part of the people.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to R. Hayyim Angel for comments on first draft. Thanks to Joshua Fitterman who commented on an earlier oral version.