

My Land Will Be Able to Hear Our Own Prayers Here:  
Midrash and the Indigenous Landback Movement:  
parashat Vayera, Reba Connell, October 2021

To support visual access, I'll mention that I'm wearing a white shirt for shabbat and the pale skin of my Ashkenazi and Irish ancestors everyday, with androgynous gray hair mostly covered by a kippah. And I'm smiling at you under my mask.

Breathing and noticing your connection with the Earth.  
Noticing the solidity of your feet or wheels on the ground.  
Bringing awareness to the contact with something you are sitting, standing, or lying on.

Knowing you are a descendant of *adam*,  
the first androgynous being made from *adamah*, earth,  
and of Chavah, Eve, *chayim*, life.

Beloved child of Earth  
and of life,  
noticing feelings of belonging to the Earth,  
and bringing compassion to feelings of not belonging.

We acknowledge we are meeting in Huchiun,  
the territory of the Chochenyo-speaking Lisjan Ohlone people,  
the past, present, and future People of this land.  
Their current projects include rematriating land through the Sogorea Te Land trust, protecting sacred sites at the West Berkeley shellmound, and the Ohlone café.  
Pledging *tzedakah* in honor of this ancestral practice,  
bringing to mind one thing you will do, learn, or give this week for justice, to protect and return this indigenous land.

“In West Berkeley dwells the first human settlement on the shore of San Francisco Bay, established 5,000 years ago, the West Berkeley Shellmound [and village]..this [sacred] heritage site.. is now at risk of being obliterated by a proposed ... development. ...This ... land at Fourth Street is the only part of the ancestral village that remains intact below the surface and has never been built on. It represents a final opportunity to respect the original people of this land,” say the

Lisjan Ohlone people at [www.shellmound.org](http://www.shellmound.org).

5000, 4000, and 3000 years ago, the Chochenyo-speaking Lisjan Ohlone tribe is dancing and praying to Creator, making elaborate baskets, and taking fishing boats onto the bay where the train tracks are now.

On the other side of the globe in these times, Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham, or Jewish tribal ancestors like them, are living in tents, praying in sacred groves, having angels over for dinner, and making miracles of healing and schok, joy, for their communities.

Waves of European settlers violently broke the continuity of this relationship with the land. 174 years ago, a guy named Levi came to California and started putting the name of the tribe of temple singers of Israel on every *tuchas*. In Jewish time, that's like last week. In indigenous time, it's today. The Ohlone are reviving their religion and language after genocide.

Alison Luterman writes in her poem "Insatiable,"  
...and I know I wasn't there  
at the theft of the Americas,  
but I'm here, now,  
treading with unlawful feet  
over sacred ground, asking even the trees  
For solace and wisdom.

Hagar asked even the bushes for solace and wisdom. Cast out, running out of water, Hagar, the first person in the torah to have named the Divine, "atah el ro'i," you are the Divine who sees me," (Genesis 16:13), receives a response from an Angel when she sets her child under a bush. "Vayifkach Elohim et eyneha vatereh be'er Mayim," (Genesis 21:19) and the Divine opened her eyes, opened her imagination to possibility, and she saw a well of water."

Abraham, too, planted an eshel tree at Be'er Sheva and invoked there the name of the divine (21:33)

Resh Lakish, a talmudic rabbi beloved to the LGBTQ community for his moving love story with his hevrutah, or study partner, says,

"Abraham caused God's name to ring out in the mouth of every traveler. ... He would tell them, "Was it my food you ate? Was it not Creator's food you ate?" So they thanked and gave praise and blessing to the one who spoke and the world came into being.

"The real food growing in my orchard, served in my hotel is not human finite stuff, it is God's substance – infinite, charged with love," says Aviva Zornberg.

"Not blessings but gifts Abraham gave Isaac," quotes Zornberg from the midrash. "This is like a king who owned an orchard and gave it to a tenant-farmer to attend. Two trees grew there, entangled with one another: one grew vital potions, and the other group grew fatal potions. The farmer said "if I water the vital tree, the fatal one will be nourished too. But if I don't water the fatal one, how will the vital one live?" He concluded: I am merely a tenant-farmer, in temporary charge of the orchard. Let me finish my tenure, and then let the owner decide what to do." So said Abraham...: "I am merely flesh and blood – here today and tomorrow in the grave. ...let God do what God wishes in God's world."

The sacred groves and intertwined trees remind me of my difficulty living as a non-indigenous person on Turtle Island. The vital tree of beauty, safety, home, loved ones, work that matters, cannot be separated from the fatal tree at the root, benefiting from stolen land and stolen lives. Further entangled at the root is Christian oppression of Jews, exported globally to suppress indigenous religions and lives.

This Elul, I studied talmud with Svava queer yeshiva, wondering together how a stolen beam might relate to reparations today. In Gittin 55a, our ancestors respond to a problem of a house built with *hamarish hagazul*, the stolen beam.

Beit Shammai argues: "mka'akayah et kol habirah kolah umachzir marish l'ba'alav," tear down the whole building, the whole thing, and return the beam to its owner.

The mishnah offers the idea of paying "damav, mipnei takanat hashavim," equivalent financial compensation, literally its blood,

because of the ruling, or repair, of those making *tshuvah*, or changing their ways. Beit Hillel holds with this view.

Rambam says that if your sukkah is built with a stolen beam, you pay during the holiday, but after the holiday, you give the owner their whole beam back. Sitting in a stolen sukkah sounds exposed, vulnerable, and hard to hide.

Rashi comments that *takanat hashavim*, the option of paying instead of tearing down the structure, came about to eliminate barriers to *tshuvah*.

*Tshuvah* is hard.

With a knife in his hand, Abraham receives a gift of grace at the last moment, an angel calling, Abraham, Abraham! (Genesis 22:11).

Here comes the switch, the reprieve: "Vayisa Abraham et eynav," (22:13) and Abraham lifted his eyes, opened to a new understanding. And there is a ram, "*vaya'aleyhu l'olah tachat b'no*," and he raised it up, he sacrificed it, tachat, instead of, his own child.

Rashi comments that Abraham prayed, this act should be as though [*ke'eelu*] it were done to my son."

Rashi says that Abraham says to God, "then I have come here for nothing, I will wound him and draw a little blood," and that's when God emphasizes, "*v'al ta'as lo m'uma*," and don't do anything to harm him.

It's hard to pull back, It's hard to change when we've already invested in a view. It's hard to shift from the idea that it's possible to own land.

Thinking about sacrifice, and substitutions, in the context of the land back movement. To respond to the demand to return indigenous land to indigenous sovereignty and indigenous religion, what might we be being asked to give up?

What possibilities might have been there all along that we might not have perceived?

What else might there be for us instead?

In what new ways might we belong to each other, to the land by the Bay, to Turtle Island and to Planet Earth?

For many Native Americans, our land ... is a natural relative, not a natural resource. And our justice traditions require the restoration of our land relationship, not monetary reparations, says professor Daniel R. Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation.

In July 2020, the Esselen tribe finalized the purchase of a 1,200-acre ranch near Big Sur... the Esselen tribe will share it with other [Native] groups including the Ohlone. "Getting this land back gives us privacy to do our ceremonies. It gives us space and the ability to continue our culture without further interruption. This is forever, and in perpetuity, that we can hold on to our culture and our values."

Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, "... in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

And "We Jews cannot remain indifferent. We are either ministers of the sacred, or slaves to evil." ministers of the sacred.

Every Sunday during slavery in the US, an enslaved preacher would end the sermon saying, "You are not slaves, you are the children of God."

The Torah teaches in the language of intimate relationship, and names Hagar as a slave. How do I live with Jewish tradition, both so creative and life-giving and the source text for so much harm? I write midrash, listening for and giving voice to women, animals, and queer ancestors. When I listen to Hagar and Sarah's story, I hear a breakup. Here an excerpt from Hagar's story of her breakup with Sarah, and her protest against her conditions:

How did things go so wrong between us?

...I did everything she asked. So it was natural, when she was tired, to rub her feet, just so at the arch, and put oil on them until the chapped skin, cracked from walking on the hot sand, softened under my strong palms.

...It's so humiliating, the way I followed after her like a little goat, hoping she would notice me, or even once ask me if my own feet ached too, or if I wasn't dusty and hot from the sun. But I didn't exist to her, my own need and suffering never moved across her horizon any more than a rain cloud ever found us in the desert.

... I wanted her to see me, to really see that I wasn't the little girl she took out of Egypt like any other piece of jewelry or livestock she and that man wanted.

... I didn't do it for her pleasure, but to show her that I existed. That I had a name, not that one she called me, Hagar, the stranger.

I am no stranger to myself, only to you.

I have my own name, given to me by my mother, and pronounced perfectly in my own land by people familiar with its syllables, holding it only briefly in their mouths the way they eat a familiar food without wincing at its spiciness or needing to get used to its taste. I would say it to myself after she sent me off to cook something for her. Or to gather water in this impossible desert she took me to, far away from the Nile where normal, civilized people live, to look for some god I can't even see. Who I'm sure never sees me, the invisible girl.

The undeveloped space at the West Berkeley Shellmound creates space for a land midrash. The Ohlone vision is to create a public open space for ceremony and contemplation. Corrina Gould, tribal spokesperson for the Confederated Villages of Lisjan and co-director of the Sogorea Te land trust, said in the Rosh Hashanah dvar torah at Kehillah,

"To hear the language of your people as you sing it through your chants and your prayers is beautiful and it gives me hope and dreams that as those languages and prayers that were brought all the way from the other side of the world to my land, that my land will be able to hear our own language and prayers and songs again here...

It gives me great joy to hear that a part of your tradition is to let the land rest and let it be itself...

To know there are people that stand with us gives me great hope and joy for my grandchildren, not only for my grandchildren but for yours as well.”

My land will be able to hear our own language and prayers and songs again here.

Ways to learn, get involved and contribute:

<https://www.jewsonohloneland.org/about>

Learn about the shellmound and support the legal defense of the sacred Berkeley shellmound:

[www.shellmound.org](http://www.shellmound.org)

People, organizations, and cities can learn more about how not being “federally recognized” affects land, and pay land tax to rematriate Ohlone land:

<https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/>

Indigenous Landback movement:

<https://landback.org/>

Questions:

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Reba Connell (she/they) is a lesbian mindfulness teacher, a lay leader at Or Zarua Reconstructionist Havurah and Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA, as well as other Jewish communities. She has been writing midrash from the perspective of women, animals, and queer ancestors for 30 years.