

D'var Torah
Eric J. Ellman

Ki Tavo

Deuteronomy 27:11 – 29:8

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Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Md.

Shabbat shalom.

There are some strong associations between this week's parshah and the parent-child relationship. While my d'var Torah last year was inspired by Wendy, Sarah, and Abby, I would like to dedicate this d'var Torah to my parents, Richard, Yitzhak ben Dov Yisroel; and Sue, Bayla bat Tzamech.

Ki tavo. When you come. *Ki Tavo*, continues Moses' last speech before the Israelite people. The portion opens in the first part of the triennial cycle in Deut. 26:1 with Moses saying to the children of Israel "when you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage...you shall take some of every first fruit...which you harvest" and honor God. And the children of Israel are to then recount their history. In Deut. 26:5 we recall, as we do every Pesach, the story of the wandering Aramean, who sojourned to Egypt, meager in numbers, but he became a great and populous nation. The Egyptians oppressed us, God heard our plea, and He freed us with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Ki tavo is about honoring God and seeing the joy that comes with that honor and, as we see in this particular triennial reading, the consequences that result in not honoring God. These are messages we might hear as parents relate to children, as spouses relate to each other, or as we as people deal with each other. We are told to bring the fruits "which you harvest". "Which you harvest" is not unlike "you get what you give", or "reap what you sow".

Moving through the first two triennial cycles, the Israelites are told to bring the first fruits, set aside a portion of the land for God and the needy, and engrave the Torah on stones along the Jordan River. And then things get a little weird, which is where we start this week's reading.

Six of the twelve tribes stand on Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, and the other six tribes stand on Mount Ebal, the mountain of curses. The Levites stand in between the two mountains and shout curses. At the end of each curse all twelve tribes on both mountains shout “amen.”

Cursed be the one that makes an idol.	Amen.
Cursed be the one that denigrates his parents.	Amen.
Cursed be the one that misleads the blind.	Amen.
Cursed be the one that does not uphold Torah.	Amen.

If we obey Adonai, our God, we will be supreme above all nations. We will be blessed in our cities and in our fields, blessed in our baskets and kneading bowls, blessed when we come and when we go. God will provide and protect, and we will prosper. But it is not enough to serve God, we must do so *b'simcha u'vsuv l'va'vech*, with joy and gladness in our hearts.

But, if we do not obey, we will be cursed in ways you cannot even imagine. While there are just over a dozen blessings, there are more than 50 verses of curses. The list is long, exhausting, and awesome.

In the night you would wish it was day, and in the day you would wish it was night.

The Lord will give you dashed hopes, a depressed soul, and a trembling heart.
You will not even know yourself.
You will till the soil and tend the vineyards, but you will not eat or drink.
God will bring disease; He will give you oozing sores.

Oy! All these curses be summed up in one sentence by my grandma Sadie, of blessed memory, when she said “*Migilgl zol er verin in a heng-laykhter, by tog zol er hengen, un by-nakht zol er brenen.*” He should be transformed into a chandelier, to hang by day and to burn by night.

The parshah closes by saying we now have eyes to see, a heart that can feel, and ears to hear. If you honor *ha'brit ha'zot*, this covenant, you will succeed in all that you do. I love it when movies end happy, but this does not sound all that happy.

For some of us this parshah can be a bit troubling. How can we make sense of all the blessings and curses? Midrash tells us that there are 70 faces to the Torah and many different paths to it. To me this parshah is more about the white space, *ha'd'rash*, between the black letters, *ha'p'shat*.

This is my favorite time of year. The days turn shorter, the air is crisper, the leaves change colors, and thoughts turn inward. It is a time of year when I think about the long summer just over my shoulder and the darkness and cold around the corner. Deep in the month of Elul it is a time of introspection. We seek in ourselves what did not go so well and what we can cast off. We think about what worked and how we can keep that as a foundation on which to build the next year. I think about this and I say it out-loud in the presence my community, to the generation behind me, the generation ahead of me, and the generation that stands by my side, with whom I entered in to a written covenant.

Maybe this parshah should be called *ha'brit ha'zot*; this covenant. In the parshah we make promises to God, just as in life we make promises to others. If you help me clean the house this morning we will get ice cream this afternoon. If you watch the kids Tuesday night for your meeting I will take them Thursday night for yours. As you took care of me in my spring and summer, so shall I care for you in your autumn and winter.

The white space (what is sometimes called the white fire) in Ki Tavo is about our relationships with each other, but the black letters (the black fire) in Ki Tavo is about our relationship with God. As we look inwards and prepare for the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, there is an important lesson in this week's Torah portion. By returning to God, to our friends, to our family, and to our community, we will be in the grace of God and in those that take care of us that we may be taken care of ourselves.

Rambam tells us that Israel cannot be redeemed until we repent, but repentance is not a forgone conclusion. *U'teshuvah, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'averen et roa hag'zera*. Repentance, prayer, and charity can avert the harsh decree. Once we have repented, we and *Kol Israel*, all of Israel, will be redeemed.

By returning to God, and to others, we create a double mitzvah – we redeem ourselves and our people. Twice blessed; like the two tablets at Sinai at the beginning of our exodus where our covenant was written, and two mountains at the end of our exodus, one for blessing and one for curses, where our covenant was sealed.

As we turn to the new year, we turn from inward to outside ourselves. We right our wrongs; we make promises anew; we are reborn. This is our covenant to God and to each other. May we serve God, ourselves, and all others with joy and gladness in our hearts.

In this coming year, may you be righteous enough to be blessed in the cities and the fields, in your baskets and in your kneading bowls, and *b'voecha v'b'aytecha*, when you come and when you go. Amen.

Shabbat shalom v'shana tovah u'metukah.