

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tavo
September 17, 2022 *** 21 Elul, 5782

[Ki Tavo in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2504/jewish/Ki-Tavo-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Moses instructs the people of Israel: When you enter the land that G-d is giving to you as your eternal heritage, and you settle it and cultivate it, bring the first-ripened fruits (bikkurim) of your orchard to the Holy Temple, and declare your gratitude for all that G-d has done for you.

Our Parshah also includes the laws of the tithes given to the Levites and to the poor, and detailed instructions on how to proclaim the blessings and the curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival—as discussed in the beginning of the Parshah of Re'eh. Moses reminds the people that they are G-d's chosen people, and that they, in turn, have chosen G-d.

The latter part of Ki Tavo consists of the Tochachah ("Rebuke"). After listing the blessings with which G-d will reward the people when they follow the laws of the Torah, Moses gives a long, harsh account of the bad things—illness, famine, poverty and exile—that shall befall them if they abandon G-d's commandments.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell:Isaiah 60: 1-22](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/555430/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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This week's haftarah is the sixth of a series of seven "Haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

In glowing terms the prophet recounts descriptions of what will unfold during the Redemption. Beginning with the resurrection of the dead and the ingathering of the exiles, continuing with the joy and abundance the Jewish people will then experience, as well as the gifts that will be brought to G-d from all of the nations of the world.

Finally, the Jewish nation will no longer be despised and derided, there will no longer be violence nor mourning, and G-d will shine His everlasting light on His people.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[The Pursuit of Joy: Ki Tavo by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/the-pursuit-of-joy/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/the-pursuit-of-joy/>

Happiness, said Aristotle, is the ultimate good at which all humans aim.[1] But in Judaism it is not necessarily so. Happiness is a high value. Ashrei, the closest

Hebrew word to happiness, is the first word of the book of Psalms. We say the prayer known as Ashrei three times each day. We can surely endorse the phrase in the American Declaration of Independence that among the inalienable rights of humankind are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But Ashrei is not the central value of the Hebrew Bible. Occurring almost ten times as frequently is the word simcha, joy. It is one of the fundamental themes of Deuteronomy as a book. The root s-m-ch appears only once in each of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but no fewer than twelve times in Deuteronomy. It lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in the Land of Israel. That is where we serve God with joy.

Joy plays a key role in two contexts in this week's parsha. One has to do with the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. After describing the ceremony that took place, the Torah concludes as follows:

“Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your God has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst.”

Deut. 26:11

The other context is quite different and astonishing. It occurs in the context of the curses. There are two passages of curses in the Torah, one in Leviticus 26, the other here in Deuteronomy 28. The differences are notable. The curses in Leviticus end on a note of hope. Those in Deuteronomy end in bleak despair. The Leviticus curses speak of a total abandonment of Judaism by the people. The people walk bekeri with God, variously translated as “with hostility,” “rebelliously,” or “contemptuously.” But the curses in Deuteronomy are provoked simply “because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things.” (Deut. 28:47)

Now, joylessness may not be the best way to live, but it is surely not even a sin, let alone one that warrants a litany of curses. What does the Torah mean when it attributes national disaster to a lack of joy? Why does joy seem to matter in Judaism more than happiness? To answer these questions we must first understand the difference between happiness and joy. This is how the first Psalm describes the happy life:

Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat where scoffers sit. But his desire is in the Torah of the Lord; on his Torah he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in all that he does he prospers.

Ps. 1:1-3

This is a serene and blessed life, granted to one who lives in accordance with the Torah. Like a tree, such a life has roots. It is not blown this way and that by every passing wind or whim. Such people bear fruit, stay firm, survive, and thrive. Yet for

all that, happiness is the state of mind of an individual.

Simcha, joy, in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share. A newly married man does not serve in the army for a year, says the Torah, so that he can stay at home “and bring joy to the wife he has married.” (Deut. 24:5) You shall bring all your offerings to the central sanctuary, says Moses, so that “there, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.” (Deut. 12:7) The festivals as described in Deuteronomy are days of joy, precisely because they are occasions of collective celebration: “you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you.” (Deut. 16:11) Simcha is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.

Happiness is an attitude to life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. As J. D. Salinger once said: “Happiness is a solid, joy is a liquid.” Happiness is something you pursue. But joy is not. It discovers you. It has to do with a sense of connection to other people or to God. It comes from a different realm than happiness. It is a social emotion. It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.

Paradoxically, the biblical book most focused on joy is precisely the one often thought of as the unhappiest of all, Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. Kohelet is notoriously the man who had everything, yet describes it all as hevel, a word he uses almost forty times in the space of the book, and variously translated as “meaningless,” “pointless,” “futile,” “empty,” or as the King James Bible famously rendered it, “vanity.” In fact, though, Kohelet uses the word simcha seventeen times, that is, more than the whole of the Mosaic books together. After every one of his meditations on the pointlessness of life, Kohelet ends with an exhortation to joy:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice and do good while they live.

Kohelet 3:12

So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in his work, because that is his lot.

Kohelet 3:22

So I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and rejoice.

Kohelet 8:15

However many years anyone may live, let him rejoice in them all.

Kohelet 11:8

I posit in the Koren Succot Machzor that Kohelet can only be understood if we realise that hevel does not mean “pointless,” “empty,” or “futile”. It means “a shallow breath”. Kohelet is a meditation on mortality. However long we live, we

know we will one day die. Our lives are a mere microsecond in the history of the universe. The cosmos lasts forever while we living, breathing mortals are a mere fleeting breath.

Kohelet is obsessed by this because it threatens to rob life of any certainty. We will never live to see the long-term results of our endeavours. Moses did not lead the people into the Promised Land. His sons did not follow him to greatness. Even he, the greatest of Prophets, could not foresee that he would be remembered for all time as the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had. Lehavdil, Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime. He could not have known that he would eventually be hailed as one of the greatest painters of modern times. We do not know what our heirs will do with what we leave them. We cannot know how, or if, we will be remembered. How then are we to find meaning in life?

Kohelet eventually finds it not in happiness but in joy – because joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in God's land, enjoying His blessings, eating the produce of His earth, watered by His rain, brought to fruition under His sun, breathing the air He breathed into us, living the life He renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing, and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city's choir, then there is joy.

Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice." [2] It is one of the most poignant facts about Judaism and the Jewish people that our history has been shot through with tragedy, yet Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, to sing the Lord's song even in a strange land.

There are Eastern faiths that promise peace of mind if we can train ourselves into habits of acceptance. Epicurus taught his disciples to avoid risks like marriage or a career in public life. Neither of these approaches is to be negated, yet Judaism is not a religion of acceptance, nor have Jews tended to seek the risk-free life. We can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy. Every Succot we leave the security and comfort of our houses and live in a shack exposed to the wind, the cold, and the rain. Yet we call it zeman simchatenu, our season of joy. That is no small part of what it is to be a Jew.

Hence Moses' insistence that the capacity for joy is what gives the Jewish people the strength to endure. Without it, we become vulnerable to the multiple disasters set out in the curses in our parsha. Celebrating together binds us as a people: that and the gratitude and humility that come from seeing our achievements not as self-made but as the blessings of God. The pursuit of happiness can lead, ultimately, to

self-regard and indifference to the sufferings of others. It can lead to risk-averse behaviour and a failure to “dare greatly”. Not so joy. Joy connects us to others and to God. Joy is the ability to celebrate life as such, knowing that whatever tomorrow may bring, we are here today, under God’s Heaven, in the universe He made, to which He has invited us as His guests.

Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West’s first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller’s Ode to Joy. I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship, and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed. As individuals we may aspire to the goodness that leads to happiness, but as part of a moral and spiritual community, even in hard times we find ourselves lifted on the wings of joy. [1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1. [2] *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967, p. 493.

[Waiting On Our First Fruits: Ki Tavo by Rabbi Claudia Kreiman](https://truah.org/resources/claudia-kreiman-ki-tavo-moraltorah/)
<https://truah.org/resources/claudia-kreiman-ki-tavo-moraltorah/>

Several years ago, I visited a young Nicaraguan man who was being held in an ICE detention center while applying for asylum. Over the course of our visits, I learned that he had come to this country to escape horrible danger in his homeland. I offered spiritual support as well as practical support – connections that eventually helped him receive his asylum status.

On my first visit, which was the first time he was ever visited while in detention, he was moved to hear both that I was a clergy person who spoke Spanish and that I wanted to talk about God and God’s presence in his life. Each time we met, he spoke of his gratitude for all the help he had received along his journey, including during his detention. He would say that God was helping him and that God was with him. His capacity to recognize the blessings in his life, along with his true trust that he was blessed while in jail, was humbling. In a moment of so much pain, suffering, and unknown, he held onto hope and gratitude.

This week’s Torah portion, Ki Tavo, begins with the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, or first-fruits. The Torah commands that, upon entering the land, each Israelite should bring a basket of produce to the Temple and give it to a priest, who would set it by the altar. Then the pilgrim would recite a scripted summary of the history of Israel from the days of Jacob, through the slavery in Egypt, to the present day, giving thanks in Jerusalem. While we no longer make offerings of first-fruit, we still recite

the same verses during the Passover seder. (“My father was a wandering Aramean...”)

This ritual was given to us while still in the desert and not yet in the land, while we were totally dependent on God for sustenance and protection from a myriad of daily dangers. One of the only rituals found in the Torah with such great detail, it is unique in its liminal liturgy: within a time after leaving but before arriving, where hope is possible, when blessing is coming, when the aspiration is true and God is at hand; it demands a level of faith and trust. The order of the ritual is key. We first experience gratitude by bringing the fruits that the land has gifted us, by recognizing the blessing of God. Then we retell our story, linking the individual to the destiny of the people of Israel, acknowledging that my life, my blessing, my good fortune, is part of something larger than myself. I am not a solitary actor alone in the world but part of a community; if I have blessing, it is because I am rooted in the lives of those that came before and those who are not yet born. And lastly, actualizing this realization of connection in sharing with others by rejoicing with the Levite (who has no share in the land) and the stranger (who not only has no share in the land, but is not yet fully part of the fabric of society). By doing this we show that we truly understand that the blessings of our lives are not for our own pleasure but are given for the purpose of expanding our very sense of self.

Moses gave the ritual’s instructions while still in the desert, on the cusp of arriving in the Land of Israel, in the thick of the despair and hardship of the journey. The people of Israel are told: You will arrive at a place, and there will be blessing, and at that moment you will recognize the hardship, but you will enjoy the blessings, and then share it with those most in need. They have to trust and believe.

For those of us who center our religious practice and life on social justice work, I believe that the *bikkurim* ritual has a lot to teach and inspire us. It can be daunting and exhausting to stay focused and, like Moses, hold onto the belief that we will arrive in a place of blessing, that we will enjoy those first-fruits. The current and continued brokenness of our world, the injustices that surround us, the ongoing suffering of those most vulnerable can make us lose hope, make it hard to believe that the aspirational land of milk and honey is somewhere on the horizon. The Torah unequivocally tells us that we will enter the land; we will enjoy its fruits; and in that moment we will link the blessing to our past, our journey, and to our continued obligation. The Torah doesn’t give up, but with certainty and clarity gives us directions of what to do with the blessing of those first-fruits: Say thanks and remain committed.

Like the young man from Nicaragua who held God’s blessing and presence, we, too, are commanded to find connection and hope, not to lose sight of God’s blessings. In what I imagine was one of the most horrifying times of his life, filled with uncertainty after a long journey, before he had fully arrived, he had faith in God’s blessings. The work of pursuing justice, healing this world, feels at moments

like a desert without a clear destination. The journey is hard and long, but when in the desert, when in the midst of suffering, when in despair, we are commanded not to lose hope. We must know that we will enter the land, we will have fruit to bless and to be grateful for, and in that moment of abundance, we will share that blessing with others. [*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman is the Senior Rabbi of TBZ (Temple Beth Zion in Brookline, Mass.) and a board member of T'ruah. She is the first Chilean woman ordained as a rabbi.*]

[Count Your Blessings: Ki Tavo by Burton L. Visotzky](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/count-your-blessings/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/count-your-blessings/>

Ki Tavo is a Torah portion with three parts of interest. First, there are the curses and imprecations with which God threatens the Jewish people if we do not do God's will. As we do when we read the Torah in synagogue, we will quickly and quietly move past the scary stuff.

Second, we are commanded to bring our first fruits to the Jerusalem Temple once we have settled the land. And then we are commanded to offer them to the priest in acknowledgement of God's beneficence.

When we do so, we recite a fixed liturgy, reinforced, no doubt, by hearing the many Israelites ahead of us in the line reciting the exact same words as the priest prompts them. "Repeat after me . . ." he says.

"Arami oved avi—My ancestor was a wandering Aramean."

(Deut. 26:5)

This verse and its sentiment should be familiar, for the "Arami oved avi—My father was a wandering Aramean" passage from our Torah reading is the very heart of the Passover Haggadah. On seder night in Jewish homes, we intone these verses to remind us that God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

I am convinced that we recite these verses from Deuteronomy on seder night—rather than the story in the book of Exodus—because our sages thought that having heard and then recited these verses while standing in a long line at the Jerusalem Temple, most Jews would know them by heart and be able to recite them come Passover.

Of course, this worked only for the generation or two following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, who actually experienced standing in the line and hearing the liturgy. Further, it requires all who recite it on Passover (even now) to conveniently ignore the part of our portion that stipulates that these verses be recited with the priest ("repeat after me . . .") upon bringing first fruits.

First fruits?! But don't we bring first fruits for the holiday of Shavuot and not Passover? Well, yes. But our sages wisely recycled this liturgy and pressed it into service on seder night because people knew it by heart. (This happened before

there was a Maxwell House Haggadah for everyone at the table.)

“Arami oved avi—My ancestor was a wandering Aramean” (Deut. 26:5). One of my students correctly and accurately translated the verse, “My ancestor was a Syrian refugee.”

It is in this translation that we each should have a shock of recognition. Yes, we Jews were once refugees—and not all that long ago, either. And, once again there are again Syrian refugees. And, to be sure, there are Ukrainian refugees. Indeed, one of our wonderful new rabbis, ordained just this last May, is a Ukrainian refugee. Part of her rabbinate is working to help the Ukrainians fend off the Russian invasion.

Perhaps we can learn that the mitzvah, the call to action of this verse in this week’s Torah reading, is: my ancestor was a refugee—and so, I am obligated to help other refugees.

We Jews, secure in our own land, recognize through reciting the vicissitudes of our own history that being a refugee requires action on behalf of others. Further, we must be grateful for the land in which we now live, be it here in the US or in Israel. Just like Russian refugee Irving Berlin wrote, “God bless America” from “the mountains to the prairies to the oceans white with foam,” this week’s portion has us singing of our “land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 31:20).

Which brings me to the third part of the Torah reading that I find interesting. The Torah portion commands us, “You shall rejoice in all of the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your family” (Deut. 26:11). Ki Tavo is chock full of the blessings that God gave the Jewish people during our wanderings in the wilderness and those anticipated for our settlement of the Land. When we get there and gather first fruits on Shavuot, we remember that we were once refugees and we now thank God for the abundance we have. And when we celebrate Passover, we remember that we were refugees and again thank God for the abundance.

But thanksgiving must lead to action on behalf of others. If not, our gratitude to God seems hollow, maybe even selfish. But when recognition of God’s blessings leads us to reach beyond ourselves: to our Jewish community and to those outside of the Jewish community—to all who are hungry and in need, to all who are immigrants who need a hand up, to all who today stand where we once stood—then our blessings can bring reward beyond measure.

As the great twentieth-century biblical commentator Israel Beilin wrote, in what I’m sure must have been his commentary about our portion Ki Tavo:

If you’re worried and you can’t sleep

Just count your blessings instead of sheep

And you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings

I suspect that Ki Tavo was Beilin’s bar mitzvah portion. Of course, we remember him by his stage name, Irving Berlin, whom I quoted earlier.

It is up to each of us to avoid the curses, to tamp down the dissention and hatred that besets us individuals and as a nation. When we count and embrace the blessings that God has bestowed upon us and then act upon them, we can fulfill the promise of our Torah reading (Deut. 26:19): *“You will be a holy people to God.”* (Burton L. Vizotzky is the Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at JTS)

Yahrtzeits

Treasure Cohen, Rachel Rose-Siwoff, and Rebecca Lubetkin remember their mother Jessica D. Levin on Monday September 19th (Elul 23).
Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on Friday September 23rd (Elul 27).

Coming Up at Kol Rina

All Are Welcome

Lunch and Learn: R. Aryeh Routtenberg, Walking the Path of the Patriarchs: A Biblical Exploration

Sunday, September 18, 2022 at 10:30 am via Zoom

Live from Israel, Aryeh Routtenberg, rabbi and master tour guide, takes us on a journey along byways thought to have been traveled by our biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. Rabbi Routtenberg combines knowledge drawn from the Bible with recent archeological findings to give a multi-dimensional experience, combining history, geography, textual analysis, and scenic appreciation. The presentation will be on Zoom and will combine on-site photography and narrative.

Aryeh Routtenberg received his rabbinic ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1968. He then moved to Israel and began a career in Jewish education. Aryeh has been a leader and innovator at the Kfar Etzion Field School for many years, teaching and guiding his younger associates and helping to develop the school's unique philosophy. He also lectures at Israel's Herzog Teachers' College. Aryeh is proud to claim Kol Rina's own Len Levin as his cousin.

This program is sponsored by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, and is offered to the public free of charge. To register and obtain the Zoom link for the program, click on the following link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/walking-the-path-of-the-patriarchs-a-biblical-exploration-tickets-404714852017>

