

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tavo
September 2, 2023 *** 16 Elul, 5783

Ki Tavo in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Ki Tavo," means "when you come," and it is found in Deuteronomy 26:1.

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.

Moses concludes by telling the people that only today, forty years after their birth as a people, have they attained "a heart to know, eyes to see and ears to hear."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 60: 1-22

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/555430/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

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

We Are What We Remember by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/we-are-what-we-remember/>

One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularisation is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

These cannot be answered by the four great institutions of the modern West: science, technology, the market economy and the liberal democratic state. Science tells us how but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. The market gives us choices but does not tell us which choices to make. The liberal democratic state as a matter of principle holds back from endorsing any particular way of life. The result is that contemporary culture sets before us an almost infinite range of possibilities, but does not tell us who we are, why we are here, and how we should live.

Yet these are fundamental questions. Moses' first question to God in their first encounter at the burning bush was "Who am I?" The plain sense of the verse is that it was a rhetorical question: Who am I to undertake the extraordinary task of leading an entire people to freedom? But beneath the plain sense was a genuine question of identity. Moses had been brought up by an Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh. When he rescued Jethro's daughters from the local Midianite shepherds, they went back and told their father, "An Egyptian man delivered us." Moses looked and spoke like an Egyptian.

He then married Zipporah, one of Jethro's daughters, and spent decades as a Midianite shepherd. The chronology is not entirely clear but since he was a relatively young man when he went to Midian and was eighty years old when he started leading the Israelites, he spent most of his adult life with his Midianite father-in-law,

tending his sheep. So when he asked God, “Who am I?” beneath the surface there was a real question. Am I an Egyptian, a Midianite, or a Jew?

By upbringing he was an Egyptian, by experience he was a Midianite. Yet what proved decisive was his ancestry. He was a descendant of Abraham, the child of Amram and

Yocheved. When he asked God his second question, “Who are you?” God first told him, “I will be what I will be.” But then he gave him a second answer:

Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, the name you shall call Me from generation to generation.

Ex. 3:15

Here too there is a double sense. On the surface God was telling Moses what to tell the Israelites when they asked, “Who sent you to us?” But at a deeper level the Torah is telling us about the nature of identity. The answer to the question, “Who am I?” is not simply a matter of where I was born, where I spent my childhood or my adult life or of which country I am a citizen. Nor is it answered in terms of what I do for a living, or what are my interests and passions. These things are about where I am and what I am but not who I am.

God’s answer – I am the God of your fathers – suggests some fundamental propositions. First, identity runs through genealogy. It is a matter of who my parents were, who their parents were and so on. This is not always true. There are adopted children. There are children who make a conscious break from their parents. But for most of us, identity lies in uncovering the story of our ancestors, which, in the case of Jews, given the unparalleled dislocations of Jewish life, is almost always a tale of journeys, courage, suffering or escapes from suffering, and sheer endurance.

Second, the genealogy itself tells a story. Immediately after telling Moses to tell the people he had been sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God continued:

Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey.’

Ex. 3:16-17

It was not simply that God was the God of their ancestors. He was also the God who made certain promises: that He would bring them from slavery to freedom, from exile to the Promised Land. The Israelites were part of a narrative extended over time. They were part of an unfinished story, and God was about to write the next chapter.

What is more, when God told Moses that He was the God of the Israelites' ancestors, He added, "This is My eternal name, this is how I am to be recalled [zichri] from generation to generation." God was here saying that He is beyond time – "This is My eternal name" – but when it comes to human understanding, He lives within time, "from generation to generation." The way He does this is through the handing on of memory: "This is how I am to be recalled." Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of what they remembered and handed on to me. Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory.[1]

All of this is by way of prelude to a remarkable law in today's parsha. It tells us that first-fruits were to be taken to "the place God chooses," i.e. Jerusalem. They were to be handed to the priest, and each was to make the following declaration:

"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our suffering, our harsh labour and our distress. The Lord then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fearsomeness and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. I am now bringing the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me."

Deut. 26:5-10

We know this passage because, at least since Second Temple times it has been a central part of the Haggadah, the story we tell at the Seder table. But note that it was originally to be said on bringing first-fruits, which was not on Pesach. Usually it was done on Shavuot.

What makes this law remarkable is this: We would expect, when celebrating the soil and its produce, to speak of the God of nature. But this text is not about nature. It is about history. It is about a distant ancestor, a "wandering Aramean", It is the story of

our ancestors. It is a narrative explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi said in his classic book *Zachor*,^[2] Jews were the first people to see God in history, the first to see an overarching meaning in history, and the first to make memory a religious duty.

That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the land and state of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. We are what we remember, and the first-fruits declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget.

In the past few years, a spate of books has appeared in the United States asking whether the American story is still being told, still being taught to children, still framing a story that speaks to all its citizens, reminding successive generations of the battles that had to be fought for there to be a “new birth of freedom”, and the virtues needed for liberty to be sustained.^[3] The sense of crisis in each of these works is palpable, and though the authors come from very different positions in the political spectrum, their thesis is roughly the same: If you forget the story, you will lose your identity. There is such a thing as a national equivalent of Alzheimer’s. Who we are depends on what we remember, and in the case of the contemporary West, a failure of collective memory poses a real and present danger to the future of liberty. Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown so fast, from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become so foreshortened, there is an important Jewish message to humanity as a whole. You can’t delegate memory to machines. You have to renew it regularly and teach it to the next generation. Winston Churchill said: “The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward.”^[4] Or to put it slightly differently: Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children’s future.

^[1] The classic works on group memory and identity are Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, and Jacques le Goff, *History and Memory*, Columbia University

Press, 1992. [2] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. University of Washington Press, 1982. See also Lionel Kochan, *The Jew and His History*, London, Macmillan, 1977. [3] Among the most important of these are Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, Crown, 2013; Robert Putnam, *Our Kids*, Simon and Shuster, 2015; Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide*, IVP, 2012; Eric Metaxas, *If You Can Keep It*, Viking, 2016; and Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*, Basic Books, 2016. [4] Chris Wrigley, *Winston Churchill: a biographical companion*, Santa Barbara, 2002, xxiv.

Ki Tavo: Inscribing Ourselves with Love During National Recovery Month
by Rabbi Ilan Glazer

https://truah.org/resources/ilan-glazer-ki-tavo-moraltorah_2023/

What is the Torah inscribed on our lands and in our hearts?

What Torah do we bring with us into a new land?

Before Moses dies, he wants to ensure that the Israelites are prepared to enter the Land of Israel. In our parshah, in Deuteronomy 27, he prescribes a ritual for them to do once they cross over the Jordan River. The tribes will be split between two mountains, with an altar for sacrifices built on Mount Eval. The Torah will be written on large stones they must gather after crossing the river. Blessings and curses will be said out loud — blessings on Mount Gerizim and curses on Mount Eval. The entire community will again re-covenant itself to God and Torah.

If they're going to spread out throughout the land, why do they need to inscribe Torah on stones, and why immediately after crossing over the Jordan River?

Commentators disagree as to what exactly they were supposed to write on the stones — the whole Torah, the Torah translated into 70 different languages (just how big were these stones?), the 613 mitzvot, the 10 Commandments, or the blessings and curses they are about to proclaim.

Commentators also disagree as to why they are meant to write Torah on these stones. Is the Torah they write on them a reminder to other nations that Torah is the law of the land? Are the stones a way to show their love and connection to God? Are they a reminder to themselves of the momentousness of what they have achieved? Yes, yes, and yes. Some scholars think that having the Torah on stone was also a way for everyone to come back and learn the original Torah — these stones would serve as the urtext for generations. Some say that the stones are a reminder to everyone that ours is not a religion of elites, that everyone has access to Torah. The stones and the Torah they carry are here for all.

It is also unclear, from the Torah's telling, if the stones of the altar and the stones

inscribed with Torah text are two separate entities or one and the same. How many rituals do we need to remind ourselves of who we need to be and what we are committed to? One ritual may not suffice. Like life, ritual needs to be repeated and renewed.

The covenant ceremony clearly harkens back to Mount Sinai. This time, after 40 years of desert wandering, instead of God inscribing the stones, the people can do it themselves.

Perhaps seen in this light, the ceremony is also a reminder to the Israelites that Torah and connection to God go hand in hand. Before you spread yourselves out throughout the land, make sure that you hear words of Torah and feel connected to the mission of our people.

I'm struck by the fact that the altar of stones, where the Torah was inscribed, is built on Mount Eval, where the curses are to be recited, and not on Mount Gerizim, where the blessings are spoken. Isn't Torah a blessing to us and to the world? Why should we build an altar amidst curses?

The blessings tell us that if we follow the ways of Torah, we will be successful, our enemies will flee, we'll have an abundance of rain, produce, animals, and children, and we will know that we are God's holy people. If we don't, extraordinary plagues and sickness will come our way, our hearts will be anguished, our eyes will pine for a better life, and our spirits will be despondent. We will be driven mad by what our eyes behold, and we'll feel terror and dread night and day. We will find no peace. When I read these blessings and curses, I can't help but think of addiction, which steals the hopes and yearnings of so many, and drives us mad with anguish, emotional and physical maladies, and precarious living. I remember the days when I didn't know who I was or what I was here for, when I yearned for a better life but knew that nothing could ever improve. Active addiction is a madness I wouldn't wish on anyone.

In my left pocket, I carry with me my recovery coin. It reminds me how long I've been in recovery (nine years in December), and when I am tempted to do something the old version of myself would have done, the coin is a tangible reminder that while I have free choice, there are painful consequences if I walk away from my best self and my recovery journey. Addiction is the Egypt I do not wish to return to, and I need the reminder every single day that an imperfect life in the Promised Land is so much better than the illusion of a good life anywhere else. The

altar of stones on Mount Eval is a reminder that the curses we wish to avoid need not come to pass. We can choose life, today and every day.

All around the world, there are millions struggling with the ravages of addiction and other curses. Thankfully, recovery and healing are possible, though only if we are willing to do the hard work of repairing our lives and can find a support system that guides us as we do.

What Torah do we bring with us into a new land? Does it lift us and others up into a better way of living? What do we need to remember who we are? Have we inscribed ourselves with fear, and if so, can we find ways to heal and to add love to the mix as well?

As we begin National Recovery Month and head toward the High Holidays, may we all be blessed with a renewed covenant — with ourselves, each other, and the Holy One. May happiness, holiness, and healing come to us all, one day at a time, and may we inscribe ourselves and each other with love.

(Rabbi Ilan Glazer is the Founding Rabbi and Director of Our Jewish Recovery, a community dedicated to supporting everyone impacted by addiction in the Jewish community.)

Ki Tavo: First Fruits by Leiba Chaya David

<https://www.growtorah.org/devarim/ki-tavo-first-fruits>

Parshat Ki Tavo facilitates a look into the distant future for the generation of the midbar. With the land of Israel conquered and divided and Jewish farmers settled into the yearly cycle of growth and harvest, B'nei Yisrael will have the opportunity to fulfill a special commandment, one that applies only in the Land of Israel: bikkurim - they must take their first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash to express their gratitude to Hashem.

The first pesukim of this week's parsha describe the ritual: "...you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose..."[1] As we will explore below, the farmers were not only thanking Hashem for an abundant harvest, but also affirming the link between Hashem, themselves, Eretz Yisrael, and the collective history of the Jewish nation.

Jewish farmers, upon bringing their bikkurim, are commanded to recite a passage relating their ancestors' journey, to and from Mitzrayim, with the Land of Israel as the culmination. An Armanean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Mitzrayim and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation – great, strong and numerous...Then we cried out to Hashem, the G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice and saw

our affliction, our travail and our oppression. Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and he gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O Hashem!...[2]

In addition to acknowledging Jewish historical continuity, the passage highlights our reliance on Hashem, particularly in the land of Israel.

In Eretz Yisrael, the most basic sense of faith stems from an agricultural dependence on Hashem. The Jewish farmer, whose livelihood is entirely dependent on Hashem's blessing, must live in a perpetual state of faith and appreciation. This faith is even indicated in the kind of fruit farmers brought as bikkurim; they only offered the seven species for which the Land is praised—wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive, and date honey.[3] These species are native to Israel and are especially dependent on the blessing of rainwater for their growth.

The agricultural enterprise does more than just sharpen one's awareness of Hashem. According to Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook,[4] it also has the power to unify the Jewish nation. Commenting on the bikkurim ceremony described by the Mishnah,[5] he writes "the first fruits symbolize the special love the nation [of Israel] has for agriculture...As opposed to the nations of the world where cohesion is fostered by trade fairs, here [in an agricultural ritual] it is built through the common denominator of pure worship of Hashem."

On the following Mishnah, "All the professionals in Jerusalem would stand before them (the farmers) and inquire as to their welfare,"[6] Rabbi Kook comments:

...When the nation is morally depraved, when individuals' eyes and heart are only upon money, these two types, those who engage in nature and those who engage in artifice become alienated from one another. The farmers, who dwell in villages close to nature, will be the object of disrespect on the part of the professionals who have figured out how to live by civilization divorced from nature.

In the colorful ceremony of bikkurim, which involved Jews from all walks of life, Rabbi Kook saw an opportunity to rectify the disrespect and alienation between the farmers and the townspeople. In a G-d-fearing society, each individual sector of society recognizes the relevance of the other.

Rabbi Kook is not saying that all Jews should become farmers. Rather, he is proposing that the integrity of the nation of Israel, and of humanity as a whole, is contingent upon the cosmopolitan city-dweller acknowledging his deep connection to the provincial farmer. Today, most people are unable to trace our connection to the "provincial farmer." Industrial agriculture is dominant and we cannot trace the natural origins of many of the

things we use in our daily lives, including plastic, medicine, and even food. Our cultures are largely divorced from nature.[7] The loss of local culture—that intricate web of language, food, religion, economy, and ecology—is disastrous for both people and the planet. Wendell Berry, an American farmer and writer, suggests that “lacking an authentic local culture, a place is open to exploitation, and ultimately destruction, from the center.”[8] He advocates strengthening local economies, fostering connections between generations, deepening religious convictions, and, most importantly, building cohesive communities centered around specific places.

Jewish life during the times of the Batei Mikdash wove together religion, economy, food, language, and local ecology and was a highly integrated local culture. Today, the Jewish people no longer bring bikkurim, since the Beit HaMikdash is no longer standing. Nevertheless, bikkurim can provide us with a model for connecting with Hashem, and instill in us valuable environmental ethics.

Bikkurim shows the importance of becoming acquainted with the traditional agricultural practices of the region and supporting farmers who implement them. And even in the Galut, we can still experience a sense of partnership with Hashem by growing our own food. We can help maintain an environmentally sensible food culture by purchasing locally grown products in season. We can grow some of the seven species that might be compatible with our bioregions.

Every year upon bringing the bikkurim, the farmer announces, “Today I am affirming that I have come to the Land that G-d swore to our fathers to give us.”[9] Rashi comments that this is an expression of thanks to G-d for having given us the Land of Israel. It would make sense to give thanks upon initial entry into the Land, but why would a farmer need to repeat this every year? It must be that coming into the Land and our recognition of gratitude and Hashem’s generosity in this gift are part of an ongoing process. May we merit to continually “come into the Land,” reinforcing our commitment to it, to Hashem, and to all of the Jewish people, and may this strong bond serve as an example to all of humanity.

Suggested Action Items:

Connect to the land, and support efforts at a more sustainable relationship with agriculture. If feasible, buy food and other products that are made or grown locally and in season. Consider seeking out regenerative farms. Look into sustainable meat.

[1]Devarim 26:2 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah) [2]Devarim 26:5-10 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah) [3]See Rashi on Deut. 26:2 [4]Rabbi Kook (1865-1935) was the first chief rabbi of the State of Israel. [5]Tractate Bikkurim Chapter 3, Mishna 2: “How do we bring up the first-fruits? All the people of the towns belonging to the ma’amad (convocation) gather to the city of the ma’amad and stay overnight in the city plaza. They do not enter the homes. The next morning the appointee would

call: 'Rise, let us go up to Zion, to the house of the L-rd our G-d.'" [6]Tractate Bikkurim Chapter 3, Mishna 3 [7] See the NRDC's guide to Industrial Agriculture [here](#). [8]Berry, Wendell. What Are People For?, 166. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990. [9]Devarim 26:3 (translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah)

Yahrtzeits

Lisa Small remembers her brother Joshua Small on Sat. Sept. 2nd

Rebecca Greene remembers her uncle Howard Mendelsohn on Mon. Sept. 4th

Steve Sklar remembers his father David Sklar on Wed. Sept. 6th