Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Ki Tavo

September 21, 2024 *** 18 Elul, 5784

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/HafTorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah 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

Freedom Means Telling the Story by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/freedom-means-telling-the-story/

Here's an experiment. Walk around the great monuments of Washington D.C. There, at the far end, is the figure of Abraham Lincoln, four times life-size. Around him on the walls of the memorial are the texts of two of the greatest speeches of history, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's second Inaugural:
"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right. . ."
A little way away is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial with its quotations from each period of the President's life as leader, most famously:
"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
Keep walking along the Potomac and you come to the Jefferson Memorial, modelled on the Pantheon at Rome. There too you will find, around the dome and on the interior walls, quotations from the great man, most famously from the Declaration of Independence:
"We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."
Now visit London. You will find many memorials and statues of great people. But you will find no quotations. The base of the statue will tell you who it represents, when they lived, and the position they occupied or the work they did, but no narrative, no quotation, no memorable phrases or defining words.

Take the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Churchill was one of the greatest orators of all time. His wartime speeches and broadcasts are part of British history. But no words of his are inscribed on the monument, and the same applies to almost everyone else publicly memorialised.

It's a striking difference. One society – the United States of America – tells a story on its monuments, a story woven out of the speeches of its greatest leaders. The other, England, does not. It builds memorials but it doesn't tell a story. This is one of the deep differences between a covenant society and a tradition-based society.

In a tradition-based society like England, things are as they are because that is how they were. England, writes Roger Scruton, “was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don’t need an explanation. They are there because they are there.”

Covenant societies are different. They don’t worship tradition for tradition’s sake. They do not value the past because it’s old. They remember the past because it was events in the past that led to the collective determination that moved people to create the society in the first place. The Pilgrim Fathers of America were fleeing religious persecution in search of religious freedom. Their society was born in an act of moral commitment, handed on to successive generations.

Covenant societies exist not because they have been there a long time, nor because of some act of conquest, nor for the sake of some economic or military advantage. They exist to honour a pledge, a moral bond, an ethical undertaking. That is why telling the story is essential to a covenant society. It reminds all citizens of why they are there.

The classic example of telling the story occurs in this week’s parsha, in the context of bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem:

The Priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous . . . So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me." Deut. 26:4-10

We all know the passage. Instead of saying it on Shavuot when bringing first-fruits, we now say it on Pesach as the central part of the Haggadah. What remains remarkable is that, even in biblical times, every member of the nation was expected to know the story of the nation, and recite it annually, and make it part of his or her personal memory and identity – "My father… so the Lord brought us out."

A covenant is more than a myth of origin – like the Roman story of Romulus and Remus, or the English story of King Arthur and his knights. Unlike a myth, which merely claims to say what happened, a covenant always contains a specific set of undertakings that bind its citizens in the present and into the future.

Here for example is Lyndon Baines Johnson talking about the American covenant:
"They came here - the exile and the stranger… They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish."

Covenant societies – of which the USA is the supreme contemporary example – are moral societies, meaning not that their members are more righteous than others but that they see themselves as publicly accountable to certain moral standards that are part of the text and texture of their

national identity. They are honouring the obligations imposed upon them by the founders.

Indeed, as the Johnson quotation makes clear, covenant societies see their very fate as tied up with the way they meet or fail to meet those obligations. "If we keep its terms, we shall flourish" – implying that if we don't, we won't. This is a way of thinking the West owes entirely to the book of Devarim, most famously in the second paragraph of the Shema:

If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today . . . then I will send rain on your land in its season . . . I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

Be careful, lest you are enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. Deut. 11:13-17

Covenant societies are not ethnic nations bound by common racial origin. They make room for outsiders – immigrants, asylum seekers, resident aliens – who become part of the society by taking its story and making it their own, as Ruth did in the biblical book that bears her name ("Your people will be my people, and your God, my God") or as successive waves of immigrants did when they came to the United States. Indeed conversion in Judaism is best understood not on the model of conversion to another religion - such as Christianity or Islam - but as the acquisition of citizenship in a nation like the USA.

It is utterly astonishing that the mere act of telling the story, regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood – land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination -– and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project

of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign; in which God alone is King.

One of the most profound truths about the politics of covenant – the message of the first-fruits' declaration in this week's parsha – is: If you want to sustain freedom, never stop telling the story.

Shattering Our Idols: Ki Tavo/Rosh Hashanah by Matthew Berkowitz (2004)
https://www.jtsa.edu/Torah/shattering-our-idols-2/

Judaism tantalizes the senses with the sights, sounds and fragrant smells that characterize its observance. Rosh Hashanah is certainly one of those times when we are overwhelmed by the richness of Jewish symbolism. At the heart of our New Year observances, however, lies the piercing cry of the shofar. What is the meaning of the shofar? Many explanations have been offered to explain why we blow the shofar during the month of Elul into Rosh Hashanah, and at the close of Yom Kippur. Included in these interpretations are the following: it signifies creation, specifically of the beginning of God's kingship, it is meant to remind us to hearken to the blasts echoing from God's revelation at Sinai, it links us to the binding of Isaac since the shofar is a symbol for the ram caught in the thicket by its horns that ultimately is offered to God in place of Isaac; and, that the sharp sound of the shofar is to be understood to be a call to teshuvah, repentance. The latter interpretation connects the shofar with a wake up call to each and every one of us. In reading a magnificent book entitled Symbols of Judaism, I was further inspired by the commentary of Rabbi Marc-Alain Ouaknin in his philosophical explanation of the call of the shofar when he writes, "the prohibition of representation or definition is sounded by the notes of the shofar" (64). What does Ouaknin mean by this?

At the core of Parashat Ki Tavo, are the dramatic curses and blessings. Most notable, in this respect, is the phraseology of the opening curse, which reads, "cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Lord, a craftsman's handiwork, and sets it up in secret"

(Deuteronomy 27:15). Not surprisingly, this curse reminds us of the Torah's fervor in its condemnation of idolatry — which is found in particular, at the beginning of the "Ten Utterances." As Ouaknin points out however, "there are no idols, only idolaters." More than the fear of immutable idols, is the Torah's fear of immutable people. Elul and Rosh Hashanah give us the annual opportunity to shatter the idolatrous images we have adopted over the course of the past year. We have become hardened and the challenge is to break the mold — to become more human and to become more ourselves.

It is for this reason, I believe, that we are granted the gift of multiple calls of the shofar. Tekiah means that which is rooted; shevarim means that which is broken; and teruah refers to an image of shaking. As we enter the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, we are as the tekiah call of the shofar — fixed and rooted, hardened by our routines. Elul presents us with the challenge of becoming shevarim, of examining and critiquing ourselves so that we can break ourselves, indeed, be able to shake ourselves out of a spiritual malaise. And, we close with a tekiah gedolah, a great, long sound representing the rebirth of the self. By the end of Yom Kippur, with the help of God, we have managed to build ourselves up again, to a new and passionate whole.

Perhaps, this is the meaning of Rashi's commentary on Deuteronomy 26:16. The verse states, "The Lord your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul." Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator writes, "the meaning of this verse is that every day should be fresh in your eyes as if the Torah were commanded to you on this day." To approach Judaism with a fresh set of eyes and renewed sense of purpose is ultimately the goal of this period of repentance. May we each strive for such renewal and emerge from the heightened sanctity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur — each of us as a tekiah gedolah.

Ki Tavo: Torah That Lights a Fire by Rabbi Mimi Micner
https://truah.org/resources/mimi-micner-ki-tavo-moralTorah_2024_/

As a rabbi who feels urgency about ending the war in Israel and Gaza, and who feels that the stakes of our election couldn't be higher, I often ask myself this question: What kind of Torah will light a fire under us? What kind of Torah will get us to do something?

My first answer would not be Parshat Ki Tavo.

In this week's parsha, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold as part of a ritual of gratitude that our ancestors did in the Land of Israel:

My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to Adonai, the God of our fathers, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Adonai freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. (Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

Now, this is an incredibly powerful narrative when we think about it in the context of gratitude. What a gift that God heard our cries, freed us from Egypt, and enabled us to experience abundance. We should not take this for granted for a second. Yet this version of the Exodus story does not inspire action. In this version, God is the only agent. We are passive recipients of God's blessing. In this story, our role is to cry out to God, and wait for God to save us.

The version of the Exodus story in the Book of Exodus, however, does just the opposite. It lights a fire. It demands that we act.

This first version of the story is about what is possible when human beings and God partner in the project of justice and liberation. It is the story of God calling Moses and Aaron to leadership, and of Moses and Aaron going to Pharaoh and demanding freedom. (Exodus 7) It is the story of Shifra and

Puah resisting Pharaoh and refusing to kill the Jewish baby boys. (Exodus 1:15-20) It is the story of the Israelites having the courage to leave everything comfortable behind and walk towards a freedom that they could barely imagine. (Exodus 12:33) This is a story about what is possible when human beings act.

And, in this way, the words in Exodus ask something of us that the words in Deuteronomy do not. We are called to do something. It asks us to take seriously our power and ability to create change. It asks us to get off the couch, and to use the best of our spiritual and political wisdom (which is to say, to use the spark of Divinity within us) to challenge the injustice of our time and transform the world.

This is the kind of Torah we need right now. In the face of devastating war, human suffering, and injustice in Israel/Palestine — and in this time when our own country's future hangs in the balance — we need Torah that propels us towards using our power and agency. We need Torah that reminds us that our actions matter, that our courage matters, that our work to imagine and insist on a different future matters. We need Torah that will get us to the polls, that will get us to have the hard conversations, that will get us joining together on the streets. The Talmud teaches that studying Torah is great because it leads to action (Kiddushin 40b). We need Torah that does just this. Our future requires no less.

Thank God we have such a well of Torah to draw on for such times. For me, the Exodus story in the Book of Exodus has always been this Torah, but there is so much more. In this precarious time, may each of us find the Torah that lights the fire under us, and that gives us what we need to meet this moment with courage, strength, and tenacity. *(Rabbi Mimi Micner (she/her) serves a small Conservative synagogue in the Boston suburbs and as faculty for Kirva: Spiritual Practice & Action for Social Change. She is currently a T'ruah campaign co-chair for the No New Women's Prison campaign in Massachusetts. Before becoming a rabbi, she was a community organizer for the AFT and J Street U.)*

Ki Tavo: First Fruits by Leiba Chaya David, Edited by Shoshi Ehrenreich

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 trevail 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.

<u>Suggested Action Items:</u> 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)

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<u>Yahrzeits</u>

Rebecca Greene remembers her uncle, Howard Mendelsohn on Sat. Sept. 21

Steve Sklar remembers his father, David Sklar on Mon. Sept. 23

Treasure Cohen and Rachel Rose Siwoff, remember their mother Jessica D. Levin on Thurs. Sept. 26

Rebecca and Peter Greene, (as per their request), remember their son Ethan Greene on Wed. Oct. 2

Rebecca Greene remembers her mother, Anita Schwartz on Thurs. Oct. 3