

Ki Tavo - 5782

With the reading of this week's parsha, we are one step closer to the end of the narrative which began with the words "In the beginning" so many months ago. In Ki Tavo, we hear Moses directing the Children of Israel immediately upon entering the Promised Land to collect a basket of first fruits and take it to that place where the Ark of the Covenant will be established in a permanent location so that they may give thanks. The narrative then continues to elucidate exactly what they are to give thanks for. Essentially, we then read a very brief synopsis of the events that took the children of Israel from Egypt to the time just before the death of Moses. From this passage, we proceed to what is called by the sages the Tochecha, the calling out of all the blessings that will be bestowed upon the people if they abide by the contract HaShem had made with them at Sinai and even before, but also all the curses that will follow if they do not follow the commandments as told by Moshe.

One can think of this as nothing more nor less than a graduation address delivered by the valedictorian or a very special guest speaker. Imagine, if you will, being in that audience 2500 years ago. Almost all of the people gathered there have no understanding of the world around them, neither the natural world nor the world of men. They are situated in a world where the other peoples of the world think that they are like pawns responding to the events around them which occur with or without their action. The Greeks are still thinking about the constellations of stars as being the realm of Zeus. The Egyptians think of the pharaoh as a god-king who sacrifices to their gods with pleas for their benevolence and beneficence. To the best of our knowledge, there are NO other political cultures on the planet that share similar beliefs about their relationship to the events of history as do the Children of Israel with the Divine.

We have been told and are being reminded that we have free will and if we do what is right, HaShem will smile down on us, and our fate will be one of success. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 28, Verse 9 we read "The Lord will make you the head, not the tail, you will always be at the top, and never at the bottom, if only you obey and faithfully observe the commandments of the Lord your God, that I enjoin upon you this day, and do not deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day and turn to the worship of other gods". Thinking about this verse in the context

that it was delivered, at the time it was delivered, this was a giant leap for mankind. We were being given free choice but told that it was OUR responsibility to use that choice wisely. And I'd like to remind that it was not our individual but our collective responsibility, that would determine the future. Remember as I proceed, we are talking about a deal struck 2500 years ago or more.

As you all know, I am a retired educator. I was in an elementary classroom for more than 25 years and then, after that, I was a consultant for the school board. I consulted about the integration of technology into classroom teaching practices. One of the things about being a teacher is that from year to year, you invest so much time in your students, if you are a true professional, that long after the year is over, you wonder how they are faring, these students of yours. As I get older, I find myself wondering not just about my junior students that I taught, but the adults who I helped to prepare for classrooms of their own during my second professional career. I wish I could wave a magic wand and see them now and see whether or not my work paid off, if you know what I mean. When schools were forced to go online due to the pandemic, I used to wonder whether my students heard my voice in their heads telling them, foretelling that, it was not a question of if, but only of how long it would be before they had to be able to teach online. I have occasionally run across students from long ago, something hard to avoid when you stay in the same community you taught in. Those are wonderful coincidences. But, I also find myself wondering where they are now, these former students of mine, not socially but professionally.

I thought about that when I was thinking about the Tochecha this week because it contained some pretty dire consequences if the Israelites didn't adhere to the plan as laid out by HaShem as well as some pretty wonderful outcomes if those assembled between the two mounts at the end of Devarim did fulfill the prophecy. So just how did we do, these 2500 years on? I pose this question rhetorically, obviously. We are still here, as a people, and as a force in the affairs of man. WE sing every Shabbat upstairs, the words from the Amidah for the Shacharit service on Shabbat, VeShamru B'nai Yisrael, et Ha Shabbat, LaAsot et HaShabbat, L'Dorotam Brit Olam. And You, the Children of Israel, shall keep the Sabbath Day and to make it a covenant for all the generations. Think about it..... how many of us light the Shabbat candles or make a

challah or have a real Friday night dinner or come to services on Shabbat? Enough that we can say, without any qualms that we are still keeping up our part of the divine deal struck 2500 year ago. Sure, we can point to all the ways in which the curses in the Tochecha have come to fruition, the plagues, the pogroms, the destruction, the expulsions, but what have we done in face of those challenges? We have come closer to HaShem, we have observed the commandments and kept Judaism alive in our hearts and in our homes. How many deals agreed to that long ago are still resonating today?

Shabbat Shalom