

Ki Tavo - 5783

In this week's parsha, Ki Tavo, we hear Moses directing 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 identify exactly what they are to give thanks for. To do this, he revisits in a very brief synopsis the events that took the people from Egypt to the cusp of entering the promised land. From this, we proceed to what is called the Tochecha, the calling out of all the blessings that will be bestowed upon the people but also all the curses that will follow if they do not follow the commandments.

One can think of this as nothing more, nor less, than a graduation address delivered by the valedictorian or a very special guest speaker at a university convocation. 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 worships their gods with pleas for their benevolence and beneficence. To the best of our knowledge, there are other cultures on the planet that share similar beliefs about their relationship to the events of history.

But we are being told that we have free will and if we do what is right, the fates will smile down on us, except those fates depend upon the actions

of both HaShem and his chosen people. 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.

These are the same people descended from Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the Garden of Eden because they could not accept that responsibility to use their free will wisely. We have read of their descendants, our patriarchs, and matriarchs, who repeatedly made similar mistakes, taking advantage of their free will for naught which landed them in heaps of trouble over the generations, BUT. Each and every time, altars were built, and the covenant forged between Abraham and HaShem was recommitted to. Our forebearers were constantly moving in the direction of greater commitment and connection to our tradition. They were really fulfilling the prophecy of finding favour in the eyes of HaShem and being rewarded as a result. We might not see that if we look too closely, but we, today, have the opportunity of seeing the span of our people's history through the lens of 2500 years of time. We can see that we have become as many as the stars in the sky and we can see that we still exist on this planet, with our faith intact and our traditions continuing because of constant devotion to God, using the words from another song, this time from Broadway.

In this way, we are bringing to life the words used in this week's parsha, as the commentaries point out, to be a praise, to be a name and to

be a glory. These three positive words show us as radiating, or attempting to radiate, God's presence into the world. Our perception of ourselves as the chosen people comes from how HaShem see us. We look at ourselves through his eyes and measure ourselves with against the standards set by the Torah. If these three positive words show us as radiating God's presence into the world, the three negative words show us as looking at ourselves from a distanced viewpoint. Rather than our existence stemming from God, our perception of ourselves comes from how others see us. We look at ourselves through their eyes instead of God's eyes. Near the end of our parashah, we find the three words describing what we will become if we don't observe God's commandments. In the midst of a long list of terrible curses, we read that we will become "as horror, as a proverb, and as a byword" among all the peoples amongst whom we are exiled.

I am constantly amazed at the genius of our Rabbinic Judaism. We read Ki Tavo in the month of Elul, the month of introspection leading up to the Yamim Noraim. We are meant to be thinking about the ways in which we have heard and followed the Tochecha, which blessings do we deserve (praise, name, and glory) and which curses are we entitled to because we have or have not erred in the behaviours we chose because of our free will. Which missteps do we hope to not make in the future, do we promise not to make in the future (a horror or a proverb or a byword)? How do we intend on coming closer to being holy in the sight of HaShem and within our families and communities? Ki Tavo reminds us, indeed shouts out to us, that while we are focussing now on this past year, one year is only part of a lifetime. In the time given to us still, we can make changes, we are intended to realize that change doesn't occur over night, and we are on a journey that for us is measured in years, but for our people in biblical times, was measured in

multiples of generations. It was not easy for Avraham, Yitzchak, or Yaakov. Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel were not perfect by any stretch of imagination. Joseph made his share of mistakes. Moses we already know is forfeiting much because of his mistakes. But time and time again, altars were built, and sacrifices were made to thank HaShem for the gift of life and for his interventions in those lives. While we no longer sacrifice, we pray for forgiveness and offer thanks for the blessings bestowed upon us. May we all be inscribed for a good new year so that we can continue to build altars and give thanksgiving for another year. Shabbat shalom and it's not too early to wish each and every one of you Shana Tova U'Metukah, a happy and a sweet new year.