

Ki-Tavo Drash

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I volunteered to give the drash on Ki-Tavo because I had glanced at the parasha and thought it was one of the weirdest ones in the Torah - and there are many odd narratives in the Torah. What struck me about Ki-Tavo is the disparity between a sprinkling of blessings compared to a flood of dystopian curses. I figured I'd tease out what this is about. And then, a week ago, when I read the entire parasha slowly, not just the part we read today, I was befuddled. Ki-Tavo is complicated.

Ki Tavo is a new beginning. The Israelites are at the end of their 40 years of wandering, the end of their hundreds of years of memories of being enslaved in Egypt. They will begin a new life as free people in the new land that they are about to enter, and with this is a new covenant between God and the Israelites, a new covenant in Ki-Tavo of rituals, behavior, blessings and curses.

At the onset of Ki-Tavo, Moses, channeling God, instructs the people about an unfamiliar first fruits ritual they will have to perform at a place that God will choose in the land that God is giving them. This will be a ritual for future farmers who had been nomads for 40 years and who will have to rely on God to provide rain and sun for their crops and to ensure that pestilence doesn't destroy what they grow.

Moses instructs the people about the future first fruits ritual, what they are supposed to do - put the fruits in a basket and give it to the priest - and what they're supposed to say to the priest: "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign us."

The first fruit ritual is a gift ritual of produce, the products of their lives as settled people. The gift of fruits are mentioned in Exodus and earlier in Deuteronomy regarding the 3 pilgrimage holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot - originally pagan harvest festivals which got a religious gloss after the Israelites entered the Promised Land.

This gift is the opposite of the blood-spilling animal-burning sacrifice that took place in the Mishkan while they were nomads, and which will take place in the future after the Israelites make an alter from un-hewn stones when they cross the Jordan into the Promised Land, and centuries later in the Temple in Jerusalem. The gift from the soil is not just the first fruits, but farmers are instructed to give one tenth of their yield to the priests, strangers, orphans, and widows. The directive of God to the farmers to give over one tenth of their crops is actually an edict of social responsibility - that the Israelites must care for those who have no means of livelihood, like the gift of rain and sun that God gives to the farmers, who, without this gift from God, would also have no means of livelihood.

After the instruction about the first fruits ritual, Moses tells the people to recite the tale we read in the Haggadah: "My father was a wandering Aramean..." Like flash fiction, this paragraph tells the story of how the Israelites became slaves in Egypt and were redeemed by

God to the land flowing with milk and honey - where they'll be engaging in the ritual of the first fruits .

Three times in Ki-Tavo Moses reminds the people to observe God's commandments and rules. The third and last time, in Ch. 27:9-10, Moses and the levitical priests call out, " ושמע ישראל - Hear oh Israel! Today you have become the people of the Lord your God: Heed the Lord your God and observe His commandments and His laws, which I enjoin upon you this day."

The narrative so far radiates positivity - of our wearied yet optimistic nomadic ancestors reinventing themselves as people to be settled in cities and the countryside in a new land. This is like an auspicious foreshadowing of hope - Hatikvah - that the Jewish people had thousands of years later, in 1948, as they waited for the land of our ancestors to be declared the state of Israel.

But suddenly that optimism of the future in the text is threatened with twelve curses that will be hurled by the Levites against individuals when they get to the Promised Land if they fail to abide by the covenant of the Ten Commandments, misdirect a blind person, or subvert the rights of the stranger, orphan, or widow.

How strange it is that in Ki-Tavo the threat of twelve curses in Chapter 27 comes before the promise of fourteen blessings in Chapter 28, verses 1-13, The blessings are directed towards the individual "you" in the Hebrew masculine case, as if God, like a father, is talking to each

one of us, male and female. Moses tells the people that God sets them higher than other nations, that, metaphorically, they will be the head, not the tail, among other peoples as long as they obey God's commandments.

The blessings have to do with economic prosperity, whether people live in the city or the country, with human procreation and procreation of livestock, with abundant crops from the soil, with rain that God will provide, with safety while traveling and safety from enemies. The blessings connote God's status as a spiritual parent who provides for his children, with the obligation that his children, in return, honor him by observing his rules.

However...

Suddenly Moses, channeling God, overturns the blessings, and foretells a sequence of blood-curdling curses. Dark, dismal, dystopian curses. Curses that make clever and nasty Yiddish curses seem like blessings.

Do you know this Yiddish curse? "May all your teeth fall out except for one, so that you'll still get a toothache."

The curses in Ki-Tavo do not evoke laughter.

The people are warned that if they don't faithfully observe all of God's commandments, they will be cursed. The threats in the Hebrew narrative are towards individuals in the second

person singular, the singular masculine “you” - but, in reality, the curses are towards all the people. It’s a warning of future collective punishment.

The first set of curses in Chapter 28 verses 16-19 are the inverse of the blessings, in that people will be cursed in the city and the country, in their own procreation and that of their animals, as well as the produce of their soil, and so on. But it gets worse. According to my tally there are 51 curses in Chapter 28 verses 16-68. Because the Israelites didn’t follow God’s teachings, he curses his Chosen People with destruction. There are gruesome detailed lists of plagues, pestilence, economic collapse, starvation, cannibalism, banishment, exile, enslavement, and annihilation. Plus, the land of milk and honey will become the land of heat and drought. Here’s one paragraph in the beginning of the curses, verses 20-24:

“The Lord will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evildoing in forsaking Me. The Lord will make pestilence cling to you, until He has put an end to you in the land that you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew; they shall hound you until you perish. The skies above your head shall be copper and the earth under you iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out.”

This sounds like climate change, and the calamity and panic of the Covid pandemic, doesn’t it?

In 2023 the majority of us at Netivot Shalom don't think that our forsaking the covenants with God will cause such calamities. However, most of the covenants that God made with our ancestors have to do with human behavior, not with ritual, and the majority of us think that human behavior of burning fossil fuels is responsible for global warming and climate change. Some Haredi sects, who are as devoted to ritual as they are to God, also link behavior to events, to political events. Some have blamed women's behavior of not dressing modestly enough - or what they consider to be modest - as having caused the Holocaust. In Israel a few years ago young woman who chose to become Haredi cut up their jeans and sundresses, because their rabbis said that immodest dress causes Palestinian terrorism.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this drash, I found Ki-Tavo weird. It's unsettling. The blessings are few, the curses many. Check out pages 1151 through 1157 in Etz Hayim if you want to read this horror story.

To me, the parasha invokes the sacredness of the contracts that God made with our ancestors, and that breaking any sacred contract results in spiritual or physical danger. Throughout the Torah, we read how our people veered from upholding God's requests, and how God takes revenge not only on the people for doing so, but also on individuals for not listening to him, such as forbidding Moses from entering the Promised Land because he hit the rock to get water when God had told him to speak to the rock.

No Jewish society has ever upheld every one of the 612 mitzvot in the Torah, and so far, God hasn't cursed us all with the curses of Ki-Tavo for defaulting on our end of the covenant. God, like a frustrated parent, called us stiff-necked. We were and are stubborn. But so is God. In offering to make us his Chosen People, God, father, made us an offer we couldn't refuse. But in that transaction, God's message to his people is this, and I paraphrase: "Uphold all my teachings and my laws, take care of those less fortunate than you, welcome the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, take care of the lands that I created, which, like my teachings, are a gift to you. And... in the upcoming Yamim Noraim, do Tshuva. Remember the covenant, and remember those curses. Capisce?"

