

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

Therefore, those who did not know Hebrew could ask for someone to assist in their reciting of the “Fugitive Aramean” passage. However, the Mishna continues by saying that some people stopped bringing the First Fruits. Bartenura, the 15th century Mishna commentator, reasoned that individuals who lacked the ability to speak Hebrew felt embarrassed for needing help reciting the paragraph, so they stopped coming all together. The priests could not allow individuals to recite the first fruits formula in just any language, so they instituted a new system which maintained the Hebrew requirement and avoided shaming those who did not know Hebrew. Now, every bringer of first fruits, regardless of their Hebrew ability, repeated the passage after having had someone read it to them. (Mishna Bikkurim 3:7). Therefore, the priests turned an exclusive ceremony into a ritual that everyone could participate in without compromising any of their values.

This story sounds like a modern one. Many of us know someone, or have felt uncomfortable ourselves in Jewish spaces due to lack of Hebrew confidence. However, the first fruits ceremony teaches us a powerful lesson in inclusion which we can apply to ourselves and our institutions. First, the priests recognized that, even in a happy moment, like the first fruit ceremony, some lacked the tools to celebrate with the community. We must be cognizant, especially in celebratory moments, of the individuals in our communities who do not feel included or cannot participate for whatever reason. We must treat them with compassion, and identify ways to include those on the fringe. Second, the priests identified how they were part of the problem. They did not blame the citizens for not knowing Hebrew well enough; rather, they performed a self-audit which revealed that their current practices excluded a significant portion of the population. Everyone has the right to participate, so when someone feels excluded, we must examine if, and how, our desire to have things a certain way dissuades others from joining in. Finally, the priests improved the first fruits ceremony by valuing inclusion without compromising their value of Hebrew language. We too can learn that inclusion is a core value which complements our system of Jewish traditions, and improves our communities and ritual practices when we prioritize it. Shabbat Shalom.



Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center
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TORAH SPARKS

Ki Tavo

September 5, 2020 | Elul 16 5780

Annual | (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8) **Etz Hayyim, p. 1140**
Triennial | (Deuteronomy 26:1-27:10) **Etz Hayyim, p. 1140**
Haftarah | (Isaiah 60:1-22) **Etz Hayyim, p. 1161**

First Fruits, An Early Lesson in Inclusion

Andy Weisfeld, JTS Rabbinical Student, CY 2013, 2019-20

This week’s parsha of Ki Tavo begins by outlining the procedure for bringing first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. “You shall take some of every first fruit of the soil...go to the priest in charge at the time...the priest shall take the basket (of fruit)..you shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: “My father was a fugitive Aramean...” (Deuteronomy 26:2-5). The person bringing the fruit continues reciting this passage, which continues for the next five verses, and gives a brief retelling of the Israelite history. We know from the Mishna in Sotah, Chapter 7, that the person bringing their offering of first fruits must say this paragraph "בלשון הקודש", in the holy tongue. In other words, everyone bringing first fruits had to recite this Biblical passage in Hebrew, even if they did not know the language.

The priests had a system in place to help those who did not know Hebrew participate in this ritual. Mishna Bikkurim 3:7 reads, “Originally all who knew how to recite would recite, while those who did not know how to recite, others would read it for them [and they would repeat the words].”

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(Dvar Torah continued on the back page...)

D'var Haftorah: Knowledge of God Through the Good and the Bad

Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein (from the archives)

The return of the exiled masses presented Jerusalem with an auspicious religious moment: "Raise your eyes and look about: They have all gathered and come to you. Your sons shall be brought from afar, your daughters like babes on shoulders. As you behold you will glow; your heart will throb and thrill (pahad v'rakhav leivavkha) ..." (Verses 4-5) The city that had suffered watching its citizenry taken into captivity, now is commanded to watch its sons and daughters return along with the wealth of the nations being brought as an offering. How can the city remain unaffected by such a moment?

This was a moment of religious ecstasy – a moment that filled the nation's hearts and souls with joyous emotion. The above translation describes this sensation as "throb and thrill" (NJPS) but a better translation might be "awe and heartfelt emotion". Rabbi Joseph Kara (France 12th century) expressed it this way: "It is human nature, when a person is bereft of all good, that when something good comes his way, a sense of trepidation befalls him." Rabbi Joseph Kaspi (14th century Provence) characterizes this feeling as one "where one's heart flutters like someone who is afraid".

Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence) discerned another side to this religious sensitivity. He noted that this feeling exists in people when good things happen to them and when bad things happen: "the heart is affected by the multitude of good as it is for bad things, troubles and mourning."

Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik (20th century US) expands Kimche's insight into a theological perspective. He contends that the knowledge of God can be found in these two contradictory experiences. God can be experienced not only in His great creative and world sustaining acts, but also in those experiences which seem to contradict these acts. In other words, God can be found not only in those acts which bring us joy but also in those experiences where are catastrophic and bring us pain. We are brought to awe, trepidation, and heartfelt emotions in both of these situations. One brings upon us thanksgiving and appreciation and the other yearning and atonement. (Out of the Whirlwind, pp. 135-138)

It is tragic to find God only in the latter sorts of situation and for many people the abyss is their first glimpse of the need for a relationship with the Ribbano shel Olam – the Master of the World – but both extremes – each the antithesis of the other, lend themselves to this opportunity. May we be inspired by our blessings but may we also find meaning in our moments of need.

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That Which Does Not Meet the Eye

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb (CY Faculty)

Background: Upon entering the land the people will perform a ceremony during which the Levites will declare the following text and the people will declare 'Amen'.

Text: Devarim 27:15-25

(15) 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol ... and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.' (16)... 'who dishonors his father or mother.'... (17)... 'who moves his neighbor's boundary mark.'... (18)... 'who misleads a blind person on the road.'... (19)... 'skews the justice [due to] a sojourner, orphan, or widow.'... (20) ... 'who lies with his father's wife' ... (21) ... 'who lies with any animal.' (22) ... 'who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother.'... (23)... 'who lies with his mother-in-law.' ... (24) ... 'who strikes his neighbor in secret.' ... (25)... who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person.' (26) 'Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this Law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'

- Why do you think that in these situations the Torah speaks of a curse by God?
- Is there any common denominator for these situations?
- Why do you think that in these situations the community has to confirm its commitment against such infractions?

Commentary: Rashbam Devarim 27:15-25

The total number of curses is twelve, corresponding to the twelve tribes of the Israelites. All of them are the type of infractions that are normally done in private, as I shall explain. There are two exceptions — idolatry and assault — which are normally done either in private or in public, and for that reason the text specifies [vs. 15, 24,] "in secret."

These verses do not invoke curses on [people who commit] infractions openly. Courts of law punish people for those "revealed acts," as it is written at the end of all the curses (29:28): "Things concealed are for the LORD our God and things revealed for us and for our children forever to do all the words of this Torah." He will take vengeance on "concealed acts" ...

'Dishonoring a father' (vs. 16) is generally done in the home where a person grows up, where it is unlikely that strangers will be there. 'Moving a neighbor's landmark' (vs. 17) is generally done with stealth, since a neighbor who saw this being done would surely complain. Similarly, 'Misleading a blind person' (vs. 18) and 'skewing the justice for an orphan, a sojourner or a widow' (vs. 19); all these are done secretly. 'Laying with the wife of his father' (vs. 20) is [done] in the place where the man grew up, where there is no one to witness. ... So also 'laying with his own sister' (vs. 22) or 'with his own mother in law' (vs. 23), since a mother often visits her daughter's home.

- Why does Rashbam feel that in these situations a curse was necessary? What does it replace?
- He suggests 2 groups whose abuse the community is unlikely to notice. What makes the abuse possible for each group?
- Would his analysis be accurate today as well?

Bonus D'var Torah! So Too the Lord Will Rejoice

Lexie Botzum CY Student 2019-20

The bulk of Ki Tavo consists of Moshe once again laying out a list of berakhot and klalot: blessings brought upon us should we follow God's word, curses brought upon us should we disobey it. It doesn't take an exacting eye to notice that the list of klalot far exceeds that of berakhot--we read ten psukim of blessings, followed by over fifty that describe, in intimate detail, the unfolding of our destruction.

Near the perek's end, we arrive at this declaration: "וְהָיָה כְּאִשֶּׁר-שֵׁשׁ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וְלְהַרְבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם כֵּן יֵשִׁישׁ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם : And as the LORD once delighted in making you prosperous and many, so will the LORD now delight in causing you to perish and in wiping you out" (Deuteronomy 28:63).

The rabbis are viscerally uncomfortable with this statement. Masekhet Megillah, Rashi, the Rosh, Daat Zekanim, and various others all hasten to assure us that Hashem won't rejoice at our destruction--rather, the other nations will rejoice. Chas v'shalom we should conceive of God, our God, celebrating our suffering just as They celebrate our triumphs.

I'd like to offer alternative approaches: those in which God does rejoice.

The first is deeply centered in an anthropomorphized image of God--a God that experiences emotions much in the way that humans do. Throughout the Tanakh, They are referred to as "a jealous God." Though Rambam would vehemently assure you that any attribute ascribed to God should be understood purely as metaphor, not everyone follows his reasoning. Some people find they can only identify with a God that feels. If we subscribe to the idea of a loving God, a jealous God, a passionate God--is it so unimaginable that a spurned God might rejoice in our punishment? That They might feel satisfaction in inflicting hurt upon those who've hurt Them?

Some people want a God that feels, but whose feelings are constricted to love and compassion. I can identify with that desire--there's a whole well of uncertainty that comes with envisioning a God who can mirror the full spectrum of human emotion. We want to think God is above the ugliness we are each capable of. To me, it's not clear you can have a loving God who is incapable of jealousy, of hurt, of anger.

A second approach: God as author. In Midrash Tanchuma, the rabbis assert that our matriarchs were barren because God desires the prayer of righteous women. Some shy away from this explanation, from the implication that piety may require suffering, or that God might inflict suffering for selfish purposes.

But a friend once reframed it for me--he posited that this is almost like the relation of an author to their favorite characters. A story relies upon conflict and challenge. An author's most beloved characters often experience untold tragedies and setbacks. The beloved characters deserve a dynamic story--they deserve the growth that misery brings.

In the vision of God as author, they rejoice in bringing untold suffering upon Their disobedient people. What kind of story would it be if They let Their people simply fade into the background, become a kingdom of idolatry and impurity? No one wants to read that story. God treasures us, and thus God relishes heaping upon us unimaginable punishment--it'll make the triumphant ending all the more satisfying.

Many are also uncomfortable with this take. It's not hard to understand why.

And the last: joy in the enacting of justice. The Or HaChaim explains that the Torah had to explicitly indicate God's rejoicing in our punishment, because had it not, we might have thought the righteous nature inherently recoils from such celebration. But this is not so, for we also have a pasuk declaring that "there is joy when the wicked perish" (Proverbs 11:10). Perhaps the answer is as simple as this: when a rot has taken hold of God's people, when they are forces of destruction in this world rather than forces of justice, God rejoices in the elimination of this evil. They will not destroy all of us: they have promised to leave a remnant, one that might grow into something holy and good if nurtured in more fertile soil. To nourish the bud of possibility for a holy people and messianic future, God hums as they clip away the rot.

None of this is to say that the rabbis' vision of a God who cannot love our suffering, who could never celebrate our destruction, is an invalid one. It is simply to argue that their take is not the only one available, and it's worth seriously considering that the Tanakh meant these words as they're written. This Shabbat, perhaps we can reflect on the implications of righteous anger and joyful punishment, and a perfect God who mirrors our imperfections.