

lines of any modern work. What makes this rather strange sentence so powerful? One of its most significant features is how García Márquez plays with time. He brings the reader forward from the present to the execution of Colonel Buendia and then sends him or her into a third time—the colonel's youth. In one sentence the audience feels as though it is experiencing both the end and beginning of the character's life while actually experiencing neither.

The beginning of Ki Tavo similarly demands that the reader travel through time. The audience, the People of Israel, is situated in their fortieth year of wanderings, waiting outside the land of Canaan. Moses instructs them to bring their first fruits to the Temple after they enter the Land. At the Temple, each individual shall recite the following:

My father was a fugitive 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 . . . and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt . . . He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 26: 5–10)

Moses instructs the People of Israel to recall their distant past at a future time. While Israel sits on the cusp of their goal, the inheritance of Canaan, Moses projects them forward to the full actualization of the covenant, the reaping of the Land's bounty. Yet Moses instructs them, when they arrive at that future time of greatness, to recall their lowly roots and God's role in raising them up. In one moment, the People of Israel experience past, present, and future, a coalescence of the collective memory of Israel.



## Parashat Ki Tavo 5775

## פרשת כי תבוא תשע"ה



## Speaking God, Speaking Humanity

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What makes the Jews God's people? On Yom Kippur, when we sing *Ki anu amekha ve'atah Eloheinu* (For we are Your people and You are our God), what are we talking about? Is this triumphalism, elitism, exclusivity? Or could it be an ethic of communal, legislated kindness?

In the third aliyah of Ki Tavo, Moses begins his second retrospective discourse (of five in Deuteronomy) with the word *hayom* (today; Deut. 26:16). It is said for emphasis, to impress on the wandering tribes that the commandments they receive this day will be in full effect when they enter the Land.

In the next two verses, Moses uses a unique formulation of the verb א.מ.ר / *a-m-r* ("to say" or "to speak"). He says this unusual word about both the Israelite people and about God:

"*Et Adonai he'emareta hayom*" ("You have spoken God today"; Deut. 26:17).  
"*Ve'Adonai he'emirekha hayom*" ("And Adonai spoke you today"; Deut. 26:18).

This is *lehe'emir*, a form of this verb found only in Ki Tavo. It is a transitive form, which wouldn't be so odd, except as applied to a verb like "to say" or "to speak." What does it mean "to say" or "to speak" a person? What does it mean "to say" or "to speak" God? These verses are usually translated as: "You have declared/promised this day that the Lord is your God." "And the Lord has declared/promised this day that you are . . . his people."

These translations are interpretations. They express Moses's belief in the mutuality of the declared faith between the Israelite people and God, or his assertion of a mutual promise of enduring commitment of the people and God to one another.

But on a hunch that there may be poetry in a literal translation of *lehe'emir* or even a poetic theology, we can ask, "What might it mean for one biblical character to 'speak' another, whether God is 'speaking' us, or we are 'speaking' God?"

An early morning prayer gives us a clue. *Barukh she'amar vehayah ha'olam* means “Blessed is the One who spoke and the world became.” It praises God who created the world through speech in Genesis. When God speaks, whole worlds come into being: God speaks them into being. God’s speech is actually transitive at Creation, creating *yesh me'ayin* (something from nothing).

What could it mean, then, when people speak God in Ki Tavo? And what did it mean when a later poet used *lehe'emir* at the end of his poem for Yom Kippur: *ki anu ma'amirekha ve'atah ma'amirenu* (“We are Your *ma'amar* [what-was-spoken], and You are our *ma'amir* [the One Who-spoke-us]”)? I wonder whether the poet who wrote the Yom Kippur prayer might have been thinking of a deed and words of ethical importance in Ki Tavo that immediately precedes Moses’s second discourse.

In Deuteronomy 26:12–15, we read about *ma'aser ani*, the tithe of produce that future Israelite farmers will set aside for the poor in the third and sixth years of the agricultural tithing cycle, which will be established in the new land. Every farmer will be required to make a declaration to God upon tithing the *ma'aser ani*, which begins:

I have cleared out the consecrated portion from my house; and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, just as You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor neglected any of Your commandments. (Deut. 26:13)

The farmer will further declare, in verse 14, that he has not transgressed laws against ritual impurity or idolatrous worship of the dead; and he will assert that he has fulfilled God’s commandment.

Rashi imagines what the farmer is thinking at the moment of tithing for the poor: *samahti vesimahti bo* (I was happy and I made others happy in it). As a vintner in Southern France, Rashi knew the joy of a successful harvest and the joy of giving a portion of it to the poor.

As the declaration continues, the farmer petitions God:

Look down from your heavenly abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers. (Deut. 26:15)

The *Keli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz notices the word *hashkifah* (look down). He says the Bible typically uses this word to describe God looking at us critically. The only exception is when God notices people giving gifts to the poor:

God looks at us in recognition of the positive value of human compassion when a person transforms cruelty in himself to compassion. So too, the Holy Blessed One transforms His anger to compassion.

Keli Yakar believed that we are noticed by God when we transform our attitude toward needy people from anger to compassion. Our actions can even transform God. Rashi expressed the joy that such action produces in the giver and the recipient of the poor tithe.

Perhaps the strange verb *lehe'emir* teaches that God and the farmer speak each other into palpable efficacy in this world. God speaks us into the world through continuing creation, revelation, and redemption. We speak God into the world by vowing to care for others who need our help and by actually helping them.

*Hayom* (today) we can reenact the spirit of the farmer’s quietly great ethical moment by making it our regular practice to care for the poor, whether in the Promised Land or wherever we live. Then we will be Your people, and You will be our God, in a real and compelling way.

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## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



### Back to the Future

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Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (trans. Gregory Rabassa)

My college modern literature professor often began class with a communal recitation of this sentence, and many readers consider it among the best first