

Count Your Blessings

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Ki Tavo is a Torah portion with three parts of interest. First, there are the curses and imprecations with which God threatens the Jewish people if we do not do God's will. As we do when we read the Torah in synagogue, we will quickly and quietly move past the scary stuff.

Second, we are commanded to bring our first fruits to the Jerusalem Temple once we have settled the land. And then we are commanded to offer them to the priest in acknowledgement of God's beneficence.

When we do so, we recite a fixed liturgy, reinforced, no doubt, by hearing the many Israelites ahead of us in the line reciting the exact same words as the priest prompts them. "Repeat after me . . ." he says.

"*Arami oved avi*—My ancestor was a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5).

This verse and its sentiment should be familiar, for the "*Arami oved avi*—My father was a wandering Aramean" passage from our Torah reading is the very heart of the Passover Haggadah. On seder night in Jewish homes, we intone these verses to remind us that God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

I am convinced that we recite these verses from Deuteronomy on seder night—rather than the story in the book of Exodus—because our sages thought that having heard and then recited these verses while standing in a long line at the Jerusalem Temple, most Jews would know them by heart and be able to recite them come Passover.

Of course, this worked only for the generation or two following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, who actually experienced standing in the line and

hearing the liturgy. Further, it requires all who recite it on Passover (even now) to conveniently ignore the part of our portion that stipulates that these verses be recited with the priest ("repeat after me . . .") upon bringing first fruits.

First fruits?! But don't we bring first fruits for the holiday of Shavuot and not Passover? Well, yes. But our sages wisely recycled this liturgy and pressed it into service on seder night because people knew it by heart. (This happened before there was a Maxwell House Haggadah for everyone at the table.)

"*Arami oved avi*—My ancestor was a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5). One of my students correctly and accurately translated the verse, "My ancestor was a Syrian refugee."

It is in this translation that we each should have a shock of recognition. Yes, we Jews were once refugees—and not all that long ago, either. And, once again there are again Syrian refugees. And, to be sure, there are Ukrainian refugees. Indeed, one of our wonderful new rabbis, ordained just this last May, is a Ukrainian refugee. Part of her rabbinate is working to help the Ukrainians fend off the Russian invasion.

Perhaps we can learn that the mitzvah, the call to action of this verse in this week's Torah reading, is: my ancestor was a refugee—and so, I am obligated to help other refugees.

We Jews, secure in our own land, recognize through reciting the vicissitudes of our own history that being a refugee requires action on behalf of others. Further, we must be grateful for the land in which we now live, be it here in the US or in Israel. Just like Russian refugee Irving Berlin wrote, "God bless America" from "the mountains to the prairies to the oceans white with foam," this week's portion has us

singing of our “land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 31:20).

Which brings me to the third part of the Torah reading that I find interesting. The Torah portion commands us, “You shall rejoice in all of the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your family” (Deut. 26:11). *Ki Tavo* is chock full of the *blessings* that God gave the Jewish people during our wanderings in the wilderness and those anticipated for our settlement of the Land. When we get there and gather first fruits on Shavuot, we remember that we were once refugees and we now thank God for the abundance we have. And when we celebrate Passover, we remember that we were refugees and again thank God for the abundance.

But thanksgiving must lead to action on behalf of others. If not, our gratitude to God seems hollow, maybe even selfish. But when recognition of God’s blessings leads us to reach beyond ourselves: to our Jewish community and to those outside of the Jewish community—to all who are hungry and in need, to all who are immigrants who need a hand up, to all who today stand where we once stood—then our blessings can bring reward beyond measure.

As the great twentieth-century biblical commentator Israel Beilin wrote, in what I’m sure must have been his commentary about our portion *Ki Tavo*:

If you’re worried and you can’t sleep
Just count your blessings instead of sheep
And you’ll fall asleep counting your blessings

I suspect that *Ki Tavo* was Beilin’s bar mitzvah portion. Of course, we remember him by his stage name, Irving Berlin, whom I quoted earlier.

It is up to each of us to avoid the curses, to tamp down the dissention and hatred that besets us individuals and as a nation. When we count and embrace the blessings that God has bestowed upon us and then act upon them, we can fulfill the promise of our Torah reading (Deut. 26:19): “You will be a holy people to God.”