A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

"Which You, O Lord, Have Given Me"

Having underscored the role of memory at the conclusion of last week's parashah (remembering the cruelty of Amalek), Torah now accentuates the importance of appreciation in Parashat Ki Tavo. Once the Israelites settle the Land of Israel and plant their crops, they are commanded to place their first fruits in a basket, bring them to the devotional site, and present them to the priest. As the tithes are set before the altar, the Israelite recites a historical narrative: "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and populous nation . . . The Lord freed us from Egypt and brought us to this place . . . a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now present the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me" (Deut. 26: 5–10). What can we learn from the presentation of the first fruits and its accompanying declaration?

Professor Ze'ev Falk writes,

> The biblical excerpt related to the "first fruits" and tithing confessional represent early forms of a prayer of thanksgiving which is the most important prayer. It is believed that much of the sacrificial rite was performed in silence—that is with the notable exception of first fruits, tithing, and sacrifices of thanksgiving. The individual offering a thanksgiving sacrifice uttered words of appreciation. Other thanksgiving prayers include the blessings over food and over the land (Deut. 8:10) and also the Haggadah of Passover is an extended prayer of thanksgiving that accompanies the eating of the Passover sacrifice (Exod. 13:8). The same story appears in both the declaration related to the first fruits and the Haggadah. The essential content of the Passover Haggadah is based on the midrash found in this week's parashah concerning the first fruits. Allusions to other prayers of thanksgiving at the time of offering sacrifices are found throughout the Book of Psalms. (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 462)

Falk's reflections on the mitzvah of *hava'at bikkurim*, the bringing of the first fruits, are striking. First, though it seems that most of the sacrifices were offered in silence, the thanksgiving sacrifice seems to be the notable exception. Expressing appreciation (through sacrifices or first fruits) involves not only reciprocity but, more importantly, verbal and spiritual reflection. One savors the moment, recalling the challenges that one faced to reach a point of thanks and hopefulness.

Second, Falk rightfully points out that the passage quoted in this week's parashah serves as the basis for the Passover Haggadah and, more than that, the entire Haggadah liturgy may be viewed as an extended psalm of thanks. Clearly, freedom is deserving of a telling and retelling—especially a narrative that showcases the extraordinary miracles and *hesed* wrought by divine will. As we find ourselves in the midst of Elul, the season of repentance (and appreciation), let us take the Torah's model and Professor Falk's wisdom to heart. May the utterances of our lips guide us to reflective moments of appreciation for all of the gifts in our lives.

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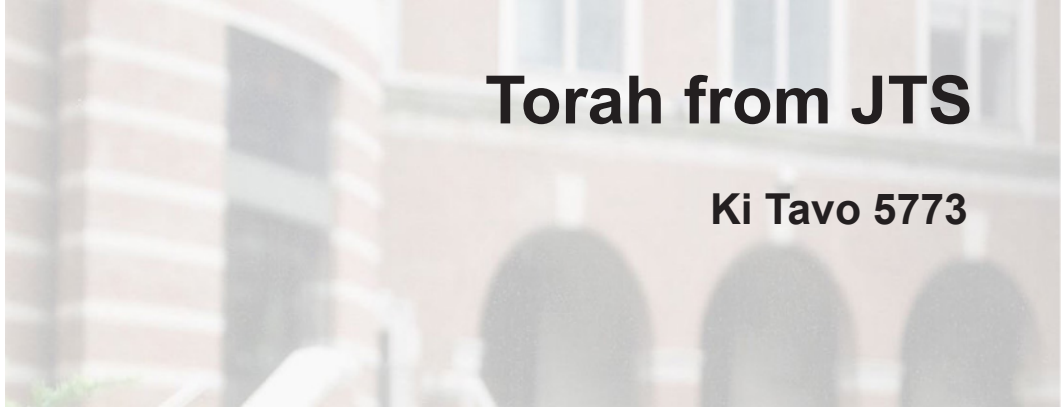

Torah from JTS

Ki Tavo 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Professor Arnold M. Eisen, chancellor, JTS.

Blessing and Curse

This week's portion contains some of the highest highs and lowest lows in the entire Torah—or in any other work of literature, for that matter. At the start of the parashah, Israelites in the wilderness are asked to picture what it will be like to testify, from inside the Land of Israel, that they have seen God's promises of blessing fulfilled. At the end of the parashah, those same Israelites are subjected to 54 verses of terrifying curses detailing the punishments awaiting them "if you fail to observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching" (Deut. 28:58). Our hearts still soar at the blessing, many centuries later, and falter at the curse. Both seem so powerful, so very basic. They speak from and to the core of what we most hope for and most fear.

A large part of that power, I think, stems from the fact that blessing and curse alike pertain to our relationship to the natural world. Israelites are commanded, first of all, to acknowledge that—after 40 years of wandering and some 400 years since God's promise of the Land to Abraham—"I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to assign us" (26:3). First fruits will be presented at the altar because they both signify and constitute the fact that Israelites possess the tangible blessings needed for life and sustenance. Their prayers that day will not ask God for something they lack, but thank God for all that they already have. God will have affirmed Israel, and Israel will have affirmed God. This chapter of Deuteronomy—in future perfect tense—is as close as the Torah comes to a vision of sacred social order. These Children of Israel are at home in their Land and their society, and so are at home in their world.

They have done right by "the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow" (26:12), and they know that God has done right by them.

The awful images of wrong piled one upon another in the latter part of this week's portion likewise pertain, more than anything else, to the order—and disorder—of nature. "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl . . . the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock" (28:17–18). Israelites will be beset with pestilence and fever, blight and drought. Rain will turn to dust. They will not only be impoverished and enslaved but dispersed and reduced to worship of false deities. Worst of all, in this litany that seems to surpass every curse with one that is still worse, "you shall eat your own issue, the flesh of your sons and daughters" (v. 53). Even "she who is most tender and dainty among you" shall eat "the afterbirth that issues from between her legs and the babies she bears" (v. 57).

Sometimes Torah works to inspire us. At other moments, it seeks to instruct. Here, as almost nowhere else, the point seems to be shock. Indifference to its message could prove fatal. Moses is about to die. He has no chance after this to be heard directly. Everything, absolutely everything, is at stake. One can argue with the theological nexus of cause and effect presented in our parashah. No one will ever be able to prove or disprove the claim that God stood behind Israel's travails at the hands of Babylonia or other enemies across the ages, or that the disruption of natural blessing where Israel is concerned could have been avoided if only the people had acted differently. But there can be no doubt, knowing ancient (and recent) Jewish history, that the curses themselves, awful as they are, were no exaggeration but only a horrific statement of fact. Such things *can* happen. They *have* happened.

How should we read the blessings and curses of Ki Tavo as the Jewish year 5773 draws to a close? It's hard not to read the verses of blessing differently than our ancestors did, now that Jews are resettled in the Land of Israel (*ha-aretz*). "Wandering Arameans" for many centuries, we as a people have now come home. But it is equally hard—at least for me, this year—not to read the verses of curse differently, knowing that our generation faces the clear and present danger that we will exhaust the bounty of Planet Earth (*ha'aretz*, in the other meaning of the word). I used to be among those who believed that doomsayers like Al Gore were indulging in hyperbole. No more. I now walk around shaken by the conviction that the curses that threaten us as a consequence of global warming will surely come to pass, unless humanity acts quickly and decisively to prevent them. Those curses will, without doubt, be more far-reaching than the worst that Deuteronomy imagined, and—unlike the latter—will likely prove irreparable.

Moses's message is inflected in 2013 by the fact that even the politicians of the world, who have every reason to deny the gravity of the problem, agreed at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009 that any increase in the temperature of the globe beyond historic levels must remain below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) or the very future of the planet will be in jeopardy. The world's scientists seem agreed that even the 0.8-degree increase that has already taken place has brought consequences more serious than many had expected. A 2-degree upsurge will mean that some island nations that exist right now will entirely disappear. For drought-stricken Africa, the impact will be devastating. And we are headed in this direction. Current carbon output will take us past the 2-degree target in fewer than 15 years.

What to do? I confess, I do not know. The answer is not to be found in Deuteronomy, just as the details of the just social order that it commands Jews to institute are not given there. But the command to steward God's Earth as wisely as we can seems, to me, what the Rabbis called *pshita*—so obvious that it cannot be contested. The threat facing the planet, as described by innumerable scientific studies, seems equally to be *pshita*. Disagreements over details should not cause us—or permit us—to look away from the grim facts on which there is virtual unanimity. We know what Moses means when he commands us to "listen, O Israel," and we understand the tremendous gift represented by the command to choose life, choose goodness, choose blessing. These stand before us as opportunity and challenge. "These are the terms of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to conclude with the Israelites in the land of Moab" (28:65), and which we seek to follow still.

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