

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Everyone on the Team

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Everyone on the team, from the manager to the coach, from a secretary to an owner, has a role to fulfill. That role is valuable if the team is to come close to reaching its potential. The leader must understand this. Every single member of your team needs to feel wanted and appreciated. If they are on the team, they deserve to be valued and to feel valued. Do you want someone on the team who doesn't feel necessary and appreciated? How do they find out unless you let them know?

—John Wooden and Steve Jamison, *Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court*

John Wooden is widely considered to have been one of the best basketball coaches of all time, certainly so at the college level. As a teacher, he is best remembered for his accessible manner. His understanding of psychology, motivation, and organizational behavior enabled him to teach life in the same breath as he did sports.

Life's players, he teaches, need to know that participation in the communal effort is valued. Whether we are at the center of the action or on the bench, we need to know we're contributing to the team's history, development, and success. If our efforts feel validated, that ultimately benefits the team.

The ceremony of first fruits in Ki Tavo is presented as a thanksgiving for God's benefit (Deut. 26:1-11). The Master Coach, however, seizes the opportunity to give everyone on Team Israel a moment to shine. Every player fulfills the obligation of showing up by bringing the basket of first fruits to the place-to-be-named-later. We follow the playbook, reciting the same formula that the rest of the team has practiced. And we all get meaningful minutes on the Divine court. The moment is ultimately an empowering one. Every player on the team participates equally. Every player is part of the narrative, sharing in the origins of the team's history. Every player gets credit for having contributed to the team's accomplishments.

As each individual Israelite gets the chance to highlight his or her contribution to the communal effort, a sense of pride, ownership, allegiance, and interdependence is fostered within the community. That is a winning formula for any team.

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כי תבוא תשע"ט



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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