

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Ki Tavo
September 21, 2019 * 21 Elul, 5779**

Kol Rina – *An Independent Minyan*, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

1: 27:11-28:3.....p. 1146	5: 28:15-69..... p. 1150
2: 28:4-6.....p. 1149	6: 29:1-5..... p. 1158
3: 28:7-11.....p. 1149	7: 29:6-8..... p. 1159
4: 28:12-14.....p. 1150	maf: 29:6-8..... p. 1159

Haftarah:

Isaiah 60:1 - 60:22.....p. 1161

Ki Tavo in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2504/jewish/Ki-Tavo-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses instructs the people of Israel: When you enter the land that G-d is giving to you as your eternal heritage, and you settle it and cultivate it, bring the first-ripened fruits (bikkurim) of your orchard to the Holy Temple, and declare your gratitude for all that G-d has done for you.

Our Parshah also includes the laws of the tithes given to the Levites and to the poor, and detailed instructions on how to proclaim the blessings and the curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival—as discussed in the beginning of the Parshah of Re'eh. Moses reminds the people that they are G-d's chosen people, and that they, in turn, have chosen G-d.

The latter part of Ki Tavo consists of the Tochachah ("Rebuke"). After listing the blessings with which G-d will reward the people when they follow the laws of the Torah, Moses gives a long, harsh account of the bad things—illness, famine, poverty and exile—that shall befall them if they abandon G-d's commandments. Moses concludes by telling the people that only today, forty years after their birth as a people, have they attained "a heart to know, eyes to see and ears to hear."

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 60:1-22

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/555430/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the sixth of a series of seven "Haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah. In glowing terms the prophet recounts descriptions of what will unfold during the Redemption. Beginning with the resurrection of the dead and the ingathering of the exiles, continuing with the joy and abundance the Jewish people will then experience, as well as the gifts that will be brought to G-d from all of the nations of the world. Finally, the Jewish nation will no longer be despised and derided, there will no longer be violence nor mourning, and G-d will shine His everlasting light on His people.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A Nation of Storytellers (Ki Tavo 5779) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/ki-tavo-5779-nation-storytellers/>

Howard Gardner, professor of education and psychology at Harvard University, is one of the great minds of our time. He is best known for his theory of "multiple intelligences," the idea that there is not one thing that can be measured and defined as intelligence but many different things – one dimension of the dignity of difference. He has also written many books on leadership and creativity, including one in particular, *Leading Minds*, that is important in understanding this week's parsha.[1]

Gardner's argument is that what makes a leader is the ability to tell a particular kind of story – one that explains ourselves to ourselves and gives power and resonance to a collective vision. So Churchill told the story of Britain's indomitable courage in the fight for freedom. Gandhi

spoke about the dignity of India and non-violent protest. Margaret Thatcher talked about the importance of the individual against an ever-encroaching State. Martin Luther King told of how a great nation is colour-blind. Stories give the group a shared identity and sense of purpose. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has also emphasised the importance of narrative to the moral life. "Man," he writes, "is in his actions and practice as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." It is through narratives that we begin to learn who we are and how we are called on to behave. "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words." [2] To know who we are is in large part to understand of which story or stories we are a part.

The great questions – "Who are we?" "Why are we here?" "What is our task?" – are best answered by telling a story. As Barbara Hardy put it: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative." This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time, from Abraham and Sarah's journey from Mesopotamia to Moses' and the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Judaism is less about truth as system than about truth as story. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.

A large part of what Moses is doing in the book of Devarim is retelling that story to the next generation, reminding them of what God had done for their parents and of some of the mistakes their parents had made. Moses, as well as being the great liberator, is the supreme storyteller. Yet what he does in parshat Ki Tavo extends way beyond this.

He tells the people that when they enter, conquer and settle the land, they must bring the first ripened fruits to the central sanctuary, the Temple, as a way of giving thanks to God. A Mishnah in Bikkurim [3] describes the joyous scene as people converged on Jerusalem from across the country, bringing their first-fruits to the accompaniment of music and celebration. Merely bringing the fruits, though, was not enough. Each person had to make a declaration. That declaration became one of the best known passages in the Torah because, though it was originally said on Shavuot, the festival of first-fruits, in post-biblical times it became a central element of the Haggadah on seder night:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, there becoming a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5-8)

Here for the first time the retelling of the nation's history becomes an obligation for every citizen of the nation. In this act, known as vidui bikkurim, "the confession made over first-fruits," Jews were commanded, as it were, to become a nation of storytellers.

This is a remarkable development. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us that, "Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people." [4] Time and again throughout Devarim comes the command to remember: "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt." "Remember what Amalek did to you." "Remember what God did to Miriam." "Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you."

The vidui bikkurim is more than this. It is, compressed into the shortest possible space, the entire history of the nation in summary form. In a few short sentences we have here "the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic prehistory, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the land of Israel, and throughout – the acknowledgement of God as lord of history." [5]

We should note here an important nuance. Jews were the first people to find God in history. They were the first to think in historical terms – of time as an arena of change as opposed to

cyclical time in which the seasons rotate, people are born and die, but nothing really changes. Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the first historians. Yet biblical Hebrew has no word that means “history” (the closest equivalent is *divrei hayamim*, “chronicles”). Instead it uses the root *zachor*, meaning “memory.”

There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. History is “his story,”[6] an account of events that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is “my story.” It is the past internalised and made part of my identity. That is what the Mishnah in *Pesachim* means when it says, “Each person must see themselves as if he (or she) personally went out of Egypt.”[7]

Throughout *Devarim* Moses warns the people – no less than fourteen times – not to forget. If they forget the past they will lose their identity and sense of direction and disaster will follow. Moreover, not only are the people commanded to remember, they are also commanded to hand that memory on to their children.

This entire phenomenon represents a remarkable cluster of ideas: about identity as a matter of collective memory; about the ritual retelling of the nation’s story; above all about the fact that every one of us is a guardian of that story and memory. It is not the leader alone, or some elite, who are trained to recall the past, but every one of us. This too is an aspect of the devolution and democratisation of leadership that we find throughout Judaism as a way of life. The great leaders tell the story of the group, but the greatest of leaders, Moses, taught the group to become a nation of storytellers.

You can still see the power of this idea today. As I point out in my book *The Home We Build Together*, if you visit the Presidential memorials in Washington you will see that each one carries an inscription taken from their words: Jefferson’s ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .’, Roosevelt’s ‘The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself’, Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* and his second *Inaugural*, ‘With malice toward none; with charity for all . . .’ Each memorial tells a story.

London has no equivalent. It contains many memorials and statues, each with a brief inscription stating who it represents, but there are no speeches or quotations. There is no story. Even the memorial to Churchill, whose speeches rivalled Lincoln’s in power, carries only one word: Churchill.

America has a national story because it is a society based on the idea of covenant. Narrative is at the heart of covenantal politics because it locates national identity in a set of historic events. The memory of those events evokes the values for which those who came before us fought and of which we are the guardians.

A covenantal narrative is always inclusive, the property of all its citizens, newcomers as well as the home-born. It says to everyone, regardless of class or creed: this is who we are. It creates a sense of common identity that transcends other identities. That is why, for example, Martin Luther King was able to use it to such effect in some of his greatest speeches. He was telling his fellow African Americans to see themselves as an equal part of the nation. At the same time, he was telling white Americans to honour their commitment to the Declaration of Independence and its statement that ‘all men are created equal’.

England does not have the same kind of national narrative because it is based not on covenant but on hierarchy and tradition. England, writes Roger Scruton, “was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don’t need an explanation. They are there because they are there.”[8] England, historically, was a class-based society in which there were ruling elites who governed on behalf of the nation as a whole. America, founded by Puritans who saw themselves as a new Israel bound by covenant, was not a society of rulers and ruled, but rather one of collective responsibility. Hence the phrase, central to American politics but never used in English politics: “We, the people.”

By making the Israelites a nation of storytellers, Moses helped turn them into a people bound by collective responsibility – to one another, to the past and future, and to God. By framing a narrative that successive generations would make their own and teach to their children, Moses

turned Jews into a nation of leaders. [1] Howard Gardner in collaboration with Emma Laskin, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, New York, Basic Books, 2011. [2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. [3] Mishnah Bikkurim ch. 3. [4] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Schocken, 1989, 9. [5] Yerushalmi, *ibid.*, 12. [6] This is a simple reminder not an etymology. *Historia* is a Greek word meaning inquiry. The same word comes to mean, in Latin, a narrative of past events. [7] Mishnah Pesachim 10:5. [8] Roger Scruton, *England, an Elegy*, Continuum, 2006, 16.

Speaking God, Speaking Humanity: Ki Tavo by Lilly Kaufman

<http://www.jtsa.edu/speaking-god-humanity>

What makes the Jews God's people? On Yom Kippur, when we sing *Ki anu amekha ve'atah Elohenu* (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. (*Lily Kaufman is Director of the Torah Fund of Women's League for Conservative Judaism*)

[Ki Tavo by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt](#)

<https://mailchi.mp/d8389de3fac8/1n6ogmq5px-2553215?e=87d85103d7>

Although other issues are discussed as well, the bulk of this portion is devoted to a detailed account of the consequences of the Jewish people not fulfilling their destiny of being a 'light to the nations'. People often look at it as God threatening to punish the Jewish people if they do not follow his commands. However, 'cause and effect' is a much better model. God says to us, so to speak: my children - make the world Godly and it will be a beautiful place to live. Fail to do so - and it will swallow you alive.

This week's portion contains a section that is known as 'the curses' - events that will befall the Jewish People if they do not behave appropriately. It would be a great script for a Quentin Tarantino film; not pleasant at all. Looking back over Jewish history, indeed it wasn't pleasant. I don't want to talk about the concept of a God that would 'punish' his creations, a Father who would bring suffering upon his children. That is an important philosophical question that Judaism must (and indeed does) address.

The point that I do want to talk about comes near the end of these curses. It says that 'all of these evils will befall you because you did not serve God with joy and goodness of heart.' It's fascinating. Judaism is not about doing the 'right' thing out of rote, out of obligation; it is about doing the right thing because it is a pleasure to do so. To draw an analogy, when my son and daughter were much younger, they would fight every so often. And because my son was older, bigger and stronger, my daughter would invariably end up crying. Rightly or wrongly (likely the latter) it invariably looked to me as if my son was in the wrong and so, rightly or wrongly (certainly the latter) I insisted that he apologise to his sister. It was a long and arduous process to get him to do so, but eventually he would look her in the eye with a look of anger and scream the word 'sorry' in a venomous tone.

That was good enough for me at the time, but nowadays I see things differently. In my mind, sorry is a feeling, not a word. It is a sentiment of contrition that can be expressed through the word, 'sorry'. But the word without the sentiment means nothing.

So too, the rabbis say in being of service to a greater good. If it doesn't come from a feeling of connection, from a feeling of desire to contribute and to give, what is it worth? To do good because that's what you do, or because you must, or because you are in the spotlight usually leads to resentment, not joy. Maimonides, the 12th Century Jewish scholar said that true service

of God is a person who, 'does what is true because it is true'.

True service is of the heart. If it is not of the heart, then going through the motions leads nowhere productive. (*Rabbi Rosenblatt grew up in Liverpool. He studied for his smicha at Aish Hatorah in Jerusalem. Shaul founded Aish UK in 1993 and Tikun UK in 2006.*)

[You Cannot Hide; Ki Tavo by Dr Joshua Kulp](#)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/10PDcV3OyjKwbDbGcghEsQRWvKmxWV_wffV5yk1EqU28/edit

The first Jewish song I remember learning is not the Shema, Adon Olam or even Shalom Aleichem, although I surely knew all three as a young child (and maybe even earlier, as my mother claims that while still in the womb I would kick upon hearing my father belt out an amen from the bimah). The first song I remember was the one I learned at the Hebrew Academy in Margate and it went, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere. Up, down, right, left, here, there and everywhere is where He can be found." The idea seems beautiful—God can be found everywhere. But, it has a scary side as well.

As the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan into Canaan, this idea is brought home to them through a series of curses proclaimed by the Levites (Deuteronomy 27:14-26). One of the commonalities of these sins is that they are often performed in secret. The first curse specifically forewarns Israel not to sin in secret, "Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Lord, a craftsman's handiwork, and sets it up in secret." People need less of a reminder not to sin in public—shame itself will usually be a deterrent. The ritual reminds people of what I learned in that children's song—God is everywhere. You cannot hide. R. Yitzchak illustrates this idea vividly in Bavli Kiddushin 31a: "R. Yitzchak said: One who transgresses in secret it is as though he pushed away the feet of the Shekhinah." Sinning in secret is akin to saying "God is not in this place." It removes the Shekhinah, God's presence, from the world.

But rabbinic literature never makes things so easy. In a parallel passage in Hagigah 16a, the Talmud raises a counterpoint: "And is that so? But didn't Rabbi Ela the Elder say: If a person sees that his inclination is overcoming him, he should go to a place where he is unknown, and wear black, and wrap himself in black, and do there what his heart desires, but let him not desecrate the Name of Heaven in public." At times, Rabbi Ela says, it is actually better to sin in private than to sin in public!

The Talmud answers the difficulty by saying they refer to two different situations. When one can overcome one's inclination to do the wrong thing, then intentionally doing so is pushing God out of the world. Why? Not caring about what one does in private and only caring about what one does in public is putting one's image at the center of the world, rather than God or one's highest values. It is as if one says: "My values themselves do not matter, what matters is that people believe that I have them."

So when should one go to a place where one is unknown, hide one's identity, and there do what one's heart desires? When there is no choice. When one simply cannot do what one knows one is supposed to do. If we take this resolution literally, then we would say that such a person is not "pushing God out of the world" for God is already not in that place. Why not? Because there is no room for God when one is so overcome with one's own desires. And when one's faculties are so overwhelmed, finding God isn't possible.

As a child, I was a bit frightened by that song, by the very notion that God is everywhere. You mean I can't get away from God for even a moment? With this reading, there is now a hedge on that statement. As it were, God is not everywhere, for God is not in the places where I do not strive to live up to my highest values and be my best self. Our tradition says that I can go there from time to time, and that sometimes I must. Hopefully I will never hurt anyone else, and hopefully I'll come out intact myself. But knowing that God awaits me whenever and wherever I try to be my best motivates me to keep doing so. (*Dr. Kulp is Rosh HaYeshiva of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem*)

[Dvar Haftarah: The Lamp of Redemption by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein](#)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/10PDcV3OyjKwbDbGcghEsQRWvKmxWV_wffV5yk1EqU28/edit#

When a prophecy seems just a tad bit too utopian, commentators find it hard to determine

exactly when these idyllic conditions are intended to happen. This week's haftarah of consolation promises that the nation will shine with refulgent light which will attract all of the nations of the world: "Arise, arise for your light has dawned; The Presence of the Lord has shone upon you. Behold! Darkness shall cover the earth and thick clouds the peoples; but upon you the Lord will shine and His Presence be seen over you. And nations shall work by your light, kings by your shining radiance." (60:1-3) When exactly was this prophecy intended to take place?

According to Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence), the prophet's message was intended for the generation of Shivat Tzion, those who returned from Babylonian exile after the destruction of the First Temple, and its intent was to encourage the returnees that all would ultimately be well with them. Kimche records another interpretation, likely that of Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (11th century Spain), who from his reading of events did not think that this promise had yet occurred. Consequently, he thought that this prophecy described a vision of the World-to-Come.

In a midrash from the Talmudic period, Rabbi Yohanan teaches a rather obscure parable to explain this verse: "This is like a person who decided to start his journey at sundown. A fellow traveler came along and lit his lantern and it promptly went out. Another came along and lit his lantern and it too went out. The first traveler came to the conclusion that from here on in he would wait until the light of morning before continuing his journey." (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 19:3 Mandelbaum ed. p. 320) The hard thing about interpreting parables is making the proper associations between the characters in the parable and who they are intended to symbolically represent. Only when we can do that, will the parable serve our purposes and offer us a meaningful explanation. It just so happens that a later midrash uses this same parable and offers the following explanation: "So, Israel, when it was enslaved in Egypt, Moshe arose and redeemed them; they again became enslaved by Babylonia, and Daniel and his friends redeemed them, but again they became enslaved at the hands of the Persians. Mordechai and Esther came along and redeemed them, only for them to again become enslaved at the hands of the Greeks. The Hashmonaim (the Maccabees) arose and redeemed them this time, but again they became enslaved by wicked Edom (the Romans). After all of this, they were no longer willing to settle for a flesh and blood redeemer. Only the "light" of the Holy One Blessed be He would do." (adapted from Midrash Tehillim 36:6 Buber ed. p. 250) This parable, then, expresses disappointment that each time a human redeemer came along and "lit a lamp" (redeemed them), the redemption proved to be temporary, until some new trauma arose. These events spiritually and physically exhausted the people, leaving them to yearn for the ultimate redemption. The question for us becomes whether we should adopt Rabbi Yohanan's attitude of waiting for the "ultimate light" to come or should we gather up the light we have been given to inspire redemptive behavior. This light, as much or as little as we have been granted joins us with God, and can provide us with the strength and the energy we need to carry on the mission of being God's people and making the world we live in worthy of being God's world. (*Rabbi Silverstein is on the faculty of the Conservative Yeshiva*)

[The Inner Witness: Ki Tavo by Rabbi Jonathan Kligler](https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/inner-witness)

<https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/inner-witness>

Cursed be the one who strikes down their fellow in secret – and all the people shall say, "Amen" (27:24)
In Ki Tavo, Moses instructs the Children of Israel in the details of some rituals that they are to perform once they have entered the land. Chapter 27 describes a communal reaffirmation of the covenant that the twelve tribes are to undertake. They are to gather in the northern city of Shechem, where Jacob had settled long ago. Shechem sits in a valley between two hills, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Six tribes are to gather on the slopes of Ebal, and six on the slopes of Gerizim. The Levites are to build an altar, and erect plastered pillars on which the words of the Torah will be inscribed. The Levites shall then proclaim in a loud voice a series of curses that will befall the people if they do not uphold the covenant, and a series of blessings that will accrue to them if they obey.

Some readers might notice how anomalous this description is from many other passages in the

Torah. For example, didn't the Children of Israel already have tablets inscribed with the Torah? Why did they now need plastered pillars? And what are they doing on the sacred mountains in Shechem? Will not Jerusalem be the eternal center of the covenant? These and many other inconsistencies in the Torah lead scholars to theorize about the differing traditions of the northern and southern tribes of Israel – the northern tribes with their center and holy mountain in Shechem, and the southern tribes with their center and holy mountain in Jerusalem. These competing traditions were ultimately woven together in the final version of the Torah that we hold today.

That said, I wish to focus on the dramatic ritual itself. The twelve tribes are arrayed on opposite slopes, and the Levites proclaim twelve prohibitions, followed by a communal "Amen". The number twelve would appear to parallel the number of tribes, and continue the symmetry of the entire description, but as I read the passage I asked myself, out of all the mitzvot in the Torah, why are these twelve placed together here?

Listen to the prohibitions: 27:15) Cursed be anyone who makes a graven image, and sets it up in secret – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 16) Cursed be the one who insults father or mother – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 17) Cursed be the one who moves a neighbor's landmark – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 18) Cursed be the one who misdirects a blind person on the way – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 19) Cursed be the one who subverts the rights of the stranger, the orphan and the widow – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". Then follow several prohibitions against incestuous relationships, followed by 24) Cursed be the one who strikes down a fellow in secret – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 25) Cursed be the one who accepts a bribe in the case of the murder of an innocent person – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". 26) Cursed be whoever will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them – and all the people shall respond, "Amen". Upon my first reading, this collection of "Thou Shalt Not's" appeared random. But then I noticed a common thread: all of these transgressions can be performed in secret. Each one is something a person could get away with: Hiding a graven image, murdering someone in a dark alley, taking money under the table, engaging in illicit sex, misdirecting a blind person, moving a landmark in the dark of night...who will ever know?

It appears the Children of Israel are being directed here to affirm a higher level of moral responsibility. They are being asked to become people of conscience. One level of moral decision-making is based on what would happen to you if you got caught. You don't want to look bad. You don't want to be punished or shamed or ruin your reputation, so you avoid transgression. This external focus is important, especially when it reinforces upright behavior. But an ethically mature person has internalized that witness. That person no longer determines his or her behavior on whether someone else is watching, because the ethically mature person is already and always watching him or herself, and assessing the rightness of the action at hand. I think that upon Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim the Children of Israel are being recruited into a higher and more mature level of moral behavior. As they enter the Promised Land, they will not be able to build a trustworthy community unless each one of them is able to monitor their own moral choices. Each person must carry a witness within, and take responsibility for his or her own actions whether or not anyone else will ever know.

This is a timely teaching as the High Holy Days approach. We are each called upon to do a cheshbon nefesh, a rigorous self-accounting at this time of year. We are asked to assess whether we have harmed anyone, whether we need to make amends and offer apologies to others whose lives we have touched. Let's not separate our account sheet between overt and hidden transgressions. I believe our Torah portion is reminding us that, for a person of conscience, there are no hidden transgressions, since we ourselves are doing our utmost to be honest witnesses of our own behavior, and to hold ourselves to a high standard. Amen to that!

YAHRTZEITS

* Treasure Cohen, Rachel Rose-Siwoff, and Rebecca Lubetkin remember their mother Jessica D. Levin (Yiskah bat Yaakov u'Penina) on Mon. Sept. 23rd (Elul 23)

* Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her mother Lillian R. Vernon on Fri. Sept. 27th (Elul 27)

