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Dvar Torah for Parshat Ki Tavo

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“And the entire people shall say, Amen.”

Shira Telushkin '08 | Bronfman Torah | Ki Tavo 2016

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A lot is happening right now in the Jewish and national calendar. Elul, Yom Kippur looming, an election looming – what should we be feeling this month? Besides a sense of futile dread and an awakened sense to the potency of fear?

In this state, we are given a *parsha* consumed with the task of constructing a public national story. We find a people who are told to erect huge stones, en route to Israel, and inscribe all the words of the Torah on them, a public witness to the values and promises that make up their covenant. We have a Moses who outlines a ritual that will be played out by the Levites before the tribes, where one by one they will call out crimes for which one should be cursed – one who sleeps with his sister, one who wrongs the stranger, orphan, or widow, one who hires himself as a hit man – and the entire people respond, together, amen. Twelve times the entire community listens and affirms that, yes, these are crimes; we as a people see the perpetrators of such acts as hateful.

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Even the opening verses outline a strange ritual, where the imagined everyday Israelite, already in the land, is commanded to go to the temple to offer his first fruits. And what is the most appropriate ritual for a fruit offering? He must first affirm he is in the land God swore to his ancestors, and then launch into a retelling of the Exodus story, starting with Jacob in Genesis and ending with the entrance to the land of Israel, emphasizing God's mighty hand and outstretched arm and the miraculous deeds and wonders displayed in freeing the people from Egypt. Then he offers up his fruits.

Seems like overkill, no? The farmer does not thank God for the rain or the soil. He thanks God for taking his people out of Egypt. Why the need to repeat and emphasize the grand narrative? Why is it so important that the individual farmer in his field join his neighbor and say that sleeping with his sister is a deplorable act, and that he also be made to place himself, once a year, as a continuation of the story that birthed the nation?

At a time when the American people feel so fractured, so unable to have one conversation on the same basic moral terms, I am drawn to this model of enforced policing of the public moral sphere. We are a people and this is more or less what we believe. I like to imagine a world where at every Presidential Inauguration we read out loud the Declaration of Independence, and have the entire people – all 300 million of us -- respond amen (or, fine, the less poetic but more secular “aye”). There is clarity at least in knowing what the communal norms are supposed to be. There is community.

But the joining together in a shared and agreed upon story is not just about building a nation. It is preparation for the rest of the *parsha*, the dreaded curses that carry us to the end of Chapter 28; it is preparation for the oncoming mothers eating their children, their sisters sold in slavery and their husbands hoarding baby flesh from their own starving relatives, and a God nowhere in sight. (The curses get brutal).

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Here is the world where the story is most needed. Isak Dinesen, as quoted in the opening of Arendt's [Origins of Totalitarianism](#), wrote: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." Somehow, the scariest thing in this world is not eating your children or being spewed from your home and enslaved in a curse-filled land. It is the prospect of such things happening to us randomly. Without reason, without ability to prevent. The story, even one full of terror, is comforting. Yes, these are things that might happen, but there will be a reason for it.

That got me thinking about these commandments, so sacred that their transgression deserves the slew of graphic punishments presented. And I don't have much to say on that, but I would guess that many in our community take issue with this kind of theology, this demand to observe such acts out of a simple reward and punishment scheme. I respect that. There are times when I resist the impulse to domesticate the Bible, to read into passages that discomfort more desirable messages. But what can I say – this parsha is a rough one.

But the question I carry with me now, with Rosh Hashanah in sight, is: What are the deeds, then, for which I think a red line should be drawn? What are the statements that I would want to have my community affirm, in one voice, as hateful to us? What are the acts that to me would be so taboo I would rather die than transgress? The theological world in this parsha is one where deeds matter tremendously. They define life and death. And this degree of importance can seem, again, overkill. This reminded me of a scene in Jonathan Safran Foer's [Eating Animals](#), where he is discussing with his grandmother her practice of hoarding, a hold over from her time hiding during the Holocaust.

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"The worst it got was near the end," she recalls, "and I didn't know if I could make it another day. A farmer, a Russian, God bless him, he saw my condition, and he went into his house and came out with a piece of meat for me." "

" 'He saved your life.'

" 'I didn't eat it.'

" 'You didn't eat it?'

" 'It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork.'

" 'Why?'

" 'What do you mean why?'

" 'What, because it wasn't kosher?'

" 'Of course.'

" 'But not even to save your life?'

" 'If nothing matters, there's nothing to save.' "

There is the initial feeling that she is being absurd. This farmer is motivated by kindness, and she is motivated towards life. Eat the pork, live, and let's get on with it. Likewise, we can see these lists and their accompanying curses and it seems absurd. What is wrong with God that he demands such unwavering followers? But in defining why we welcome and pray for life in the coming year, there is something about defining what is it for which one will die. We don't have to sign on to lay down our life for the specifics outlined in Ki Tavo, but in a similar thrust, if we have nothing to die for, we have nothing to live for.

Glad to have been your cheery note for the day!

Continue the conversation. Send Shira your thoughts:

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