

SEPTEMBER 4, 2017

Parashat Ki Tavo

Collective Responsibility

This day you have become a people (Deuteronomy 27:9)

היום הזה נהיית לעם (דברים כז:ט)

Immediately after Houston suffered the devastating damage from the flooding that resulted from Hurricane Harvey, thousands rushed to offer assistance. IsraAID, an Israeli aid group with years of experience, [sent](#) “disaster management experts, mental health experts, and engineers [who] will focus on coordination of relief work and provide basic needs including stress relief activities and recreation for those impacted by the disaster.” In addition, Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs Naftali Bennett posted a link both in [Hebrew](#) and [English](#) to the Houston community relief fund writing, “For years the Jews of Houston were there for us; now we can be there for them. *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh* —all members of Israel are mutually responsible for one-another.” He might not have realized it, but Minister Bennett was teaching us an important lesson from Parashat Ki Tavo.

Ki Tavo describes the powerful ceremony of the oaths that Moses commands the people to perform after the nation enters the Promised Land. These oaths would serve as the sealing of a final covenant between the nation and God as they left the desert. “And Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence, and hear, O Israel; this day you have become a people to the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 27:9) What does Moses mean when he tells them that on “this day” they have become a people? Rashi (on verse 9) explains that Moses refers not to a specific day in history but instead to every single day, writing, “You should view every day as if you entered into the covenant.” How do we do this? How do we accept a covenant every single day?

Rabbi Shabtai Sabato explains that a covenant or agreement means the acceptance of responsibility. When a child becomes a bar or bat mitzvah, that entrance into Jewish adulthood means the acceptance of both the rights and the obligations of Jewish life. Rabbi Sabato [notes](#) that there are other levels of responsibility as well, “Personal responsibility is the first level. There is a higher level, which is familial *areivut* (mutual responsibility)...On the third level, the circle of responsibility expands beyond the family circle...there is also communal and even national *areivut*.” According to Sabato, every day offers the opportunity to renew our sense of personal commitment and obligation, first of all for our own actions. Next, we must renew our sense of responsibility for those around us—our children, our spouse, our extended family. Finally, each day offers us the opportunity and the obligation to renew our national covenant of *areivut*: “All members of Israel are mutually responsible for one-another.”

Perhaps we don’t focus enough on the feelings of *areivut* between our two communities. We take it for granted that we care for Israel, and therefore we work for Israel’s well-being, donate money for Israel, lobby for Israel, learn about Israel and pray for Israel. Often we criticize Israel out of that very sense of *areivut* and responsibility for its actions and behavior. Like with every family, this doesn’t mean that we always agree, and it certainly doesn’t mean that they (or we) always know how to show how much we care. Because Israel is such a politically charged place in the world facing very real challenges with which many of us often struggle, we sometimes allow ourselves to forget that the caring and *areivut* goes both ways. Our feeling of *areivut* fuels our passion for Israel, but we must always remember that Israel cares about us as well, and feels a sense of responsibility for us—for our safety, for our well-being, and for our connection to the Jewish people.

As we approach the High Holidays in a few weeks, each of us must ask: Did I feel this sense of *areivut* each day? Did I do something to ignite my sense of responsibility for our people, and the safety and well-being of the only Jewish State in the world? Finally, how will I, in the coming year, accept that covenant upon myself each and every day? ■

Feeling Blessed

A wandering Aramean was my father (Deuteronomy 26:10)

ארמי אבד אבי (דברים כו:י)

We live in times of difficulty and uncertainty, both at home and around the world. We watched an entire city fall prey to the wrath of nature as a hurricane flooded the homes of thousands, seemingly randomly. Last month we witnessed the resurgence of radical anti-Semitism as neo-Nazis and others march proudly and openly in a rally in Virginia. In the Middle East, [Iran's tentacles have spread across the region](#), potentially bringing new and dangerous threats to Israel's doorstep not only in Lebanon, but in Syria as well. As we near Rosh Hashanah, now more than ever, we feel shaken and troubled. Despite this very grave reality, Judaism teaches us that we must strive and work to do exactly the opposite—to feel blessed. How do we do this? The key lies in the mitzvah of *Mikrah Bikkurim*—the “Proclamation of the First Fruits.”

During the Temple Era, every Jew was commanded to designate the first fruits of the crop, known as *bikkurim*, and bring them as a gift to the priests in the Temple. Before offering the gift, the person would recite the text from our Parashah (Deuteronomy 26:5-10). The text begins by mentioning that, “A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt...” It then chronicles the suffering during Egyptian slavery, the wondrous redemption of the Exodus, and our settlement in “a land flowing with milk and honey.” (verse 10) According to Ibn Ezra, the wandering Aramean is none other than our forefather Jacob, who wandered in fear from his brother Esau. Why do we mention Jacob in the context of giving thanks for the first fruits? Rabbah Galia Sadan [explains](#) that Jacob was unable to see the blessings in his life. When the Pharaoh in Egypt inquired about his age Jacob answered, “Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life” (Genesis 47:9). Sadan writes, “Perhaps it is specifically for this reason [that we mention Jacob], because a person must see the complete picture, see the future with optimism and not remain stuck in the troubles of the present...The person who brings the gift to the priest...summarizes things differently—with praise for the Land and her fruit. And when he says these words of praise and thanks, perhaps he internalizes them. It is incumbent upon the person to decide to see the good, to hope for blessing. He must decide to feel blessed...”

Where do we place our focus as we look out onto the world? That is the challenge of the first-fruit proclamation. It asks us to look at the fruits of our labors and focus not on the toil, struggle and challenge—which are always present—but on the blessings, which are also prominent when we know where to look. Houston suffered a flood of epic proportions, which we should be no way to minimize. But that catastrophe unleashed a torrent of kindness; of strangers opening their homes, rescuing those in danger, helping the needy. The Jewish community literally around the world has extended itself to their sister community in Houston, which has brought those who have lost so much a measure of comfort. While a few hundred racists chanted “Jews will not replace us” on one weekend in Virginia, [tens of thousands overwhelmed](#) a similarly planned protest in Boston, speaking out against bigotry and hate. Israel must indeed face a growing Iranian threat. But due to our hard work, it does not have to face that threat alone, as it is blessed with a [strong ally](#) and [strategic partner](#)—the United States—committed to its safety and security.

As part of the blessings Moses bestows upon the nation should they follow the commandments he promises that, “Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28:6) Based upon this verse, Sadan offers us a similar blessing. “Perhaps, if we decide to feel blessed as we enter into this coming year, we will feel blessed also as it exits.” We must always strive not only to see the blessings, but to realize that doing so will help us do the hard work necessary to extend those blessings from this year to the next. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.