

D'var Torah Parashat Ki Tavo
Sid Kadish

In 2 weeks, it will be Erev Rosh HaShana. Yet we are still in the weekly Torah cycle, now in the 7th parashah of D'vorim (Deuteronomy), with 4 more to go until the end of the cycle. This parashah continues Moses' discourse to the Israelite people as they are about to enter the Promised Land, after 40 years of wandering.

The first directive we read is the First Fruits (Bikurim) Ceremony. Here, the Torah lays out the words of a lengthy declaration in which the history of the Israelite people is summarized. The idea is that it is not enough to simply bring the gifts of produce to the Temple. One is obliged to make the full recitation.

(Quote from Torah v. 3-4)

Actually, you are very familiar with this formula (v. 5-10). It's in the Haggadah, and we recite it every year. The part about the first fruits is edited out. But the idea here is that the citizen/farmer is reminded that his prosperity is due to hashem's largesse, which can be withdrawn, as we read in the second paragraph of the Shema.

My own take on the First Fruits Ceremony is that it is very consistent with the thrust of Deuteronomy, namely the establishment of a central national sanctuary. This is also what is behind the Tithe declaration (v. 12-15) which supports the Cohanim and Leviim who work in this sanctuary, the Temple, but are assigned no land of their own. That is how they make a living.

What follows in the Parashah is Moses' exhortation to the people to continue to obey the rules of the Torah. This is accomplished in a dramatic fashion with a series of parallel blessings, for those who choose to obey, and curses for those who do not. The blessings are followed by horrendous and catastrophic curses called the Tochecha or Warning, typically read in a low barely audible voice since its content is so harsh and unpleasant. Now this juxtaposition of blessing and curse resonates with the looming Days of Awe and a sense of immanence of the Day of Judgment.

There is a choreography here which is quite powerful. Moses commands that when the Bnei Yisroel cross the Jordan River (v.12) that certain tribes gather near or on Mt Gerizim. These will be the "blessing tribes." Others there enumerated will assemble near Mt Ebal and they will be the "curse" tribes. This courtroom-like choreography is reminiscent of R"H where there is judgment. As a proof text, I quote from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks from his introduction to the new Koren Machzor. (p. x).

This brief D"T will not permit a close analysis of the biblical litany of blessings and curses, and how the more modern concept of Teshuva, with its elements of individual introspection and seeking individual forgiveness came to be. But somehow, there is a foreshadowing of R"H and its judicial elements in this Parashah.

A final word on the Haftarah. It is the 6th Haftarah of Consolation after Tisha b'Av. The soaring words of Deutero-Isaiah serve as a healing balm, soothing and buffering the harshness of the Torah portion. The destruction of the Central Sanctuary and the exile to Babylon certainly underline the warnings and the exhortations. But Isaiah describes a glorious return to Zion and restoration of the Jewish Commonwealth and the Temple. There are even elements of this prophesy that we have seen in our own day.

Shabbat shalom.

SPK
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