



Parashat Ki Tavo
Reflecting on Ki Tavo

by Karen Erlichman on Tuesday September 01, 2009

15 Elul 5769

Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8

Last week began the month of *Elul* in the Jewish calendar. We are turning the corner and heading on the path toward *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and several other significant Jewish holidays. *Elul* is a month of spiritual reflection, a time when Jews turn our attention to the practice of *cheshbon ha'nefesh*, the accounting of the soul.

During *Elul*, we reflect on the past year and assess how we have behaved, the choices we've made, any hurts we have inflicted or errors we have made, and hold that up against the intentions we'd set for living a life of compassion and justice. Some people literally write out a spiritual accounting, a series of checks and balances about what their lives have looked like over the past year. This is not an exercise in shame or self-flagellation; rather it is a process of *teshuvah*, of returning, of moving closer to our true selves, to one another, and to the Oneness of All.

The tenderness of *Elul* is a curious backdrop for this week's *parasha*, *Ki Tavo*. We are ushered into *Ki Tavo* with the last line of the preceding *parasha*, which states emphatically:

V'haya b'haniyach Adonai Elohecha l'cha mikol ay'vecha misaviv ba'erezt asher Adonai Elohecha noteyn l'cha nachala l'rish'ta tim'cha et-zecher Amalek mitachat ha'shamayim lo tish'kach.

Therefore, when the One your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the One your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! —Deuteronomy 25: 19

We begin *Ki Tavo* with the feeling of paradox and wonder. How do we blot out a memory and not forget at the same time? This conundrum is merely a taste of what is to come in *Ki Tavo*.

I am blessed to live quite near the ocean. It is my custom to go on long walks by the sea, and collect stones that have been smoothed out over time by the action of waves and sand. I use the stones in my work as a therapist and spiritual director to focus reflections, prayers or



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meditations. They serve as literal and metaphorical touchstones, to elevate our thinking to the next level. I offer some particularly unique, challenging or beautiful verses from this week's *parasha*, not to provide singular interpretations but as a touchstone to catalyze our contemplations of Torah as queer Jews.

The next polished stone I offer appears in the second sentence of *Ki Tavo*:

V'lakach'ta me'reshit kol-p'ri ha'adamah asher tavi me'artz'cha asher Adonai Elohecha noteyn lach v'sam'ta va'teneh v'halach'ta el ha'makom asher yiv'char Adonai Elohecha l'shakeyn sh'mo sham.

you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the One Your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the One your God will choose to establish the divine name.” –Deuteronomy 26: 2

What is the metaphorical significance of every first fruit of the soil? Does that refer to our true selves? Or perhaps we queer Jews are the first fruits of the soil, created in the image of the Divine, needing to claim our place in the Temple.

And what is the proverbial basket in which the fruits of our soil are gathered? Martin Buber said that God's bringing the people of Israel into the land and bringing the first fruits establish a relationship of reciprocity between God and the people. I can't help but wonder about how this resonates with those of us queer Jews who were brought out by a lover or friend. Think about those earliest moments in your sexual or gender identity when someone saw and knew your true and treasured queer self, and brought that part of you out in word or in action.

Shortly thereafter, we are promised that as long as we observe God's laws and rules, we are affirmed as *Am Segulah*, God's treasured people.

What would it be like for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people to claim our identity as God's treasure, and to live our lives as a reflection of that status? How liberating it would be to actually see ourselves as the treasured beings we are, rather than internalizing the hatred and loathing that is foisted upon us by those who have forgotten that following God's laws and rules includes unequivocally treating each other with love, compassion and justice!

The possibility of seeing ourselves as *Am Segulah* becomes a bit more complex as the *parasha* continues; Moses and the priests speak to the Israelites, telling them that “today they have become the people of the One Your God (*Am l'Adonai Elohecha*),” and then proceeds to divide them up into two groups, one group to stand on Mt. Gerizim as a list of blessings spoke, and another to stand on Mt. Ebal as a list of curses is recited.



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Curses will be exacted on any person who violates the stated laws and commandments, with a particular emphasis on transgressions that are committed in secrecy. To behave in secret is considered so egregious that it results in being cursed. This seems especially relevant to our lives as LGBTQ Jews, particularly with regard to the fact that at times we have had to live in hiding or closeted in order to survive. There is a difference between living an authentic life (i.e. not hiding our true selves) and sinning in secrecy. This particular distinction is nuanced but significant.

For those of us who live very visibly queer Jewish lives, it may be hard to understand how or why someone would live a stealth life, i.e. without revealing their identity as transgender or queer. The relevant ethical concern in *Ki Tavo* is the issue of hypocrisy. In the Plaut translation, there is a commentary from Samson Raphael Hirsch:

All blessing is denied to him who outwardly plays the pious man devoted to God but in secret denies the exclusive existence of One God....[goes on with multiple examples of hypocrisy]...who enjoys the highest confidence in the community but misuses it in secret corruption. (Plaut, p. 1519)

I do not mean so suggest that to live stealth is to be a hypocrite. In fact, I suggest the opposite: to live stealth can mean that one is living one's chosen life with the highest standards of integrity.

For those who obey the *mitzvot* faithfully, six blessings are promised, including the promise that God will establish you as God's *Am Kadosh*, Holy People (Deut. 28: 9). We hold the promise of being recognized as treasured and holy as long as we are faithfully observing the *mitzvot*, which, as we know from a contemporary perspective, has been subject to interpretation for thousands of years. Moreover, the blessings are followed by more curses, and this time they include dramatic descriptions of terrible suffering—calamity, panic, frustration, pestilence, fever, inflammation, heat, madness, blindness and dismay:

You shall be abused and downtrodden continuously. (Deut. 28: 33)...Because you would not serve the Lord in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything—the enemies whom the Lord will let loose against you. (Deut. 28: 47-48)

Even with the threat of illness, insanity, and isolation, we are advised of our ethical obligation to serve *Adonai b'simcha u'v'tuv*, in joy and goodness. We are commanded to live our lives with integrity, not hypocrisy; transparency rather than secrecy, and to rejoice in the “abundance of everything.”



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Queer Jews have certainly embraced the spiritual practice of joy and gladness. In a previous commentary on this *parasha*, Maggid Jhos Singer remarked:

Indeed, the LGBT community has survived, and even thrived, in some part because we know how to party and be glad... Every community that has instituted a Pride Parade was initially met with resistance...we have danced and we have been glad and we have known that we are not cursed, but so very blessed. True, we dance and sing and throw a helluva parade, but the text doesn't say celebrate without consciousness. Rather, it refers to our obligation to serve, *avad'ta*, with joy and gladness. The fullness of our joy is also an expression of service and holy obligation.

By the time I was nearing the end of *Ki Tavo*, when I bumped into “he who is most tender and dainty” (28: 54), and “she who is most tender and pampered among you” (28: 56), I was completely stupefied, particularly in the wake of a litany of curses.. These adjectives awakened my queer curiosity. “*He who is most tender and dainty*” certainly sounds like he would find a welcome home in the queer community, and “*she who is tender and pampered*” could easily be one of my high femme sisters, or a fiercely elegant drag queen. How do we understand and reconcile the conflicts, tensions and pressures imposed by *Ki Tavo*? We do it collectively as a queer *chevra*. Just as Moses speaks to the tribe as a whole, together we can study, discuss, argue and celebrate with one another as a community. We can strive to live up to the blessing of *Am Segulah* by treating one another as divine treasures, as stones from the beach that are continually being polished and cleansed by the waves.



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