

Ki Tavo 5767 - Finding the Hidden Blessings

Some of you may have heard that I am quite the fan of Harry Potter. I came to know this remarkable series of books while babysitting during college. My six-year-old charge was having it read to her every night before bed, so on Monday nights, I slowly became acquainted with Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the magical world they inhabited. My love for these books has only grown since then, and I have anxiously awaited each new release. I'm not exactly sure what I'll do now that the seventh and final book has been published.

One of the literary effects that makes the Harry Potter books so exciting to read is that, quite often, the story hinges on something or someone who is not, in reality, what he or she seems to be. (For those of you who are still working your way through number seven: I promise, no spoilers.) This plot device is evident from the very beginning of Harry's first days at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, when Professor McGonagall, whom we know to be a stern, by-the-book kind of teacher, brusquely pulls Harry out of class after an unsanctioned bit of flying. We just know that he's going to get his first detention for his breach of the rules, but instead, she offers him the coveted position of Seeker on the house Quidditch team, revealing herself to be quite different than we believed. More often, this device is used to unmask the villain in a climactic and surprising way. However, from time to time, things in these stories that we just knew, or rather presumed, to be one way, open themselves up to us to reveal the humor and love that lie underneath. We're so caught up in the thrilling and often terrifying adventures of Harry Potter's quest to find Voldemort that we just can't see things as they truly are.

The Babylonian Talmud, in *Massekhet Ta'anit, daf 8b*, teaches us: אין הברכה מצויה אלא בדבר הסמוי מן העין (*ein ha-berakhah m'tzuyah elah bid'var ha-samui min ha-ayin*) – Blessing is only found in things that are hidden from the eye. Things that do not outwardly appear to be remarkable may hold great blessing. While on the one hand, this statement feels like a pithy and meaningful aphorism, on the other

hand it is quite counterintuitive. Despite Harry Potter's literary trickery, making us second guess each new character we meet, the truth is that, thankfully, many blessings in our lives are not hidden from sight. Our families, our homes, our livelihoods, our thriving and vibrant *shul* community – these are all sources of blessing in our lives that stand before us in plain sight.

In fact, our parasha for this Shabbat, *Ki Tavo*, seems to follow in this idea that blessings are not hidden from us. In the litany of blessings that are to be the reward for our upholding the covenant with God, we read, (28:3ff) ברוך אתה בעיר וברוך אתה בשדה (*barukh atah ba-ir u'varukh atah ba-sadeh*) – Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country; wherever we live, our dwellings and lives shall be blessed. Blessed shall be the issue of your womb, the produce of your soil, and the offspring of your cattle, the calving of your herd, and the lambing of your flock – our families, our crops and animals, the very sources of our livelihood, will also be blessed. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl – the sources of our sustenance will also be blessed. These declarations of blessing are nothing if not tangible, visible. Not only are these blessings visible to us, the recipients, but, as we read a few *pesukim* later, וראו כל עמי הארץ כי שם ה' נקרא עליך (*v'ra'u ko amei ha-aretz ki shem Adonai nikra alekha*) – All the peoples of the earth shall see that Adonai's name is proclaimed over you. Our blessing will be visible to the rest of the world as well.

What then, can the Talmud mean when it declares that blessing is only found in things hidden from sight?

A passage from the very end of our *parasha* sheds some light on this for us. The end of *Parashat Ki Tavo* concludes the terms of the covenant that will bind the people of Israel to God. Then, Moshe says something to the people that is, frankly, shocking. At the beginning of Chapter 29 we read: “אתם ראייתם (*atem r'eeitem*) – You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country; the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious

signs and marvels.” So far, this is basically what we’re accustomed to hearing – our experience leaving Egypt as a source for inspiring faith and commitment to the demands of the covenant. What comes next is the shocking part: “Yet until this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” Moshe is essentially saying, you saw all this, but actually you didn’t. Given that much of the Torah is consumed with describing, often in great detail, the fact that *b’nei yisrael* did see, hear, and potentially even understand much of what they experienced, this claim is, at the very least, unusual.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, who lived from 1089-1164, the Spanish grammarian, poet, and exegete, explains that in fact, they didn’t really understand all that they experienced. Following the wondrous events of the exodus from Egypt and Sinai, *b’nei yisrael* spent much of their journey through the desert complaining, rebelling, and testing God. As a result, they couldn’t properly remember what had happened to them, and they certainly couldn’t appreciate the enormity of their experiences.

It would be easy, and not incorrect, to see the Israelites while in the desert as *kvetchy*, stubborn, rebellious group of people, and, following on Ibn Ezra’s comments, to add the adjective “ungrateful” to our description. But the plight of *b’nei yisrael* here, seeing, but not really seeing, is one with which, I believe, we can also relate.

In addition to the marvels and wonders they experienced at the start of their journey, the Israelites also faced famine, plague, exhaustion, and unrest during their forty years in the wilderness. They received hundreds of laws, participated in countless new religious rituals, and learned to be a nation. Being reflective in the moment, taking the time to appreciate and comprehend all that they had experienced was not, for better or worse, at the top of their to-do list. Only as their journey came to an end were they able to step back and see the amazing things they had lived through. *L’havdil*, like the reader of Harry Potter, they were too caught up in the goings-on of

their lives to stop and look more closely at what was going on, or even to be grateful.

How often is this our experience as well?

Now a mere week and a half away from Rosh Hashanah, we are nearing the end of Elul, the month of introspection and reflection. Perhaps, during the past year, we have seen, heard, and done many things that we have not properly understood. I can say, for myself, that I feel a certain kinship with *b'nei yisrael* right now. There have been many moments this year the significance of which I have only grasped afterward, following intentional reflection.

It might have taken *b'nei yisrael* forty years to grasp the wonder of their story – but it need not take us that long. Reflection is a process, and one that takes practice. Thankfully, our calendar understands that being in the moment often keeps us from really being in the moment, and we have this month devoted to reviewing, reflecting, and preparing for a new beginning. How many blessings, tangible and visible though they may be, remain hidden from our sight? As Rosh Hashanah grows closer, I want to encourage us to take advantage of this time that is built in to calendar, and to look back at where we've been this year, to reflect upon the people and events that have been important to us, to seek out the blessings that are waiting, just out of sight, and to carry them with us into the New Year so that we may be enriched by having discovered their presence in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.