

Ki Tavo 5773 Celebrating in the Big Picture

Shabbat Shalom.

It kind of feels a little bit like *shanah tovah* as well and it is only a week away, so *shanah tovah*. - may we all be blessed with a good sweet new year.

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I stand here today filled with a lot of emotion - gratitude and pride and thankfulness.

I also stand here today wearing two *kippot* - one as an *Abba*, a dad and the other, as rabbi of this congregation.

I am thankful to Rabbi Fel for taking charge of the service today, allowing me to sit as a father in shul for most of this morning (*todah rabbah!*) and yet, I am also appreciative of the opportunity to speak and teach this morning.

Like many parents, I have thought about this morning many times over the last twelve years. What would it be like? What would my daughter be like as a Bat-Mitzvah? How would I be both a father and a rabbi?

And on a slightly more mundane level, I have been worried about seating: where would everyone sit?

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To stand here today, is to be filled with a sense of awe and wonder.

Talya, I am thinking of some of the big moments: your birth, your naming at your *Brit Bat* at our congregation in Chicago. I remember your first day of pre-school, our Thursdays together, our move here and your enthusiastic participation in Kaytana, the Billy Dalwin Pre-school of Temple Emunah, JCDS, Jr. Congregation, Camp Ramah New England, our trips to *Medinat Yisrael*, Jr. USY and Ramah in the Rockies: Outdoor Adventure.

Each place and each moment has been a step on a wondrous Jewish journey.

Fortunately, the tradition has given us words to help us mark such a moment; it is the *brakhah*, the blessing *Hatov V'Hameitiv*. *Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam Hatov V'Hameitiv*.

Praised Are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who is Good and make things even better.

This *brakhah* allows us to stop when hearing good news or even experiencing goodness, taking stock of where we are.

Our tradition asks us to pause and encourages us to extend a moment - deepening an experience of goodness, letting those positive waves of feeling wash over us, bathing us in warmth and peacefulness.

Last Friday, a friend reminded ME to be in the moment and really enjoy this sacred day. At the time, I was so mired in logistics that it was hard to imagine doing anything else, but he was right and right to remind me of a teaching I often offer: that we should be fully present in a moment of blessing.

And right now, with all of you, I am doing just that. As I look around this room, I have shared many experiences with you - family, friends - Temple Emunah family. We have celebrated together at *smaḥot* - happy occasions including weddings, *B'nei* and *B'not Mitzvah*, *brit milah* and *brit bat* naming celebrations; we have cried together at times of illness and loss - I have been blessed and given the privilege to be a part of your lives at sacred moments and I have shared with you. Emunah is a unique community, a caring family that we are blessed to be a part of.

Thank you for sharing this moment with my family.

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Now, you have heard me say this many times: “this week’s Torah portion reflects exactly this moment.”

But it’s true. An experience similar to this one occurs in this morning’s *parashah*. No, not the *tokheifah* - warnings and curses that Talya read so adeptly, but a very different moment at the opening of the *parashah*.

Moshe tells the children of Israel: “*V’hayah Ki Tavo El Ha’arets asher Adonai Eloheikha notein lekha* - When you enter the land that Adonai your God is giving you as a heritage, and you settle in it and possess it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil [...] put it in a basket and go to the place where Adonai your God will choose to establish God’s name.” (Dt. 26:1-2)

Now, we know this place as Jerusalem, although that does not become clear until later on in Jewish history.

These instructions are given to the Israelites, who, by this time, have become an agrarian society. By bringing these fruits each farmer acknowledged that he had entered the land that God had given. This is the core of the holiday of Shavuot.

So far, this seems straight-forward. God brought the Israelites into this land and they acknowledged God's role in doing this and thanked God by bringing a gift.

Besides the importance of gratitude, the Torah teaches us that even this simple process of planting and harvesting is infused with God's presence and purpose.

But there is more to this ceremony.

After the *Kohein* set the basket down, which presumably he and the other *Kohanim* would get to enjoy, the farmer, had to make a little speech.

While the Torah rarely offers us a fixed liturgy, here the words are stated explicitly: "*Arami oved avi va-yeireid mitzraymah vagar sham...*

"My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation.

"The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our fathers, and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery and our oppression.

"Adonai freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents.

"God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

"Wherefore, I now bring the first-fruits of the soil which You, Adonai, have given me." (Dt 26:5-10)

What's going on here?

Why does the farmer have to give a short synopsis of Israelite/Jewish history until that point?

Surely, the *Kohein* should know it!

This is a most valuable exercise in appreciating one's past. At a moment of blessing, we are taught to stop and appreciate, to be grateful and to remember.

As the Ba'al Shem Tov taught: "*Zekhirah Sod Geulah* - memory is the secret of redemption."

By remembering, we understand who we are, where we came from and the narrative of our people. The past is what teaches us how to be in the present and points us in a direction for the future.

Imagine those ancient Israelites who travelled to the Temple three thousand years ago - they brought their first-fruits up to Jerusalem and then they took stock not merely of what they had experienced that year or even in their entire lives, but they bound themselves to a much more ancient narrative.

They recalled how their ancestors had struggled, how they had been slaves, how they cried out to God. And how God heard their plea, freeing them from slavery bringing them to an *eretz zavat halav u'dvash* - a land flowing with milk and honey.

As Talya mentioned in her *d'var Torah*, placing one's own life within a larger context, within a larger narrative brings a measure of reassurance. We are not alone. We are part of a much larger history, one with celebration and accomplishment – along with some suffering and terrible calamities, one that has endured. We are part of a tradition rooted in a timeless Creator who has bequeathed unto us values and morality and spirituality that serve as a compass for our lives.

But while that is the crux of the message of the opening of the *parashah* and the experience of an Israelite bringing his first fruits, there is more to the *parashah*.

Moshe goes on to warn the Israelites - like a parent who tells his children if you behave, you'll get the iPad, but if not, you'll be grounded for a year.

The only difference is that these warnings and curses are just a little bit stronger!

What are these curses doing here and how do they make sense when juxtaposed with the opening of the *parashah*?

The litany of curses and calamities serves as a poignant reminder - even at a moment of thanksgiving - such as the ceremony for bringing the first fruits, we are taught to remain aware of the other side of life.

Life is fragile and just as wondrous blessings can be harvested, times of sadness will surely also be reaped. We acknowledge that much of life is beyond our control.

Our rabbis develop this concept into their notion of “*Gilu B’re’adah* - celebrate with trembling, rejoice with a sense of awe.”

Even when we experience a joyful *simhah*, we remain aware of the nuances of life - that life is fragile, that we do not control many aspects of our lives, that we will also encounter sadness.

We live within God’s complex embrace, sensing the divine presence in places, yet knowing that there is such awesomeness to the universe that it is simply beyond our comprehension and experience.

That awareness of the fragility of life, helps us turn outwards - toward others. While we may be having our own joyful moment, it is much richer shared with a larger group. And shared in a way that reminds us of the rest of the world, helping us remain in relationship with the rest of the world.

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Back to this morning’s *parashah*.

The rabbis do something fascinating with the liturgy that one was to recite on Shavuot. They take that text, “*Arami Oved Avi* - My father was a wandering Aramean” and they use it as the central text for the *haggadah*.

The *Haggadah*? *Pesah*?! Did they get their holidays confused?

I think it was actually a stroke of genius, as they imparted a subtle, but vital lesson.

You might ask what was that?

By linking the central text of Shavuot with *Pesah*, they were completing a circle. The Torah already links *Pesah* to Shavuot with the seven weeks of counting the Omer between them, but now, with their linking of the text of Shavuot with *Pesah*, they closed the loop.

And what is the significance of that?

It reminds us that life is not linear, but cyclical, a spiral of renewal and growth. We are not locked into one destiny like a straight line, but although the years come around and around, we can experience change and growth, moving along the line - as if we were on a helix.

This takes a moment, a *simhah* or a holiday and connects it to something larger: a process of change, a narrative of a people moving through history, relating values and a spiritual message *midor l'dor* - from one generation to the next.

That's why while I love B'nei Mitzvah and I do, and I love this one, but I often enjoy the moments that come after it perhaps even more.

When our teens read Torah for the NEXT time after the Bar or Bat-Mitzvah, when they show up at *minyán* and are counted in the 10 for 10, when they come to shul, even though they are no longer required to for 25/52.

That means that the lessons of the B'nei Mitzvah have been internalized.

Just as it was not merely about the first-fruits on Shavuot thousands of year ago, but also about *Pesah* and connected to the larger Jewish narrative, this moment is not just about now, but is, God willing, part a lifetime of moments yet to come.

May we all be blessed to share those together.

Shabbat Shalom.