

Ki Tavo Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

This portion, Ki Tavo, starts with a lovely message to us: When settling in the land of Israel, you shall take your first and best harvested fruits to the priest as a sacrifice, giving thanks for the bounty you have received. It goes on to explain that the Israelites must give a tenth of their yield to the levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow and tells them to keep all of the commandments and they will be a treasured people to God. If only the portion ended here, it would show that God is loving and merciful, that we are taught to be grateful for all the things we receive from God and the land, and that we need to share with those who do not have enough to eat. This is something we especially need to remember while we are going through difficult times in our country. There are many people hurting right now, financially, physically and mentally, as some are losing jobs, cuts in wages, illness and depression. We must do what we can to help those who are in need.

Unfortunately, the portion then goes on with some of the most powerful and frightening chapters of the Torah! The first 14 verses (28:1-14) are great, saying that if the people obey God and faithfully observe all of the divine commandments, wonderful things will happen for them. However, that is followed by 54 verses (28:15-69) warning that all sorts of horrible curses will befall them if they don't observe the commandments. These punishments include terrible diseases, conquest by merciless foreign enemies, famine to the point where parents eat the flesh of their

own children and exile and dispersion throughout the world, etc. Need I go on? I've had people bring sections like this of the Torah to me and say, how can we read proverbs 3:17 in our services which says "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace", after reading this! There's not much peace in these 54 verses!

There are many ways to interpret these verses, and of course, our sages throughout the ages have had a go of it. I am quite thankful that I am a Reform Jew and believe that the Torah was written very long ago by men who were trying to teach our people to live good lives. Many sages believe that the author of this passage intended it to be a warning to the people. He wanted to convince the people to follow the laws and live righteous lives. We, who are parents, know this tactic well. "Do what I tell you or else you will be grounded for a week!" Using the "fear of God" has worked well for a lot of Religions. It's important to evolve, though, as a society, and realize that these verses, written thousands of years ago, were our history of how our people lived in ancient days and how they viewed God.

Another explanation of this section of Torah has been told by Rabbi Saperstein. He says that this section is not primarily used as a warning about the future. He believes that, historically, this author in Judea knew about the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrian armies destroyed their cities and imposed massive deportations, scattering the Israelites throughout

the Assyrian empire, and prohibiting them from maintaining their own religious institutions. This author might have been trying to communicate the message that this destruction was through God's will and that their religious failings were the cause of this disaster.

Rabbi Lauren Werber offers us another insight that brings our modern days into perspective as well. She sees the above explanations as using fear and a vengeful God behind the curses that are in this portion. However, her perspective removes fear of God from the curses and distances God from injustice. Perhaps these are not warnings, but rather an account of the plagues that WE have created for ourselves when we acted immorally!

Here are the categories she suggests:

1. These are curses that devastate our environment..., including heat, drought, lack of rain. Aren't we doing this to ourselves when we pollute our earth and face the disasters associated with global warming?
2. Then there is lack of prosperity, including failed enterprises and hunger. Don't we cause this curse on ourselves when we fail to train, employ, pay a living wage when as many as 14% of households face lack of food and shelter?
3. This curse includes a hopeless future including a lack of offspring. Family sizes, as well as, an ethnic and religious decline have happened in our country. When we fail to pass our values and practices on to our future generations, don't we create this curse of a

hopeless future? Our families are scattered all over the country and the world, making it hard to have connection to the support and love we need to help make it as we start new families.

4. This next curse includes illness- both physical and mental. Today's world of obesity, stress, lack of self-care and self-help, combined with unaffordable health care and a pandemic, is certainly not helping our society.
5. The final category that she states is a personal defeat and captivity because we cannot get along and do the right things together as a society. I just heard from a Rabbinic colleague today that one of his congregants had a neighbor pull out his Biden sign and rang the door yelling at them with profane language and calling them dirty Jews. They had to call the police and this person wouldn't open their door so he got arrested. These people are now afraid to put their sign back up. The anger that people are having right now is insane. We have always been able to have civil elections where even if you didn't agree with someone else's choice, you could respect them and agree that they had the right to choose to vote for whomever they believed was the right candidate. We need to start treating each other as if we are all God's children and all have a part of the divine within us. You don't have to like everyone, but you should treat them kindly and with dignity.

We can see how our society is failing in these areas and it seems as if it is up to us all to make changes in one or more of the above areas and to follow God's commandments teaching them to our children so that they will have a good life in the future. I pray that we can work together as American Jews, with all of our brothers and sisters in this country to end hatred, bigotry, anti-Semitism, and violence.

We are now close to the High Holidays. This is a time of self-reflection and Cheshbon nefest- an accounting of our own lives. How have we failed? What could we have done better? How can we try to help others in need? How can we promote peace and harmony in the world? How can we stop blaming others and find ways for us to make the changes WE need to make to promote peace and harmony?

In the month of Elul, may you find ways to reflect on your life and be part of the solutions to our curses, not the causes. Kein Yehi Ratzon-may this be God's will.