

Parashat Ki Tavo 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

A colleague and friend sent a request this week to a rabbinic list serve we are both on. It seemed to be a straightforward query; the kind rabbis would enjoy wrestling with, and appreciate the opportunity to do so. The request concerns two verses in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, that both my friend and I, and I am sure most of you, would find problematic, each of us eager, though, to rise to its challenge. Of one theme, the two verses speak of Israel being raised up above other nations, *ul'titcha elyon al kol ha'goyim/God would place you high above all the nations* (Deut. 26:19); and *un'tancha Hashem Elokecha elyon al kol goy'yei ha'aretz/God, your God, will set you on high, high above all the nations of the earth* (Deut. 28:1). To the first verse, my friend asked of his colleagues, "if you've got anything up your sleeve that takes the sting out of this one, I'd be grateful if you can forward it." The first response, beginning with a one-sentence preamble, came with its own sting, "Pacifism is a crutch for people who can't deal with national pride...."

Wincing at its harshness, I mused at how this response jumped to the question of pacifism. So too, wrote another colleague, even while acknowledging peacemaking as a Jewish value, "pacifism is evil and should not be used in the context of Jewish tradition because it means standing by and allowing evil to destroy good." This is certainly not the nature of pacifism as understood by its practitioners, nor as it draws from the wellsprings of Torah, nor as taught to the world by Gandhi, whose theory and practice of nonviolence in action inspired Martin Luther King. To stand by in the face of evil is evil. A way of activism that seeks to bring ultimate values to bear in the moment, in the way that Shabbos is meant to reflect a world at peace in the present, pacifism seeks cohesion between means and ends toward a lasting triumph of good over evil. In the discussion that swirled around two verses of Torah, at times civil, at times not, with all its pain and rage, the deeper question emerged as one of identity, of who we are as a people in relation to our selves and others, the challenge of who we are and strive to be.

It is the vexing, challenging question of whether we are and what it means to be "chosen." For all of the discomfort engendered, it is a question not to be avoided, a deeply entwined thread of our tradition that begs us to engage and to struggle toward deeper understanding of our calling as Jews and human beings. As one around our Thursday morning learning table lamented, it would be easier if the Torah had simply not referred to other nations in regard to our own rise to greater heights. There is in fact a third reference in *Ki Tavo* (28:9) to our being raised up that is not offered in relation to other peoples, only in regard to our fulfilling the commandments, *y'kimcha Hashem lo l'am kadosh/God will raise you up*

to God as a holy people. Whether the words of reference are there on page and parchment or not, the tension and challenge remains, and so the Torah crystallizes and holds before us the struggle to define the nature of our relationships with others, to wrestle deeply with the vital tension between the universal and the particular, and, ultimately, between the way the world is and should be and our role in bringing such transformation. Through Torah we are given an opportunity to engage, a context in which to wrestle with the hard stuff of life, the lowly as well as the lofty.

We should be uncomfortable with words of Torah that can so easily become triumphal. Engaging the discomfort, however, rather than turning away, we seek the proper tension to bring harmony to the melody of life. Just as more than one string is needed for fullness of sound, so troubling verses of Torah appear in a context, many strings joining for fullness of understanding. Just before our first troubling verse in this Torah portion, we have the source for the 611th commandment of the 613, *lalechet bidrachav/to walk in God's ways*. This is taken to be a basis for "imitatio dei," emulating the ways of God, *hit'damut l'Kel* in Hebrew. Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, known as the *Sh'nei Luchot Ha'B'rit*, from the title of his major work, challenges us from the sixteenth century to sanctify ourselves to reflect the "upper image," drawing for emphasis on our verse, *ul'titcha elyon*, not as raising us above other nations, but challenging us toward self-transcendence, challenging us to strive to go higher. As of strings that are plucked, we need to hear the tone of each one, and so too the verses that give context to those that trouble us; as in this *parasha*, that in building an altar we shall not use a steel tool, that the stones shall be uncut, remaining *avanim sh'leymot/whole or peaceful stones*. The only offering we are now told to make in these chapters is the *sh'lamim/the peace offering*. Preparing to enter the land, we are reminded that we have become a people. Of our mission as a people, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes from 19th century Germany, "Far from exclusiveness so wrongly imputed to it, Israel was to understand from the very outset that its mission was to help bring about the spiritual and moral salvation of all mankind...." It is for us to help in that process, none able to do it alone, a challenge given to all humanity, all created in God's image of Oneness. Reflecting the very language of our troublesome verses, the Slonimer Rebbe speaks of *eretz ha'elyonah/the upper land*, as the people prepare to enter the Land in the context of this *parsha*, and he says that for us this refers to Shabbos, as we enter it each week.

In the second of our verses, we are reminded that there is nothing intrinsically higher in whom we are; that all is for naught if we do not keep and do the commandments. In the question and notion of being chosen, as it has come to us through our tradition and history, is a challenge to struggle with who we are and are meant to be. It is a living, ever-present challenge that underlies every

reference to election in the particular language of our own tradition; chosen for a task, to transcend the ways of the world as they have come to be. Whether or not we are up to the task, the choice is in our hands every day, in all the contexts of our lives.

The word *ha'yom hazeh/today* appears three times immediately before the first of our verses, a teaching to wrestle, to be and become today, now, every day. In times when Jews were without power, without the sword, to be above, higher than the other nations, was a matter of pride, a way of being different that pointed to a time when all would turn to the book rather than the sword, when the ideal and the real would be joined, when God and God's name would be one. In our time, the emphasis has shifted; the challenge now directed inward as well as outward. The sword is, alas, also in our hands and we are no different in that regard, but the Torah still offers its challenge to rise above the way of the nations, including our selves. That is the self-transcendence to which we are called.

After this year's reading of *Parashat Ki Tavo*, to the second of the verses for which my friend had sought shared wrestling, I wrote in the margin of my Chumash: *un'tancha Hashem Elokecha elyon.../God, your God, will set you on high....* God will give us the opportunity to go higher..., only through moral behavior, only if we truly transcend the ways of the world, of nation states, of war and violence, of "cold steel" upon the altar of life – helping to lead the world to the "land above," to the day that is all Shabbos. This is what it means to walk in God's ways, to blaze every day a path to the future.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor