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From: JTSA Distance Learning Project <dlp@jtsa.edu>

To: rabbi@cpinternet.com

Weekly Torah Commentary from Chancellor Schorsch
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P A R A S H A T H A S H A V U A H C O M M E N T A R Y
Parashat Ki Tavo 5761
Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

The text of the parashah and haftarah is available
online. Visit:
<http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/5761/kitavo.shtml>

The apples ripened early this summer in northern Vermont despite the lack of rain. The owner of the mid-19th century farmhouse we rented for August has a well-tended orchard of diverse fruit trees. Each morning after davening under the majestic maple on the front lawn, I sauntered forth to inspect the progress of my apples. I felt like a farmer in ancient Israel choosing a portion of his ripening crop to bring to the Temple for his annual gift of first fruits. And when I picked my first apple of the season, a feeling of thanksgiving welled up inside of me, bringing to my lips the appropriate berakhah. The intensity of the experience revived warm memories of the victory garden of my childhood (our contribution to winning World War II). I liked nothing better than to pluck a ripe tomato off the vine and eat it on the spot. The soil and its produce always engender within me a sense of awe and dependence.

This week's parashah extends for me the feeling of summer by opening with the ceremony of first fruits. Once settled in the land promised to their ancestors, their children were obliged to visit the central sanctuary each year to offer thanks to God with a basket of choice first fruits. The formulaic synopsis of Israelite history to be recited by every pilgrim (Deuteronomy 26:5-10) became the narrative core of our Passover Haggadah. In its affirmation that the God of history also reigned over the domain of nature, the prayer articulated the radical novelty of biblical monotheism.

At the same time, the ceremony made a virtue of acknowledging our indebtedness. Saying thanks does not come naturally to us. One of the first social graces we teach our children is to reciprocate an act of kindness with a word of thanks. How many bar- or bat-mitzvah gifts go unacknowledged these days! The Torah seeks to ennoble us. Not only the possession of the land but its recurring bounty bespeak the muted presence of a caring God. Our achievements are never fully accounted for by our own efforts.

Ritual at its best yields patterns of living. To inculcate feelings of gratitude, the Torah required of all pilgrims, whenever they came, to intone individually in the presence of a priest the requisite thanksgiving prayer. And surely many must have known it by heart and recited it unaided. The Mishnah informs us centuries later that for those who could not, the priest would have them repeat the prayer after him. But the concession proved counterproductive. The unlearned felt embarrassed and stayed away. Thus at some point, the Temple leadership decided that the priest should prompt everyone irrespective of his knowledge of Hebrew (Bikkurim 3:7).

What triggered the problem was the growing prevalence of Aramaic among Palestinian Jews in the days of the Second Temple. Gradually, Hebrew ceased to be the spoken language. Yet the Mishnah insisted that the thanksgiving prayer over first fruits had to be rendered in Hebrew (Sotah 7:3). Hence, to preserve the ceremony of first fruits in a time of change called for accommodation elsewhere. To be sure, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. the whole matter seemed irrelevant except if you hoped for its imminent restoration, which the Mishnah certainly did.

Still, I find the partial glimpse of an early instance of religious adjustment instructive. The leadership understood the incontrovertible reality that adults do not like to be embarrassed. How many Jews stay away from synagogues because they are discomfited by the intricacies of Jewish ritual! Theological, historical or even mystical explanations of a particular rite miss the mark if the impediment lies in the doing. Isn't this the attraction of the ArtScroll Siddur for the many non-Orthodox Jews who seek to master the how of our rituals as well as the why? We give insufficient time to helping the uninitiated learn the choreography of an aliyah to the Torah or donning a tallit or saying the amidah or reciting the mourner's kaddish. Meaning often flows from performing the Mitavah unselfconsciously.

Equally clear from our fragmentary evidence is the fact that the adjustment in practice did not come at the expense of Hebrew. It is conceivable that sensitivity to people's discomfort could have taken the form of allowing Israelites to offer the thanksgiving prayer in the language they knew best. On the issue of Hebrew the Rabbis of the Mishnah were not doctrinaire. They permitted the reciting of oft-repeated prayers like the shema, amidah and grace after meals in a language other than Hebrew (Sotah 7:1). But neither were they indifferent. The Mishnah itself is written in a succinct and lucid Hebrew whose rhythmic cadence often borders on poetic. As pragmatists, the authors of the Mishnah and Talmud struggled to blend polarities to yield a balanced Judaism noteworthy both for its fidelity to the past and its responsiveness to the present.

In the case of first fruits the nod went to Hebrew, perhaps because of the sanctity of the Temple. Individual participation could be preserved through enlarging the role of the priest. By having him speak the words of thanksgiving first, pilgrims were spared the need to exhibit the power of their memory or their knowledge of Hebrew.

But the function of religion is not only to accommodate change. To hold aloft a vision of the ideal is also indispensable. Stretching helps us grow. A Judaism without Hebrew has lost a vital measure of its authenticity. It is our unique leshon ha-kodesh precisely because it served as the medium in which Israel first experienced God, the vehicle through which Torah morphed into an unending corpus of Rabbinic literature, the lingua franca of an ever-resilient exilic people and the deepest expression of the Jewishness of the Zionist state. In these dark days when all of Israel has become a front line in yet another assault on its right to exist, we Diaspora Jews should give voice to our anguish and support by, among other acts of solidarity, intensifying our efforts to enhance our command of Hebrew. Each new word, idiom and grammatical form will strengthen the rich fabric of our common identity.