

Shabbat Shalom Reb Moshe, Rav Claudia, TBZ friends, and new friends. When Kathy Kates asked me to prepare today's D'var Torah it truly touched my heart. Welcoming you and creating a welcoming environment is a value that I hold dear. Just like the lyrics of the Sanctuary song we sing here at TBZ, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, Yah", and to all of you. To begin, let me ask you why Ki Tavo, is imbued with messages of welcoming. Please listen to my summary of the salient points of this Torah portion because I am going to ask you some questions about it.

Moses continued his talk to our ancestors by reminding them when they enter Ca'anah they will have to bring bikkurim, the first produce of their fields and orchards, to the Holy Temple, and there they need to declare their gratitude to Yah for all the good He does and has done for them. Then Ki Tavo also includes mention of the tithes which must be given to the Levites as well as to poor people. Moses reminded our ancestors they are God's chosen people and they too chose Yah as their God. Also Moses stated the Egyptians treated us cruelly and afflicted us, and they imposed hard labor on us. The latter part of Ki Tavo includes a list of blessings which God will reward people with when they follow the laws of the Torah, juxtaposed with the rebuke or a long, harsh account of terrible situations that can befall them if they abandon God's commandments. Some of these include illness, famine, poverty, and exile. Moses concluded by telling our ancestors that only today, 40 years after their birth as a people, had they attained a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear.

After listening to my summary of Ki Tavo, what jumps out to you as a message or reminder of welcoming? (Just in case, I have some examples as follows.)

- Bring bikkurim, the first produce of their fields to the Holy Temple.
- As a community express gratitude to Yah.

- Tithes must be given to the Levites as well as to poor people.
- As a community, chosen people and our choice of Yah as our God.
- As a community, the Egyptians treated us cruelly.
- As a community, it is a good recommendation to follow the laws of Torah.
- As a community, let's avoid illness, famine, poverty and exile.
- As a community, let's not take 40 years to attain a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me. Now I am going to share with you about some personal experiences describing unwelcome situations, some examples of the importance of welcoming involved with my work, and then, how Alan and I try to model Moses' recommendations in Ki Tavo in our lives and with our family and friends, and lastly, how we, as the TBZ community can be welcoming. Please do not underestimate either the positive power of a welcoming feeling or the discomfort associated with feeling unwelcome.

First, here are a couple of examples of the discomfort associated with feeling unwelcome. In the community where we used to live there are individuals who refused to give me a greeting when I greeted them, or even acknowledge my presence. Instead, they would literally look through me in front of my face. I did not enjoy this experience or this feeling. It took a lot of inner strength but I would look them in the eyes and greet them and say, "It is certainly nice to see you". In that same community there is a country club that excludes Jewish people and other members of minority groups from their membership. The Jewish community established a country club of their own in a different part of the community at large. This created both tension and dynamics.

Why is it important to feel welcome somewhere? Where do you feel welcome? How do you feel when you know you help make someone else feel welcome? Is there something that prevents you from being able to make others feel welcome? What is it? Here is my big question

for you. Since we are all created in the image of God, then why can't we make the effort to like each other?

I am a linguist and my field involves how adults learn a second language. In my career I have embraced the opportunity to change people's lives by either helping them learn to communicate in English or in Spanish as second languages. I chose this career because it pained me to see how my Bubbe was treated as a result of her difficulty in speaking her second language, English. I witnessed people's looks of disdain when they mistook her challenges with communicating in English for a lack of intelligence. Do you ever wonder why it is more difficult for some groups of people to acquire English as a second language successfully than others? It is all about welcoming and how they come to live in the United States.

If you can come to the U.S. of your own free will and you believe learning to communicate in English is going to lead to your upward mobility and success in life, then you will be able to gain this second language to your advantage. However, if you and your people have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved by the speakers of English, your experience with learning this language is going to be radically different. My friend and former graduate school classmate, Nancy, first came to the United States as a young adolescent. When she met her first American classroom teacher she explained that her first name is Anunciata. The teacher said, "Your name is much too difficult to pronounce. I am going to call you Nancy". My friend did not feel welcome. She left school, got married very young, gave birth to her first child and then discovered how unhappy she was. This story has a positive ending. Like me, due to discomfort caused by not feeling welcome, we found ourselves pursuing our college education at very untraditional ages. Both of us graduated from community colleges, received full scholarships to earn our bachelor's degrees at Tufts University, and then met in class in the graduate studies program of Applied Linguistics at U. MA., Boston.

For several years of my career, in addition to teaching languages, writing curriculum, and training teachers how to teach second languages, I also created, designed, and managed programs in communities of poverty to change lives of low-income members of minorities who were first-generation college students. In an after-school program aimed to serve middle-school youth in Lynn I saw why 10 to 14 year old children were joining street gangs and learning how to shoot guns and sell drugs. Our task was to turn this trend around so that these beautiful children would live long enough to succeed academically, go to high school, graduate and then go to community college. We, the after-school program, became their substitute for the gangs. Why did they join gangs in the first place? Try to imagine being torn away from your childhood home, the only home you have ever known, and come to a new place with a different culture and a strange language to learn. This new home was not very welcoming and their parents had to work multiple jobs to put food on the table and pay the rent. Who was there to welcome them—the gangs of the streets of Lynn. Here is just one more example of creating a welcoming feeling in an unwelcome setting and then we will move on.

A regional, technical high school principal decided to borrow me from the community college where I used to work because he learned I could deal with high school students as well as college students. For a year I created Spanish language and culture curriculum for that high school and taught juniors and seniors Spanish in the afternoon just before dismissal. These beautiful children did not believe they could succeed because they were tech kids, as they called themselves. I chose to make a couple of contributions to change that folk theory.

I paid for their membership in the American Association of Teachers of Spanish annual contest and structured the curriculum to include all of the learning strands they needed to succeed in the annual Spanish language contest. At least 8 of these students did superbly well and I was able to hang medals around their necks during the last full school

assembly of the academic year in the gym. Also, the student services department (a.k.a. guidance office) discovered I could translate Spanish and English languages so they hired me to serve as the translator whenever a student's family needed to attend an I.E.P. (individual education plan) meeting. Can you imagine how it felt for these families to sit in a conference room surrounded by these school officials who only spoke English? I would begin every meeting with the same acknowledgement to the families. *Su hija es una alumna excelente.* Your daughter is an excellent student. Then I would smile broadly at the families and explain that I would serve as their translator.

Now I am going to transition back into addressing how Alan and I try to model Moses' recommendations in Ki Tavo in our lives and with our family and friends, and lastly, how we, as a community can be welcoming at TBZ. Let's reflect on Ki Tavo again for a moment. Instead of bringing the first produce of the fields to TBZ, we thoroughly enjoy hosting our friends and family at home for Shabbat and holiday meals. We express gratitude to Yah that we can live in this community and be part of the TBZ community. Remember, where we used to live it was not as welcoming. Maybe we are not giving tithes to the Levites—and I am a descendent of Levites—but we do contribute to taking care of poor people. Alan and I are the co-coordinators of Family Table for TBZ. We love to nudge you and give you visual aids to encourage you to bring soups and crackers to TBZ every time you come so we can schlep the donations to the Family Table site in Waltham. Every Friday evening when we bless our Shabbat dinner table, Alan reminds us that if we had not been taken out of Egypt, there wouldn't be any Jews, Muslims, or Christians in the world. As a result, we are reminded the Egyptians did treat us cruelly, but we also learned a powerful lesson about welcoming. The Torah tells us in more than one place that "You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". This makes it easier for us to think of the

members of our communities who are marginalized in their lives and we can reach out to them.

This is really not so difficult to do at all. Personally, I think it is a much better alternative to illness, famine, poverty, and exile—don't you agree with me? So, here's what we can do as the TBZ community to be welcoming. We are really good at showing each other we are glad to see each other when we are here attending services and at Kiddush later on when we sit together and have lunch. This is the easy part. Please remember to look for new faces. Alan and I remember how welcomed we felt the first time we came to TBZ thanks to David Cherenson and Jenny Seicol's greetings and time spent with us. Let's encourage more of our friends to join us and come to services and stay for Kiddush. Look around and make sure new comers sit with you during services and at lunch. Include them in conversations. Show them how to use our siddur. Introduce them to more friends. Have as much fun as we do on Friday evenings or holidays and invite friends to come to your house for a meal. Like I mentioned earlier, it does not have to take us 40 years to attain a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear.