

Parashat Ki Tavo

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Hi! I'm Rachel Simmons, your new-ish Rabbi. As a new face here in this community, there are a few personal questions that I hear a lot more than others. Some of those questions are about how I came to Har Shalom, and how my experience has been here. Have I been welcomed? Am I settling in well? Some of those questions are about my path to Judaism— many people are curious to know, what was it like for me to convert? What inspired me to join the Jewish people? How does my family feel about my choice?

More than my path to Judaism, though, I've found that people ask me the most about my path to becoming a rabbi. Of all of the jobs and career paths I could have pursued, they want to know, why in the world did I decide to become clergy? What drew me to this job, of all jobs, and what keeps me here?

I've had this conversation with some of you, and if I have, I beg a bit of patience. Because for those I haven't talked to about this topic yet, I want to share that I usually give two answers. Both of these answers are true, but they are also very different.

The first answer is to say that the rabbinate just made sense for me with my strengths and interests and talents. My background as a teacher, as a musician, and as a linguistics major all made the rabbinate a sensible choice. Plus, I love old stuff, and thrifting, and heirlooms that have been passed down from generation to generation, which lines up nicely with the Jewish value of sharing and growing, *l'dor va'dor*. I'm a singer, I love learning languages, and I'm comfortable speaking in front of large groups. All of these things meant that becoming a rabbi just made sense. It felt right, and it still feels right.

There's a second explanation, though, that I don't always go into.

That explanation is to say that I became a rabbi because all of us, and all humans that have ever lived, don't actually know, at the end of the day, why we're here. We are all, to an extent, kept in the dark about the big questions of the Universe. We don't know, empirically, if there's a greater purpose. We can't prove if there is an afterlife or a beforelife, we can't draw a picture of God, we can't even agree on a definition of what, or who, or WHY God is.

I sometimes call the process of accepting this lack of knowledge "sacred discomfort", because while it can be difficult or unsettling to think about these things, it is also a holy and meaningful process.

One of the tools that Judaism offers us, for living within this sacred discomfort, is lifecycle rituals, that is, rituals that mark the moments when we come closest to the big questions we can't answer, those moments of wonder, moments when we are face-to-face with the limits of human understanding.

These are moments, where a new life is brought into this world. Moments, where a life leaves this world. Moments where something that seems miraculous or unexplainable happens. Moments where a life is saved. Moments where two souls meet and fall in love. Moments where the decision is made to turn off life support.

So, my second answer to the question about why I became a rabbi is this: I became a rabbi because I want to accompany others through those moments of wonder, those moments of sacred discomfort. I became a rabbi because I want to sit together with other human beings when we are shaken to the core, in the best and worst ways, when we are amazed at life cycles, when we are in mourning, when we are lost.

And I stand by this reason. It speaks to me.

But. As I read through this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, I realized that my reasons for being a rabbi actually fall a bit short, and that there is another type of holy moment that it is my responsibility to nurture within any sacred community I serve. In fact, I realized that in my own

personal observance of Judaism, in my own personal relationship with God, there is a key component that still needs to be developed.

You see, Ki Tavo doesn't begin with a lifecycle ritual. It doesn't begin with fear, or confusion, or new life, or love. It doesn't begin with sacred discomfort, or death, or anything existential. Instead, Ki Tavo begins by describing a scene of comfort and success, a scene of abundance and plenty. Our ancestors, it says, wouldn't be wandering anymore. They would be settled in their new homes, and doing well. Period.

This moment described at the beginning of Ki Tavo isn't a moment of mourning or birth— it's just a moment of contentment, a moment in life where things would be going really, solidly well for us.

This is akin to, say, working hard at your job and feeling satisfied with the outcome. Or studying hard for a test and doing well. Or moving to a new house and finally feeling settled in. Or finishing a household project. Or just waking up to one of those beautiful days when the sun is shining just the right amount, and the breeze is blowing just the right amount, and the air is crisp and clean and delicious, and all just feels right in the world.

But it's not enough for us to just enjoy those moments.

No, in these moments of contentment and simple goodness, Ki Tavo tells us, we must intentionally choose to include God in our abundance. The parasha describes how our ancestors would take the first fruits or *bikkurim* of their first harvest, which they would have successfully planted and raised in the new land, and offer them to God. Ki Tavo says—

וְלִקְחֹתָ מִרְאשִׁית | כָּל-פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תָּבִיא מֵאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ וְשָׂמַתָּ בַטֶּגֶף וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁכֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם:

you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from your land, which the Lord, your God, is giving you. And you shall put [them] into a basket and go to the place which the Lord, your God, will choose to have His Name dwell there.

וְשִׂמְחַת בְּכָל־הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר יִתֶּן־לָךְ יְהוָה

And you shall rejoice in all of the types of goodness that God has given you.

It's not enough, in moments of simple goodness, to be happy and enjoy them. Just like how we automatically include God in the moments when we feel wonder, like a bris, or a birth, or a death, we can only experience the fullness of the potential of our connection with the Divine if we invite holiness into our most everyday experiences, too.

God is not only a God for special occasions and transformations—no—God also deserves to be included in the moments where the everyday world is gorgeous in its own daily way, where things are good, where things feel easy and successful.

When we talk about ritual, what we talk about is making a choice to mark a moment. We have developed many rituals over the last few thousand years, and we are exploring new rituals all the time. We light candles, we cook latkes, we argue about what to put on those latkes, we go to miveh, we stamp on glasses and shout Mazel tov, we dance in circles, we search for breadcrumbs by candlelight. Some of these rituals have existed for thousands of years, and others have developed as Jews have spread across the globe, into the Diaspora, away from the Holy Land.

So how do we, living in the United States in the year 2022, with no Temple to bring fruits to and no crops of our own, how do we ritualize the moments of simple, bountiful happiness in our own lives? Our *bikkurim* are certainly going to look different from those of our ancestors. Most of us aren't farmers anymore. But how can we mark our simple, everyday abundance as sacred?

How do we sanctify everyday holiness with the same love and wonderment that we have put into developing the ceremony of the chuppah, or the rituals of shiva and kaddish, or the swell of emotion at a baby naming?

How do we enact the choice to say that our lives— our everyday lives— our simple, good, beautiful, boring, personal lives— should also have the chance to be sacred?

Well, the portion of Ki Tavo that we read today sure made a point of outlining what will happen if we don't make the choice to include God in our everyday lives. Curse after curse after curse, we just read, promises of all of the things that would go wrong if we limited the role of the Divine in our hearts going forward. The portion of Ki Tavo that we just read together states that all of this cursing was:

תַּחַת, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּשִׂמְחָה, וּבְטוֹב לֵב--מְרֹב, כָּל.

"Due to the fact that you did not follow the Lord your God in your joy, and when everything was good in the world and you had an abundance." (Deut 28:46)

If we only remember God in the moments where we “need” God, we are missing out.

To remember God when we are scared, when we are in awe, when we feel wonder—that is a start, and a solid one, and a human one. It is precious, but it is also not enough.

When things are just good, the Torah says, when we are settled, when we are comfortable, that's *also* when we need to turn to God.

My mother sometimes comments about how for the first three months of a romantic relationships, it's one person's representative talking to another person's representative. To be fair, she says that she may have learned this from the comedian Chris Rock, but I've always associated it with her and her wisdom.

Regardless of who said it first, though, there is a truth to the statement. The beginning of a romance is exciting and thrilling, with butterflies in your stomach and flirty conversations and racing heartbeats.

But after that first stage, after those first few months have passed, relationships with lasting power and healthy longevity often experience a shift. Love, instead of being expressed through grand gestures and statements, becomes everyday, and comfortable. The person you desire starts to feel like family, like the family you choose.

That's because there is a special type of love that comes from sharing the everyday, from eating takeout on a Thursday night, from folding each others' laundry, from making a cup of tea and asking your partner if they would like one, to. It doesn't mean that the moments of intense love don't happen anymore, just that they are spread out, punctuations in a lifetime shared together, in a deeper, honest love.

And the same can happen, and should happen, with our relationship with God.

What would it look like if we loved God not only in those intense moments, but also in the mundane?

It's a beautiful thing to turn to God in moments of wonder. God, and our tradition, are there for us just as they have been for generations, to welcome a new child, to establish new families, to give us the words to chant as we lower a casket into the ground.

And, there is another type of love, the type expressed in parashat Ki Tavo, that our tradition also invites us to feel for God.

Remember that list of life events— a job well done, a test that you studied hard for, or just walking outside on a beautiful and normal day, not a holiday, just any old day?

What if we practiced including God in those moments?

What if we committed ourselves on a daily basis— truly, each day, no matter how much of a boring Tuesday it is— to find something to be grateful for, something to praise God for, something to wonder about?

What if we regularly check in with ourselves each week, perhaps at Shabbat dinner, to ask— what is something about this normal week of life that I want to share with my family and with God?

What have I learned? What could I choose to marvel at, to feel wonder about?

What if we practiced lying down at night, every night, no matter what, and breathing deep, and thanking God for our everyday lives, for our everyday jobs, for our everyday families, for our everyday hobbies?

What if we made it a habit of reaching out to God with the same sort of love we reach out to our families, our partners, our dearest friends?

It's time to stop, as my mother and Chris Rock say, having it be our representative talking to God's representative. We can have a deeper love and a deeper relationship to God and to Judaism, a relationship that holds us and follows us through every single day, beyond the Shabbats and holidays and funerals and births and into the Tuesdays and the Thursdays and the simple, everyday moments of contentment.

וְשִׂמְחַת בְּכָל־הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לָךְ יְהוָה

And you shall rejoice in all of the types of goodness that God has given you.

Let's make the choice to love God with an everyday love, too.

Shabbat shalom.

