

Parashat Ki Tavo
Naomi Litrownik
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Temple Aliyah, Needham MA

Shabbat Shalom

Ki Tavo, “When you come into the Land”, the first phrase of this Parsha, in Deuteronomy, takes me back 50 years, to August, 1973, when, as a rising college junior, I got onto a double decker jumbo jet, with what seemed like hundreds of 20 year old Jewish students from all over the United States, for what seemed like an endless flight, landing in the then Lod airport,(it had not yet been changed to Ben Gurion), in Tel Aviv.

We arrived early in the morning, i had never been out of the US; No one I knew was on this plane. Searching for meaning in my first two years of college; trying out two majors, I yearned for more. My Hebrew professor suggested I go to Israel for a junior year abroad. “That’s it!”, I thought... maybe that will help me figure out what I want to do in my life.....feeling both excited and terrified, having never left home like this before; knowing I wouldn't see my parents for a whole year, off I went.

The blazing almost blinding white light of that August morning, as I got off the plane, startled me. Ki Tavo..... “When you come into the land”.....well, here I was.

What does it mean to enter a longed for, yearned, for Holy space?

Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin, of Temple Sinai in Oakland, describes this Torah portion as “the Stories we tell”. Our origin story, is repeated in this parshah, in fact, the Israelites are commanded to repeat this story as they entered the land: and WE are obligated to repeat this story each Pesach from our Haggadah “my father was a fugitive Aramean, and he went down into Egypt, dwelled there, became a great number, but the Egyptians ill-treated us, made us suffer, enslaved us...then we cried out to the Lord, who heard our voice, and saw our suffering, and



brought us out of Egypt....” This is one of the stories we tell over and over as a people, to remind us of who we were, where we came from, and what we can become..... As we are in the month of Elul, the self reflection month,, the month the Talmudist sages write that God is in the field, approachable, close to us, we HAVE to be reminded of our story, “we need to know our own story in order to repent, to change, to heal and to forgive”, Rabbi Mates-Muchin writes.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, wrote that ONE reason Judaism has survived is that it answers three questions EVERY reflective person asks: “Who am I? Why am I here? How Shall I live?” Moses asked the first question to God at the burning bush “Who am I? An Egyptian, a Midianite or a Jew?” He then asks God, “Who Are you?” And God answers “I am who I am”. Rabbi Sacks wrote that the great questions in life are Answered by stories. The Torah, he says, is a series of interlinked stories extended over time; Judaism is less about "Truth as system" than about “Truth as Story”. And WE are a part of that story. That is what it means to be a Jew. A large part of what Moses is doing in Devarim is retelling that story to the next generation, the ones who will cross over, reminding them of what God had done for their parents, and detailing some of the mistakes their parents had made. Moses is NOT ONLY the great liberator, but also the supreme storyteller. In Ki Tavo, Moses NOT ONLY instructs the people to tell that story, he also instructs them to bring the first ripened fruits to the central sanctuary, the temple, as a way of giving thanks to God. It’s a two part obligation on entering the land: telling and thanking. “Here, for the first time”, Rabbi Sacks wrote,” the retelling of the nation’s history becomes an obligation for every citizen of the nation”. This is known as Vidui Bikkurim ie Declaration of the First Fruits. Throughout Devarim we are commanded to remember. To tell our story. Our story is one of gratitude for making it to the Promised Land. and so we are obliged to tell our story in order to give back, to feel joy, and to help those who don’t have enough.

Rabbi Shefa Gold writes about the SPIRITUAL journey of entering the Land...: the remembered retelling, and the thanking which, when practiced in OUR times, can open up our hearts and minds to blessings, AND to an expanded awareness of who we are, why we are here, and how we should live.

So back to my journey to the Promised Land 50 years ago, in search of direction and meaning. And a journey it was..... Very early in the morning of

Yom Kippur, on Shabbat, Oct 6th, 1973, with newly made friends, I walked to the Kotel. In those days, women and men were at the same Wall, davening. All of a sudden, we heard the sounds of jet planes and looking up, saw several planes, pointy nosed, flying in formation in the skies ahead. Planes didn't fly over the Kotel on Shabbat or Chagim. There was an audible collective gasp from the assembled daaveners, and a quiet descended on the crowd. We quickly made the 45 minute walk back to our dorms. I was awakened from my nap not long after when an air raid siren blasted; my clock said 8:45am. The Yom Kippur war had begun. Megaphones were used to shout out unit numbers, and young men ran out of their rooms. The campus soon emptied except for us foreign students. As the Givat Ram campus of Hebrew University, where I lived, was very close to the Knesset, the military camped nearby; wires were put up around the campus, civil servants knocked on our dorm door each day at dusk to turn off the lights; a blackout was enforced; I slept with my passport under my pillow, in case we had to make a quick escape. All buses were appropriated for the fronts. We stayed in. We played cards. We gave blood. We lined up at the one phone on campus to call home, it took hours to get to the front of the line to make that call. We heard no news. The Israeli radio stations played only patriotic music. Voice of the BBC was one station we could occasionally get.

During these fateful and terrifying three weeks, approximately 2,600 Israeli soldiers were killed and 7,200 were injured.. When the war finally ended, the campus was bereft. Professors had died, students had died; everyone had a family member or friend who had died; and some American students decided to leave. The campus was very somber; normalcy was gone; the country was in mourning. Our courses eventually started up again, but the jubilant mood that greeted us when we first arrived was gone. Around that time, I met a Jewish Israeli and a Palestinian Israeli, both social work interns at a local school. As we talked, I experienced an “aha” moment: that was what I wanted to be: a social worker, caring for others who were in conflict, helping those who were in the midst of suffering. At the end of June, after the program was over, I left Israel, not without trying to get a permanent job there, and not without trying to convince my parents to make Aliyah; alas, I didn't get the job, my parents didn't make Aliyah, and I returned home. That year, my journey, was incredibly formative in my life.... My career, as a psychotherapist, now spanning over almost five decades, has been one of listening to stories of those in pain, helping folks find meaning, helping them

to live with the uncertainty we all have to manage, and helping them to create new, healthier narratives....

Yes, I did see the movie, Golda, this past Sunday; despite having to get used to Helen Mirren's face, and that the movie was mainly in English, I was both riveted and triggered into remembering the stark naked terror I felt when the war was on. "How can this be?" I thought at the time". "What will happen to us?" Now, in looking back the almost 50 years since that time, I feel SO grateful that this story HAS been a part of my life, grateful that this experience gave me clarity and meaning, strengthened my ties to the country I love best in the world, despite all its shortcomings, despite all its problems, despite the dreadful decisions being made at the top levels, Israel is a part of me. For this I am grateful.

The stories we tell... we are a nation of storytellers.....as we approach Rosh Hashanah, may we tell our stories proudly, may we reflect on our gratitude, may we own the errors we have made and vow to do better, and May we all find the strength to do better.....in the coming year. Shabbat shalom!