



Parashat Ki Tavo – September 16, 2022 – 20 Elul 5782

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

The Sages who first divided the Toraitic text into distinct allotments to be read in weekly installments throughout the year likely did not know that the opening words of each of these portions (parshiyot) would come to serve as appellations by which each of the texts would be referenced over subsequent generations. Nor could they have forecast that their intellectual descendants would then make of the statements formed from these names in sequence, their own sense of order and insight into the meaning of the larger Biblical corpus. Nevertheless, the practice of reading into the names of the Torah portions a deeper sense of meaning has become a rabbinic enterprise, and there are few times during the year when this exercise carries greater impact than when applied to the titles of this week's Torah portion (*Ki Tavo*). Read in conjunction with the title of the week that precedes it (*Ki Teitzei*), the phrase roughly translates as "When you go out [and] when you return [or "come in"]". As such, it closely echoes the oft-quoted verse from Psalms (Ps 121:8): "May God guard you in your going and your coming from this day forward." However, notably missing in the statement taken from Devarim (Deuteronomy) is the implication that it is God that is the source of blessing or protection. Rather, the parashah titles, like the texts to which they refer, emphasize our own responsibility for acting in a manner that will usher blessing into our lives. In this way, the constructed phrase gives a nod to the V'Ahavta paragraph in the Shema that asserts that we must actively incorporate the teachings of the Torah into our conduct in the outer world and embody them in the inner sanctum of our homes.

The idea that Toraitic precepts (the counterpoint of "*Ki Teitzei*") should guide and protect us as we go out into the world is, perhaps, the less surprising of these two assertions. After all, it is easy to spot the ways in which our values might be challenged, our sense of our own identity warped by the influences of a world shaped by "foreign" cultures that are in some ways and forms inimical to our own.

Furthermore, as a person who wears a kippah in almost all settings, I understand that my conduct as an identifiably Jewish individual conveys certain impressions of who we, as a Jewish people, are. Hence there is a need for me – or for anyone who is or conceivably could be –

identified as a Jew to represent the very best of our culture and traditions in the way that we walk the world (as a matter of good “PR”).

But it is harder to see why we need to be warned about applying a Torah lens as we re-enter our homes. Is it not expected that our homes represent sanctuaries in which our fundamental values are safeguarded and perpetuated. Shouldn't that be the one place where we needn't give active thought to deporting ourselves “Jewishly”?

Our tradition seems to think otherwise. It recognizes that we can import into our domestic spheres, into our inner lives and monologues, elements that are antithetical to the values that we profess. And in these most intimate spheres, when our guard is down, we threaten to do the most harm, not only to ourselves or our tradition, but to those we love. Indeed, in Baba Metzia we are cautioned that it is in the context of our interactions with those we are closest too that we are at risk of causing the greatest injury. So, one might postulate that the author of that text might have chosen to place *Ki Tavo* (the selection dealing with our entry into the home sphere) even ahead of *Ki Teitzei* in the ordering of the texts.

Whatever the case may be, our Toraitic tradition and its source remind us that the person that we are and the mark that we leave on the world is a composite of our public and private deportment, of the way we walk when we are in the public eye and the way that we comport ourselves behind closed doors, indeed, even in the company of one.

May we use the remainder of the month of Elul to bring this area of our lives under the lens of *cheshbon hanefesh*, our examination of who we have been and who we seek to become in the year ahead.

Shabbat shalom,

- Rabbi Rachel Safman

Note: I look forward to seeing many of you either in person or via Zoom for our first recitation of Selichot, the “Prayers of Forgiveness” that anticipate and accompany our High Holiday services. We will launch the cycle with a program in the sanctuary on **Saturday night (9/17) at 9:30 pm.**