

THIS WEEK IN TORAH *Ki TAVO*

Picture the scene 2000 years ago: A farmer made a pilgrimage from his field with a basket of the first fruits he harvested. He finds a priest and hands the basket over to the *Kohen* and proclaims in a very loud voice: “My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but then it became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to יהוה, the God of our ancestors, and יהוה heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. God freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” [Deuteronomy 25:5-9] It was a powerful moment as a farmer acknowledges the sense of Divine Providence in his ancestors’ journey as well as God’s influence in the work of the land.

But there is more at play than a mere ritual—which was being repeated over and over again on the steps of the Temple. The medieval Rabbinic sage RaSHI noted that this had to have been proudly and in an audible fashion for people to hear. Contemporary playwright David Mamet wrote that this was not a passive activity—the volume of the declaration coupled with the words spoken added to the intensity of the ritual. This was loud and proud, but also full of other emotions: there could be crying as the journey into Egypt was spoken of. There was also an acknowledgement of the culpability that the people had in their plight; this was not about victimhood but about consequences as God took to deliverance of the people.

15th/16th century Italian rabbi Obadiah Sforno noted a parallel here with a verse from II Samuel [19:7] In that section of the Bible, King David mourns his son Absalom’s death in front of the warriors who defeated the rebellious child. Sforno thought that some might find such conduct rude as the warriors risked their lives to save their king and now he weeps for his son. But Sforno noted that a moment like this possessed mixed emotions, even conflicting ones. The Chasidic sage *Sefat Emet* noted that is just like us

right before the High Holidays—guilt and joy mixed together with acknowledging our frailty as well as the blessings of an upcoming harvest.

Such was the moment outside the Temple. There was joy of the harvest and gratitude for the redemptive powers of God. But there was also acknowledgement of the pain of the journey and the sacrifice ancestors made for their heirs' fortitude. There was admitting culpability and a perception that others were displaced by the Israelite conquest. Oh there was a lot of “baggage” as the priest took the basket from the farmer!

So it is with us. When we gather to pray, people come for different reasons—*yarzheit*, celebrating a *simcha*, an acknowledgment of the Sabbath, or maybe to schmooze with friends. All are valid. No one motive is more pure than another. Instead of judging why a person is there, let us turn a cacophony into a beautiful and loud song that we call a communal prayer.

The scene outside the Temple is a long gone ritual, but what happens every time we gather for prayer echoes the deep and lingering meaning of that time.