

PARSHAT KI TAVO

September 5, 2020 – 16 Elul 5780

Annual (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8): Hertz p. 859

Haftarah (Isaiah 60:1-22): Hertz p. 874

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Torah Portion Summary

Once they have settled in the land, each Israelite farmer is to bring a portion of his first fruits to the central sanctuary. Before the priest, he will recite the declaration expressing gratitude for all the gifts God has given. In the third year of the agricultural cycle, farmers are to give the second tithe of their produce to the poor rather than bringing it to Jerusalem. Once this was done, the farmer is to recite a declaration acknowledging that he had done as God commanded. Moshe reminds the Israelites that they have affirmed their covenant with God, that they have promised to obey Him, and that God in return has affirmed that Israel is His treasured people. Moshe tells the people that as soon as they cross the Jordan they are to inscribe large stones with the words of the Torah and set them up on Mount Eival, and then they are to enact a covenant ritual on Mount Eival and Mount Grizim. Moshe tells the people that if they observe God's commandments they will experience many blessings. However, if they do not obey God they will experience many curses, culminating in war, famine, plagues, and exile. Moshe concludes by reminding the Israelites of all that God has done for them in the forty years since He redeemed them from Egypt.

I. Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them. – And all the people shall say, Amen. (Deuteronomy 27:26)

1. Here he [Moshe] included the entire Torah, and they accepted it upon themselves with a curse and with an oath. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. Who does not fulfill and confirm that it is proper to do them all, but there will be a commandment that he will nullify; this refers to one who is an apostate regarding even one thing (commanded by God). (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. In my opinion, this requires that a person avow the commandments in his heart and consider them as the truth, believe that he who observes them will be requited with the best of rewards and he who transgresses them will be punished, and if someone denies any of them or considers it annulled forever he will be cursed. However, if a person transgressed any commandment, such as eating swine... he is not included within this ban, for Scripture did not say "who does not perform the terms of this Teaching and observe them." This verse is the ban on those who rebel [against the authority of the Torah] and who deny [its validity]. (Ramban--Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain)
4. This curse applies to those who say it is not necessary to observe the commandments of the Lord in practice, claiming that the important thing is that a person should understand their meaning and that person should be good "in his heart," and nothing more. (K'tav Sofer--Rabbi Abraham Samuel Benjamin Schreiber, 1815-1875, Hungary)
5. Rabbi Yitzchak Arama was right when he said that there are many people who in their public appearances convey the impression that they observe the Torah's commandments meticulously, but their principal purpose in doing so is to conceal sins committed in private. They use the commandments they perform in public as a ruse to make their peers believe that they are righteous people. They want to be appointed to public office, positions of power, and in order to achieve their goal they pretend to perform all these commandments as an expression of serving the Lord, while in reality they are self-serving. They may even use their so-called piety in order to lure people to deposit large sums of money with them, having established their credibility as being trustworthy by "piety" that is a cover for corruption... If someone wants to be described as upholding Torah, his mitzvah-performance must have as its objective the mitzvah itself, not the personal advantage he

can realize by putting on such a show. (Hak'tav Vehakabala--Rabbi Jacob Zvi Mecklenburg, 1785-1865, Germany)

6. Rabbi Acha said: If a person learned and taught, observed and did, and was in a position to strengthen the Torah by supporting Torah scholars and did not do so, he is included in "Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them." If he did not learn, teach, observe, or do, and he was not in a position to strengthen the Torah but nevertheless did so through self-sacrifice, he is included in "Blessed be he who upholds..." (Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 7:4)

Sparks for Discussion

Our commentators offer several suggestions for those to whom this verse applies – those who do not affirm that all the mitzvot are binding for all time and may not be changed; those who do not undertake to observe all the mitzvot; those who perform mitzvot for personal gain; and even those who do not support Torah scholars. Just what does it mean to uphold the Torah? Consider for a moment the growing influence of the far right movements in Judaism. Do you think that the teaching of Hak'tav Vehakabala is particularly timely? You could read Rabbi Acha's statement to imply that a person need not observe the mitzvot as long as he gave a lot of money to support Torah scholars and institutions. Do you think that is what he meant? Can you be Jewish by proxy?

II. They shall serve as signs and proofs against you and your offspring for all time. Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve – in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything – the enemies whom the Lord will let loose against you. (Deuteronomy 28:46-48)

1. The Torah does not specify the sins for which the Jewish people will be punished. The only one which it mentions specifically is "Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and gladness." (Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, 1765-1827, Poland)
2. Our rabbis taught: A person should not stand up to say the Amidah while immersed in sorrow or idleness or laughter or chatter or frivolity or idle talk, but only while rejoicing in the performance of the mitzvah. (Talmud Brachot 31a)
3. The Divine Presence rests neither in the midst of sadness, nor in the midst of idleness, nor in the midst of frivolity, nor in the midst of levity, nor in the midst of chitchat, nor in the midst of inane talk, but only in the midst of joy in observing a commandment. (Talmud Shabbat 30b)
4. Service without joy is the work of slaves for those who exploit and hate them. Therefore, if you fail to serve God with joy and gladness of heart, it is like slaves serving the enemy. (Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, 1749-1821, Lithuania)
5. Would it not have been sufficient to say "because you would not serve the Lord your God"? Why add "in joy and gladness"? With this brief phrase the Torah encapsulates an approach to observance and worship that is central to Judaism. True service of God is joyful and enthusiastic service. It is not cold and formal, merely following the details of laws and rituals, but service that comes from a joyful recognition of the wonders of life. (Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *Entering Torah*, p. 290)

Sparks for Discussion

Why is the refusal specifically to serve God with joy that is punished so severely? What does it mean to serve God with joy? Does it mean we must be happy whenever we perform any mitzvah, or does it mean that we should be happy to be Jews who have mitzvot to perform, even if we may not feel joy at a particular moment? Do you feel that Judaism is a burden or a gift?