

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Ki Tavo: A Topsy-Turvy World in Need of Humor and Dedication Rabbi Asher Lopatin



*A tribute to Steven Sotloff and
Joan Rivers, of blessed memory.*

What other comedian has the ability to make jokes about a spouse's suicide, the Holocaust, and AIDS without driving away her audience? Over her 50-year career, Joan Rivers, of blessed memory, sensitized us to the important issues of our time. She evolved from talking about the plight of single women to defending the state of Israel in its time of need. She never left our side; she was the face – plastic surgery and Botox aside – of Jewish resilience, representing our ability to face the toughest issues and deal with them, laughing and crying at the same time.

How much more can we cry about the Jew, the Israeli citizen, Steven Sotloff? According to reports, he kept Yom Kippur by feigning sickness and was able to pray toward Jerusalem by following the lead of his brutal captors as they prayed towards Mecca, all in secret. We know that God shed tears at the moment of his beheading, and that a world was destroyed when Steven Sotloff, a"h, was murdered, a Jewish world reflecting the preciousness of each human life.

So it is almost fitting that this week we read the *tocheicha*, two columns of horrific curses given "As you come to the Land" ("Welcome to Judaism!"). Parashat Ki Tavo always comes a week or two before the beginning of the new year. The idea is to chase away the curses of the old year and, in so doing, bring in the blessings of the new one. Amen v'amen this year. I have already mentioned the

death of Joan Rivers, proud Jew, and the tragic and infuriating death of Steven Sotloff, journalist and proud Jew to the end. Sadly, these events are just the tip of the iceberg: the whole world seems to be suffering from terror, Islamic fundamentalism, Russian imperialism, and many other ailments. Some you will find in the newspapers. Many, like the ongoing genocide of the Muslim minority in Myanmar, you will not.

As difficult as they are, the worst thing we can do is avoid or try to evade these curses and hardships. It is not easy, but we can't let them overwhelm us. The history of the Jewish people, while frequently joyous and celebratory, is filled with pain and suffering. We should be strengthened by our history and, as taught by the *parasha*, "enter the land."

As evidenced by my pun in the first paragraph, I'm not on the *madrega* – the level – of Joan Rivers, able to navigate a path through difficulty and suffering with shared laughter. And who can imagine being on the level of keeping Yom HaKippurim when your life depends on your captors' ignorance of your identity and faith? But Joan Rivers' humor and Steve Sotloff's self-sacrifice and devotion to his hidden identity enabled them to live through and in tragedy rather than shrink away from it.

In memory of Steve Sotloff, a"h, and Joan Rivers of blessed memory, and in obedience to our Torah, let us not hide or bury our heads in the sand. Whether through humor, conversation at the Shabbat table, protesting out loud, or through courageous actions, let us make sure we connect with our Torah, with each other, and with our world. Let us laugh and cry, and let us hope that 5775 brings peace and *simcha* for our people.

FROM THE ROSH HaYESHIVA

Mixed Blessings?

Rabbi Dov Linzer

In the middle of the extended section on the calamities and curses that will befall the Israelites if they fail to observe the *mitzvot*, we find a curious set of verses:



Because you served not the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore shall you serve your enemies which the Lord shall send against you, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things (Devarim, 28:47-48).

Not only have we sinned, the Torah seems to be telling us, but we sinned when we had every opportunity to serve God to the best of our ability, when we were prosperous and happy. And so, as a measure-for-measure punishment, we will be stripped of this goodness and left in a state of dependency and want.

Read this way, the message seems to be that it is easier to serve God when all is going well. But is this actually the case? Often, it is exactly the opposite that is true. When we are dependant and in need, we call out to God. It is when we are successful that we tend to forget God. Sometimes this is because we are drawn after hedonistic, or at least materialistic, pleasures. At other times it is because we grow arrogant, thinking, as the verse states, that “it is my power and the might of my hand that has gotten me this wealth” (8:17).

Most of the time, however, it is not so much that we rebel against or reject God but something subtler and, for that reason, all the more pervasive. It is a variation of Pierre-Simon Laplace’s reported response to Napoleon’s question (“But where is God in all this?”) after he had discussed the orbits of Saturn and Jupiter: “Sire, I had no need for that hypothesis.” When we have it good, we have “no need for that hypothesis.” God stops being a present force in our life, stops serving an obvious purpose. It is less about rejecting than it is about ignoring and forgetting.

This is of course a problem that we face today. Overall, we have it quite good. What makes us remember God?

One possibility is the drastic answer presented in our *parasha*: hardship and privation. If the people are taken

as slaves, made naked and starving, they will by necessity turn to God to save them. Even less severe circumstances could lead to a profound sense of dependency. Consider the verse at the end of the section of curses: “And your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall fear day and night, and shall have none assurance of your life” (28:66).

The simple sense of this verse is that every moment you will fear the next tragedy that may befall you. But the Talmud (Menachot, 103b), quoted by Rashi, offers another explanation: “you will not have any stored food, but will have to rely on the baker daily for your bread.”

When Boris Yeltsin visited the United States in 1989, seeing an American supermarket impressed him more than anything else. As is known, in the U.S.S.R., people had to wait in long lines in hopes of receive basic food items, and here all was available for the taking. The AP reports that on returning to Russia he said to his followers, “Their supermarkets have 30,000 food items... You can’t imagine it. It makes the people feel secure.”

It is because of this basic sense of security we all take for granted that it is so hard to see God in our lives. As someone once said regarding why *tefillah* is such a challenge in Modern Orthodox schools: “We are asking the children to pray in a language they don’t understand, to a God they might not believe in, for things they don’t need.” If we are free from basic need, what will make us turn to God?

Undoubtedly, were we reduced to privation and a precarious existence, were our lives “hanging in doubt before us,” we would turn to God on a regular basis. But this is certainly not something we would wish on anyone. There is a reason that this is a curse in the Torah. It is an answer of last resort.

So what then is the ideal solution? An answer can be found in the opening of our *parasha*. There the people are told that they are to bring their first fruits to the Temple and express their gratitude for what God has given them. But it is not just a simple “thank you.” For it is easy to say thank you without any real meaning. The Torah, rather, is teaching us how to say thank you.

Before any thank you is uttered, the person first recites what has brought him to this place – the descent to Egypt, the slavery, the calling out to God, God’s redeeming of the people, and God’s giving the land of

Continued next page...

YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

Israel to the people. We must pause to remember how and when things were different. If our national history is vivid in our memory, if the hardships faced, wars fought, and challenges overcome are in the forefront of our consciousness, then we will know what God has given us and what God is continuing to give to us.

What is the antidote for the concern that we will not serve God *bi'simcha u'bi'tuv levav meirov kol* – in joy and gladness of the heart, from an abundance of good? To learn how to appreciate that what we have is from God. Then, the Torah tells us, using almost identical phrasing, *vi'samachta bi'kol hatov* – you will rejoice in all the good. And it will be a rejoicing that serves God, because you will know that it is *kol ha'tov asher natan likha Hashem E-lokhekha*, “the good that you have been given by God” (26:11).

Of course, this is easier said than done. The point of giving thanks to God is to cultivate this sense of gratitude and blessedness, but it doesn't happen automatically. We have many blessings in our liturgy which can help us do this – the blessings before food, the blessings after food, blessings on good tidings, on wonders of nature – but if these are said mechanically they will fail to shape our religious sensibilities. The lesson from the recital of the first fruits is that we must not pay attention to what we are saying (already a major accomplishment) but also take the time to truly consider how things were different in the past and how things could be different, were we not so fortunate, in the present.

In a way, this is a variation of the line, “Remember that there are children starving in Africa.” As a means of getting a child to eat her food, this statement is probably useless today. But a thoughtful consideration of the privation of others can help a person cultivate a sense of appreciation for the opportunities and advantages that she has been given and a sense of gratitude to God for the blessings that she has received.

This suggests another, related, approach. For in full, the final verse of the first fruits reads thusly: “And you shall rejoice in all the good that God has given you and your household – you, and the Levi, and the stranger in your midst.” The command to share our bounty with those less fortunate is not just an outgrowth of our recognition that our prosperity comes from God. It can actually be the source of this recognition.

If we go out and contribute to the betterment of those who are less fortunate than ourselves, if we approach them not just with sympathy but with empathy, if we put ourselves in their place and understand their realities, then it will not be possible for us to take what we have

for granted. If we spend more time in homeless shelters, in soup kitchens, and in depressed neighborhoods, we will more deeply appreciate what it is that God has given us.

This does not mean that we are to use these individuals instrumentally so that we can feel more blessed. Far from it! Rather, by truly caring and connecting we will naturally appreciate our blessings, and then, just as naturally, we will be led to share these blessings with them since we will know that, ultimately, all these blessings come from God. And then this virtuous cycle will repeat. The more we feel blessed, the more we will give. And the more we give, the more we will feel blessed.

As Rosh HaShannah approaches let us pray that next year will be one of only blessings and prosperity. And let us do what we need to do to be deserving of these blessings. Let us live our lives with the knowledge that what we have is a blessing from God, so that we may truly rejoice in all the good that God has given us – us and the Levi and the stranger in our midst.

GUEST D'VAR TORAH

Ki Tavo

Dr. Michelle Friedman
Chair, Department of
Pastoral Counseling



Ki Tavo is a psychological roller coaster that recapitulates prior spiritual milestones of the Jewish people and then catapults the emerging nation further along the development of individual and collective moral consciousness. We read the *parasha* midway through Elul, when the sun's shifting light reminds us that autumn approaches and the intensity of the high holidays looms ahead. For contemporary readers, Ki Tavo kindles reminiscences of the year gone by, and, at the same time, challenges us to examine our own private moral compasses as well as where we have gone and are going as a people.

Last week's Torah portion ended with the story of *Amalek*, which is also read on *Parashat Zachor*, thus evoking notes of Purim. In those final phrases, the Torah commands us to "remember," "never forget" *Amalek's* treacherous brutality toward our ancestors as they emerged from the psychological and physical slavery of Egypt. Ki Tavo opens with instructions as to how the generation of the desert should bring a first fruits offering when they come into the land of Israel. Now we hear echoes of Passover as we read passages familiar from the opening of the Haggadah, *Arami oved avi*. *Parashat Zachor* issues a double command: to remember and not to forget. Commemoration and not allowing something to recede from active mind can both be understood as simultaneously public and private. So too, the Haggadah spans personal and communal realms as it is designed to provoke personal reactions to concepts of freedom and responsibility which are then shared with a group.

In Ki Tavo, the Jewish people are poised on the brink of

history. They are about to enter the land and become a sovereign nation. For forty years they wandered in a unique society. Basic needs such as food and clothing were taken care of. They lived in camps where not much was private. Moshe's authority came directly from God and his word was absolute. In the land of Israel, the people will have to function on a more mature level. They will spread out and life will be less centralized.

The generation of their parents left Egypt and stood at Sinai but was not able to fully absorb the revelation of Torah. Their spiritual imaginations were limited by slavery and fear. They clamored to return to Egypt and fashioned the golden calf. The generation of Ki Tavo, however, was born in the wilderness and does not directly know the experience of bondage. This generation, then, has capacity for taking responsibility, and that capacity will now be put to the test. The fledgling nation must take responsibility for their destiny as they leave the wilderness, the only environment they have ever known. The inhabitants of the new land will tempt them with idolatry and immorality. The children of Israel need to develop internal spiritual compasses to meet these challenges. They need to make the covenant their own.

Their first assignment demands that they give physical expression to the commandments. The people are to plaster stones and paint the divine laws on them. Next, they must shout the curses that will befall those that violate these injunctions from the mountaintops. These curses all relate to activities that can potentially be done in secret. The group as a corporate whole must be accountable for private sins. Just as the commandments to remember *Amalek* and the exodus from Egypt created a national memory, the capacity to choose behavior that will result in either hideous curses or great blessings now creates a national moral consciousness.

We have to wait until next week to hear the inspiring uplift of *Netzavim*, where the glorious potential of our covenant with God is proclaimed. As we approach Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, may we be blessed to take an inventory of our moral accomplishments and failures as individuals and members of a larger society. May our preparation help us grow and inspire.

YESHIVAT | ישיבת
CHOVEVEI | חובבי
TORAH | תורה

Setting the standard
in rabbinic education