

Parshat HaShavuah

כי תבוא

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Enriching and Enhancing Your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

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## LOST AND FOUND!

RABBI BEN SUGERMAN

The first *aliyah* of this week's parsha sounds familiar. It should- it's the pesukim that we say at the seder on Pesach. In addition to bringing his first fruits, *bikkurim*, to the Beit Hamikdash and handing them to the kohen, a farmer is also obligated to recite four short pesukim that provide a brief historical synopsis of the exodus from Egypt.

The Mishna in the tenth perek of Pesachim tells us that a main part of the mitzvah of telling over the story of Egypt is to recite these four pesukim and provide a midrashic interpretation for these verses. And so we do. Every seder night, we start with the classic *arami oved avi*. Additionally, the Mishna provides a thematic instruction in terms of how to tell the story of the exodus. *Matchil b'genut u'misayem b'shvach*: Start the story on a downer and end on a positive, as any good storyteller knows. The gemara in Pesachim relays a debate over how to properly fulfill this requirement.

One opinion is that we start with the low point of our slavery and finish off with our emancipation, and another opinion is that we start with our spiritual depravity and finish off with our commitment and connection to Hashem. In practice, we do both. One of the opening paragraphs for the Haggadah's Magid section is *avadim hayinu*, while another is *mitchila hayu avoteinu ovdei avodah zara*.

The first opinion is the more logical one. The topic of slavery seems to be more germane to the theme of the evening as we are celebrating our exodus from Egypt. How do we understand the second opinion? Is there any indication in the pesukim themselves that we need to be telling the story going all the way back to Avraham and his father Terach, reminding ourselves that once upon a time we worshipped idols?

Perhaps the answer comes from this week's parsha. As mentioned, the prototype story for *yisvat mitzrayim* is the four pesukim beginning with *arami oved avi*. The Torah provides a very succinct storyline of slavery to freedom.

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## REFLECTION IS KEY

ARIEL BUGAY ('15)

As a senior, I find myself reminiscing about my years spent at WYHS. Similarly, in Sefer Devarim (especially towards the end), we find Moshe recollecting the years in which the Jews traveled in the desert. Even though Moshe might not have been recalling that time he failed his algebra test, or the time he got sent to Rabbi Kroll's (RJK) office, he does mention places the Jews traveled to, their accomplishments, and also their sins as advice and forewarnings for the future.

In Parshat Ki Tavo, the Jews are finally about to enter into the land of Israel. Thus, Moshe gathers the Jews in order to rally and excite them for the ensuing events. However, Moshe possibly gives the worst pump-up speech ever, saying, "You have seen everything that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his slaves and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders. But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear, until this day" (Devarim 29:1-3).

Moshe begins his speech by reminding the Jews of all the miracles Hashem performed from the time of Bnei Yisrael's exodus from Egypt. However, in just the next pasuk, he sounds like a hypocrite. Moshe screams, "HASHEM HASN'T LET YOU UNDERSTAND, HEAR, OR SEE THE MIRACLES BUT STARTING TODAY HE WILL, YAY!!!" It is easy to imagine that a silence has fallen over the camp, until one guy in the back shouts, "Wait, what?! Hashem hasn't let us see His miracles until today? I ate the mun two minutes ago! And even more so, you just said a second ago that we saw everything Hashem did!" There would be an uproar, and everyone would be furious. Yet, that did not happen, so Moshe's pump-up speech must have worked....But how?

The Maharal's approach contains a beautiful lesson. He says that after 40 years of learning from Moshe and seeing the miracles, Bnei Yisrael could finally *understand* them. As the Jews are about to enter Israel, they can now look back at their experiences with an outsider's approach, without bias. They can figure out what they did wrong and understand how amazing the miracles were that Hashem performed, since they are not directly involved in them anymore. It is similar to when you're in summer camp; camp is amazing, but it is not until you leave and you're with your siblings again that you realize how truly amazing it was.

Thus, we learn from the Maharal the importance of reflecting. Now that the Jews are about to go into Israel, Moshe is teaching them this lesson by having them review everything that happened in the desert. He wants them to use all of the good—the miracles they witnessed—to their advantage and abstain from repeating their mistakes. As I reminisce about WYHS, I find myself taking Moshe's advice. I look back at that failed algebra test, and I know now for future tests that I need to study. I look back at my time in Rabbi Kroll's (RJK) office and I say, "Man, I wish I was in here more." What's incredible is that the more one reminisces about the past and figures out how he or she can do better, the more one gets excited about the future. Thus, Moshe's seemingly terrible "pump-up speech" is possibly the best one ever. Though one will never forget the day he played the Titans, he will always remember he needs to work on himself and improve. The way to do that is to take the time to review our actions and commit to correcting our mistakes.


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## THE CHOOSING PEOPLE

MATTHEW SAMILOW ('17)

In the week's parsha, Ki Tavo, Hashem gives the Jewish people a choice: "Obey My commandments and be blessed for eternity...or transgress My words and be cursed" (28:2&15). I believe this choice illuminates why Jews are different from the other nations of the world. It is not arrogant, as the moniker "The Chosen People" suggests, but rather represents a practical difference in how we live our lives. The Sages explain that of all the nations, the Jews were the only ones willing to accept the Torah when given the choice. However, the Jews still refuse to listen to Hashem on several occasions.

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*Samilow continued*

After leaving Har Sinai, they seem to have a change of heart and sin constantly, like with the Golden Calf and the *meraglim*. Eventually, Hashem resolves the issue by punishing Bnei Yisrael and forcing them to wander in the desert aimlessly for 40 years. Why is this important? Here, in Parshat Ki Tavo, Bnei Yisrael are once again on the cusp of entering the Holy Land. God explains the binding contract that will become legal once the Jews cross the Jordan River—"Follow My commandments and be prosperous, or transgress them and be cursed." Although the choice the Jewish people make is important, it is not as important as the simple fact that the Jews again get to choose.

This ability distinguishes us from the other nations as we hold our destiny in our own hands. It is clear now that we are not necessarily The Chosen People, but rather The People Who Get To Choose. Sadly, we do not always make the best choices, which is why in these increasingly morally bankrupt times it is imperative that we embrace our role and truly become an eternal *ohr lagoyim*—a light unto the nations.

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## TRUE HAPPINESS

### YONI MAYER ('18)

This week's parsha discusses the mitzvah of bikkurim, bringing one's first fruits to the Beit Hamikdash. A farmer must thank God for the crops with which he has been blessed. In addition to declaring his gratitude, the farmer must also rejoice, as it says, "You shall be glad with all the goodness that Hashem, your God, has given you and your household" (Devarim 26:11).

Rav Mordechai Gifter asks the obvious question: Why does the Torah have to command the farmer to be happy with what Hashem has given him? Isn't the farmer already joyous enough, bringing his plentiful amount of first fruits to Yerushalayim?

Rav Gifter explains that, unfortunately, a person might not always be satisfied with his crops. A person may travel to Yerushalayim with an ample load of bikkurim and still think to himself, "It could have been better!" He might be jealous of his neighbor's fruits and think, "He had a better season than I did." One can be blessed with the biggest bounty and yet choose not to be happy. For these reasons, the Torah has to instruct people to not only thank Hashem for the generous amount of food He has given them, but to also be genuinely pleased with what they have.

The message of Parshat Ki Tavo is clear. We must be happy with what we have even if it could have been better and even if our neighbor has something better or more. God has His reasons for everything, and we must be happy with everything He bestows upon us.

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## NOTHING IS WRITTEN IN STONE... OR IS IT?

### MICAH TOKAYER ('17)

Have you ever wondered what a most unusual mitzvah is? In this week's parsha, we are commanded to write the Torah *on stones*! The pasuk reads, "You shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah, very clearly" (Devarim 27:8). Normally, the Torah is written on parchment, a stiff material made from the skin of a kosher animal, so why is the Torah commanding us to write on stone?

The Shem MiShmuel explains that there are two ways our heart receives Torah learning. One way relates to parchment, which needs preparation and purification, and the other way relates to stone, which is immune to outside forces and is unchangeable. The more external exhibition of the Jewish heart is very similar to parchment, due to the fact that both are highly impressionable. This means that while the heart can be persuaded in a positive way, it is also defined by its bad influences. It is the very fact that the heart is open to influence that enables it to welcome Torah knowledge and ideals.

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For the most part, these pesukim are very clear, except perhaps for those first three words: *arami oved avi*. What do they mean? Rashi gives the more popular explanation, reflecting the view of the midrash that we say every year at the seder: the "Arami" is a reference to Lavan, who sought to destroy Yaakov. A different explanation is offered by Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam. The "Arami," explains the Rashbam, is a reference to Avraham. The pasuk should be understood as saying the following: our father Avraham, who was from Aram, was wandering and lost, "like a lost sheep looking for its master."

Based on this explanation, we see that the Torah itself--when recounting our story of going into exile--takes us back to Avraham who was wandering and searching for a truth. The exile and slavery is a means and a backdrop to how we eventually discovered that truth. This is further reflected by the fact that our destination after leaving Egypt is Sinai. Revelation becomes a realization of a search for the Divine that traces its way back to the wanderings of our patriarch, Avraham.

One more point to consider... the end of the Magid section concludes with the first two paragraphs of Hallel, which is followed by a break for washing, matzah, maror, and the meal. Later in the evening we resume Hallel with the third paragraph. Is there any significance to stopping after the first two paragraphs? I will suggest that the first two paragraphs are the perfect summation to the dual theme of Magid. For the storyline of how we once served idols, we say *halluelu avdei Hashem*, "we are now the servants of God". For the storyline of how we were slaves to Pharaoh, we say *b'tzet Yisrael mi'mitzrayim*, "As the Jews left Egypt". The orchestrator of the Magid section, sensitive to the dual nature of Magid, carefully selected the first two paragraphs of Hallel to conclude Magid--two paragraphs which embody the essence of both themes!

*Tokayer continued*

The second, more fundamental aspect, is the divine soul, the inner heart, which is completely immune to outside forces. It is the inner, holy part of one's personality that cannot be altered. Stone represents this unchanging element.

As the Jewish people are about to enter Eretz Yisrael, they need a tangible reminder of the correct way to serve Hashem; hence, He commands them to write the Torah on stone. The lesson behind writing the Torah on stone is to awaken a person's innermost feelings and relationship with the Torah.

Ultimately, we write the Torah on both stone and parchment to teach us a lesson about the right way to serve God: we purify our hearts from all negative influence and we reach deep into our souls to connect with Hashem. Let's all serve God with both our hearts and our souls so we can prepare ourselves to experience the depth of Torah and accept the Torah b'levav shalem!

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