

# OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parshah Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

Parshat Ki Tavo

September 4-5, 2009

Elul 15-16, 5769

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## Avishai Don

### A FIRST CHANCE FOR FIRST FRUITS

Everyone has at some point or another felt like an outsider, but after weeks or months of getting adjusted, finding our true friends, and watching our initial awkwardness fade into the background, we tend to forget how difficult it was for us to adapt in the first place. Ki Tavo, this week's Parsha, illustrates a beautiful opportunity to remind ourselves of from where and how far we have come, making it the perfect Parsha for us to welcome the new members of our community who are just starting their journey.

The beginning of Ki Tavo (26:1-11) describes the ritual of Bikkurim, giving thanks to God for the first crop of fruits that have blossomed in the Land. When the Temple stood, a farmer in would take a portion of his ripened fruit and sojourn to Jerusalem. A priest would receive him and his fruits at the Temple, and the farmer would cry out his praise to God for blessing him with the fertile land that made this harvest possible (26:5-10). The beautiful prayer described in this Parsha outlines the emergence of the Jewish nation, detailing the descent to Egypt, the Exodus from Egypt, and the entrance into the Land of Canaan. Strikingly, as opposed to starting from God's first appearance to Abraham, the farmer begins his recounting of Jewish history with the proclamation, "arami oved avi" (26:5).

Midrashically, "arami oved avi" has been inter-

preted to mean, "An Aramean sought to destroy my father," a reference to how Laban (a native of Aram) pursued Jacob after Jacob fled Laban's home. This is indeed how the phrase is expounded in the Passover Haggadah, as a preface for retelling the Exodus.

However, as some commentators point out, "oved" should actually be read as an adjective rather than a verb, thus rendering the phrase to mean, "my father [i.e. Abraham] was a wandering Aramean." As the Mishna in Tractate Pesachim (10:4) relates, the story of Exodus should not begin with "glory," but rather with "disgrace." Before remembering how we became a nation, we must first remember our humble beginnings as soul-searching wanderers. Before remembering the event that made us a cohesive unit, we must remember that we were once aimless individuals struggling to define ourselves.

No matter if we are starting our first year of college or soon to be graduating, we must never forget our incredible, overwhelming, and perhaps sometimes painful entrance into the community in which we now reside. Indeed, perhaps the lesson from the Bikkurim is that by remembering our journey to create ourselves, we will be more able to help out those who are just beginning to shape their molds.

*Avishai Don '12 is a prospective Social Studies or Philosophy Concentrator in Phorzheimer House.*

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## Betty Rosen

While preparing for Freshman Week this summer, I tried to reexamine my own freshman experience. I realized that a crucial step in my acclimation to Harvard was taking a sense of ownership of the place, establishing a feeling of personal connection to the minutiae of life here. Working with the Freshman Week volunteers, I tried to convert that sense of personal possession and comfort into a means of reaching out to the new students. Only recently did I begin to question whether my own sentiments of contentment at Harvard are truly the goal I strive to achieve as a university student.

This week's parsha, Ki Tavo, presents us with a pattern to follow as we progress from alienation to comfort in new surroundings. Opening with the statement, "And it will be, when you come into the land which the Lord, your G-d, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it," the parsha seems immediately to establish a three-staged progression of inheritance, possession, and settling in. This progression is paralleled in several places, including near the end of the first aliyah, when G-d reminds us of the Exodus of Egypt (and necessarily our subsequent claim to the new land), commands us to prostrate ourselves before Him (an act that demonstrates enough comfort with surroundings to allow for a posture of vulnerability), and finally rejoice (a moving beyond mere comfort to share joy with others).

The third stage is the one that is not necessarily intuitive; it entails a giving to others of the comfort and possession that one has achieved. An example appears later in the parsha, in the sentence, "When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give [them] to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat to satiety in your cities." I find most interesting the turn of phrase "your cities" (arecha); the produce is always the grower's, but we take possession of our cities only when we become sufficiently settled in them so as to reach out to others and invite them to partake in our pleasure.

Does this giving only go one way? Or is some sort of reciprocal relationship between individuals, or between us and G-d, necessary in order for us to completely "settle in"? One way in which the parsha addresses this question is to present us with an instance of reciprocation between ourselves and G-d. We read, "You have selected the Lord this day, to be your G-d, and to walk in His ways, and to observe His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and to obey Him" and immediately after "And the Lord has selected you this day to be His treasured people, as He spoke to you, and so that you shall observe all His commandments." This process of mutual selection implies not only that we should

## Betty Rosen (continued)

use our comfort to reach out to G-d and to others but also an affection between ourselves and G-d that I feel can inspire us to a similar affection for one another. Thus, we come to see why the threat of returning the Jews to Egypt if they do not obey the commandments is so horrifying; not only is it a physical return to bondage, but it also marks a temporal reversion, an undoing of a spiritual and emotional journey, of an evolution towards a better relationship with G-d and towards a more caring society.

Still, I feel troubled by the idea that my ultimate goal at Harvard should be resting in a contented state of expertise, advising freshman as though I have reached some level of ultimate understanding. Shouldn't I be continuing to struggle myself? Once again, the parsha gives me a resolution to my dilemma. In the initial presentation of the

"settling in" stage, the parsha describes rejoicing with "the stranger who is among you" and alludes to "the stranger" several times. Thus, over every scene of comfort hangs a shadowy image of insecurity and alienation. I would argue that this feeling comes not only from those around us whom we help to gain comfort, but from within us as well. As we strive to extend our contentedness at Harvard to others, we should always be aware of the part of us that is, and always will be, uncomfortable. Rather than ignoring that fact, we should strive to nurture this sense of newness that will enable us always to be journeying, always to be beginning a progression towards complete ease, and, luckily, never finishing it.

*Betty Rosen '12 is a prospective Literature Concentrator in Leverett House. She was co-coordinator of Freshman Week 2009.*

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## Jeremy Aron-Dine

In the middle of this week's portion Ki Tavo, we find a series of twelve curses pronounced against people who commit various transgressions, such as creating idols, mistreating the blind, and sleeping with prohibited relatives (Deuteronomy 27:15-26). Looking at this text from a contemporary vantage point, it is tempting to divide the prohibitions into three categories: religious prohibitions, ethical rules, and sexual taboos. After all, rules against taking bribes or harming orphans seem to apply universally and to stem from principles of justice, with or without a specific divine injunction, whereas a law against idolatry is dependent on the Israelites' (at that time unusual) belief in a single, incorporeal God. The laws on sexual immorality seem similarly idiosyncratic: while all societies have sexual taboos, they vary from one place and time period to another (in fact, Abraham and Sarah would have been in violation of one of the curses from this portion).

However, the text itself does not seem to make any distinction here among these three categories. Laws on proscribed sexual relations are interspersed with ethical and religious principles, suggesting that we are not meant to see a sharp distinction between them. Given that there is a clear difference in universality among the different types of prohibitions, how can we interpret the fact that the text treats them all in the same way? At first glance, there seem to be two main possibilities: either we should view the particular prohibitions more like the universal prohibitions and try to find ways in which they do not derive merely from the force of these curses, or we should view the universal prohibitions

more like the particular ones and see them as having force only because of divine mandate. If we take the first view, we might take the prohibition against idolatry to be a prohibition against hypocrisy: if we claim to be monotheists, then we cannot go home and worship idols in private. The sexual prohibitions seem more difficult to treat this way, especially when we consider the way they change even within the text of the Torah. On the second view, the reason why witnesses or judges ought not to take bribes merely because God says so, rather than because it perverts our system of justice. This view therefore seems to miss the connections between commandments: each curse stands entirely on its own, rather than forming a part of a plan for a just society, in which even those with little power of their own are treated fairly.

Perhaps the strategy to reconcile these different types of prohibitions is to look at effects rather than justifications. Violations of ethical principles and of communal norms lead to similar responses from the community, just as all of the transgressions listed in this passage receive the same curse. For that reason, the imperative to abide by both is the same, and both sorts of transgressors should be treated in the same way by society. It is tempting to point out, though, that while ethical principles stay relatively constant, we see even within the text of the Torah itself how communal standards can change, so that an action once blessed (or at least neutral) is now cursed.

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We are pleased to announce the return of *Open Scroll*, a forum for discussion about the week's parshah created by and for the Hillel community. We encourage all students to contribute in whatever capacities they can; we welcome all views, backgrounds, and levels of preparation.

*If you would like to contribute to Open Scroll or have questions or comments, please email Nell Hawley '10-11 at [nshawley@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:nshawley@fas.harvard.edu).*