



Parashat Ki Tavo
Fine-Tune Your Spiritual Hearing

by Maggid Jhos Singer on Friday September 08, 2006

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Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8, Shabbat

This week's Torah Portion, Ki Tavo, reads like it might have been penned by Jimmy Swaggart and Charles Bukowski with just a little editing by Stephen King. It is the original 'Hellfire and Brimstone' rant to which all others pale in comparison. Its images of damnation know no bounds; It is one of those bits o' Bible that has fueled the hateful lust of bigots and fundamentalists for centuries. I would go so far as to call it scriptural porn. It's the stuff that usually makes folks like me, a genderqueer Berkeley liberal Jew, run screaming from Judaism, so it's kind of odd to admit that I love this portion. It's scary and exciting and makes me feel like I'm watching a really weird piece of performance art. The trick with this portion is staying cool, not reacting to the surface level ugliness and instead tuning into the God in it. When I read it I try to imagine that I'm hearing a song on a static-ravaged transistor radio, I'm standing amidst a huge noisy crowd, I'm getting jostled around, nearby some wild-eyed preacher is raving into a microphone, *Cursed are you sinner, you will burn for Eternity, you are a perversion*, people are yelling back, I hold the radio up to my ear straining to hear and little by little the song cuts through the din and a big smile spreads across my face... Welcome to this week's parasha.

In brief, this portion tells us that if we are obedient we will be blessed, with the blessings described in one short paragraph. However, if we are not obedient we will be cursed. The Torah then unloads pages of orgiastic curses that we will endure for our transgressions, laid out in graphic, gory detail. It is grating and provocative, and I don't mean in a nice way. Everything about it is repulsive on the surface. One has to wonder why the Torah would include such ugliness.

But read it carefully, and you will first note that the Torah tells us explicitly that the orators here are not God, but Moses and the Elders:

"Moses and the Elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, "Observe the entire commandment that I command you this day." D'varim 27:1



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Perhaps it is simply that Moses, and his cohorts, are on a proto-Pentecostal roll, taking the law into their own hands, so to speak. To his credit, even in the midst of this diatribe, Moses manages to sputter out a key spiritual concept. He says that it is God's voice that we should be listening to (28:15), that we must hear the commands that God is giving us (in spite of Moses' interpretation). Might Moses have been trying to tell us that we have to fine tune our spiritual hearing so that we can know what it is that God wants from us, rather than what other people want from us? Similarly Moses seems to be implying that God speaks to us as individually and if we let someone else do our channeling for us the price we pay will be high.

Additionally, in the midst of describing the litany of ills that will befall us if we don't follow Moses's commandments, there is a sweet dose of wisdom slipped in. Moses says, "You will be mocked and starved, diseased and blighted. You will be so bereft and so debased that you will become the supreme example of human depravity to all other peoples,

"Because you did not serve your Source of Being with gladness and with a full heart when everything was abundant." (Deuteronomy 28:47)

I experience this line as God getting in a word edgewise.

There is much to learn from this raw scripture. Coming out as homo-, bi-, or trans-sexual takes steel and faith. It takes tuning out the hate mongers and spiritual terrorists, and overriding the din of ignorance and fear to find God's message and lock on. Standing up as a Jew, whose faith and ways have been seen as "queer" since we began, takes guts and deep self-knowing. Queer folk, of every stripe, cannot afford to lose our balance. Is it any wonder then, that the Torah includes an opportunity for us to practice listening to the ugliness of degrading threats while training our ears to hear the personal word that God whispers to each of us? After all, didn't our communal revelation on Sinai begin just like this, in the sound and the fury? So we stay calm, focus our hearts and minds and – "*Shema*" – we listen.

And there, in the bang-clanking cawing of curses, we hear some of the most loving words of Torah: *Yea, verily I saith unto you: That you will be destitute, crazed and destroyed if you don't give your self to gladness when times are good.* I hear this line being spoken with love and compassion, I imagine God cradling my head in Its big soft hands and whispering, "Aww now pun'kin, why so angry? Look around, you are healthy, loved, smart, blessed and cute as a bug's ear. Lighten' up and enjoy it baby."

Indeed, the LGBT community has survived, and even thrived, in some part because we know how to party and be glad. We know how to show up with bells on and bring color and music into the world. Every community that has instituted a Pride Parade was initially met with resistance. The megaphoning morality meisters have shown up again and again, bellowing out their messages of loathing and disgust—but they have never been able to drown out Sylvester



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z'l, or Sister Sledge or Barbra or Judy z'l, who have told us in whispers in the dark: *Come on get up and dance because somewhere over the rainbow we are a family of the luckiest people in the world.* We have listened to them and we have danced and we have been glad and we have known that we are not cursed, but so very blessed.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav said, "*Mitzvah g'dolah l'hiyot b'simcha tamid.*" (It's a great mitzvah to insist on gladness.) As this week's teaching reminds us, we must practice being glad when there is something to be glad about. We cannot take a single blessing for granted, *peh peh peh*, lest the challenges and difficulties of being our true Self become overwhelming. We must be astute enough to know who God created us to be, no matter what the imperfect human authorities in our lives would say about it. Even great human leaders sometimes try to scare us into submitting to their ideas of who we should be. But remember: God relies on each one of us to manifest in this world our own unique aspect of It. Be brave, choose life, choose blessing. Tune out the static, listen hard and I'm sure you will hear a still small voice boldly singing "*Eheyeh Asher Eheyeh*"—"I am what I am" (Exodus 3:14/Jerry Herman by way of Gloria Gaynor).



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