

Ki Tavo - When you come
16 Elul 5780 — Sept 5, 2020
Torah: Deu 26:1-29:8
Haftorah: Isa 60:1-22
Apostolic: Rom 11:1-15

Ki Tavo

In *Parashat Ki Tavo* Moses reaches the end of the detailed provisions of the covenant, with commands about bringing first fruits to the central Sanctuary, as well as allocating the various tithes. He closes this section with a reminder of what the covenant is: a mutual pledge between the people and God. The people are to give God their total loyalty. God, in turn, will hold the people in special regard.

The text then turns to the next feature of ancient covenants: the blessings and curses that will attend faithfulness on the one hand, disloyalty on the other. Given that Israel's entire existence as a nation is predicated on the covenant, it means that their fate will be an ongoing commentary on their relationship with God and the ideals, both sacred and social, to which the people have dedicated themselves as "a holy people to the Lord your God" (Deut. 7:6). The *parasha* ends with Moses summoning the people, at the end of their forty-year journey and in sight of the Promised Land, to renew the covenant their parents made with God at Mount Sinai.

The first of the following essays is about the declaration to be made on bringing first fruits, a unique institution that illustrates the connection between memory and identity. The second takes up the theme, noted in earlier essays, about the importance of the verb "to listen" in Deuteronomy, and the absence from biblical Hebrew of a verb meaning "to obey." Here I argue that a proper understanding of the many meanings of *shema* refutes the arguments made by Immanuel Kant against religious ethics. Judaism embodies not only a system of morality but also, and no less importantly, of moral *growth*, not unlike those articulated in modern times by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. The third essay is about the curses in the Torah. Do they mean that Jewish suffering during the many centuries of exile was divine punishment? The fourth essay is about the difference between the curses in Leviticus and those in *Ki Tavo*. Leviticus spoke about the Israelites rejecting the covenant, whereas here Moses merely speaks about their failure to serve God with joy. Why should this be so serious? The last essay is about the nature of the covenant itself, and why language is so sacred in Judaism.¹

History and Memory

By Jonathan Sacks²

The late Sir Isaiah Berlin was one of the great sages of post-war Britain, a brilliant philosopher and historian of ideas, of whom Noel Annan once wrote that he "seems to me to have offered the truest and most moving interpretation of life that my own generation made."³ He did more than most to define the liberalism that took shape in his lifetime, and his lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty" became one of the most famous essays on politics in the twentieth century.

I came to know him late in his life, and in 1997 I asked him whether he would be kind enough to read the book I had just published, *The Politics of Hope*,⁴ and give me his impressions. In it I developed a

¹ Sacks, Jonathan. Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant (Covenant & Conversation Book 5) (pp. 181-182). The Toby Press.

² *ibid* (pp. 183-187). The Toby Press.

³ Henry Hardy, ed., *The Book of Isaiah: Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 15.

⁴ London: Jonathan Cape, 1997.

somewhat different account of the nature of freedom, not because I disagreed with Berlin, but because I felt that times had changed, and the threat to liberty was not what it had been forty years before, when he delivered his lecture. Then, the perceived threat was from communism and the Soviet Union. By 1997, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and the Cold War was at an end. I believed that the new threat had to do with the loss, in the West, of **a shared moral code**. Without morality, societies eventually disintegrate. Individualism becomes so strong that people no longer work for the common good. **They lose the sense of collective responsibility**, and they can no longer muster the energies needed to defend their way of life.

There is an ancient word that describes the bond that holds society together. History has shown, time after time, that without this bond societies collapse.

That word is *tzedaka*. It is a verb, a word of action, and it is about voluntarily giving help to restore fairness and reason. It takes at least three modern words to understand *tzedaka*, those would be charity, justice, and righteousness.

There remains a key difference, however, between the ancient and the modern. In the modern, the idea of charity, justice, and righteousness is framed as a spontaneous reaction. Sometimes called *a stimulus*. In contrast, the ancient concept holds *tzedaka* as an intentional, regulated response born out of ethical principles. Otherwise known as, *collective responsibility*.

It is neither a tax or a gift. Taxes are levied not volunteered, and gifts are often deferred taxes in disguise, neither fair or reasonable. That is why *tzedaka* is called a blessing, because it elevates the recipient and the benefactor.

To be held together we must rise together. We! Not, us and them.⁵

He agreed, and I sent him the book. Months passed and I did not hear from him, so I phoned his home, just outside Oxford, and his wife, Lady Aline, answered. To my surprise, she said, "Isaiah has just been talking about you." "In what context?" I asked, knowing that rabbis were not his usual topic of conversation. "He wants to ask you," she said, "to officiate at his funeral." I rapidly changed the subject, thinking this was far too morbid. Clearly, though, he knew his end was near. Four days later, he died, and I did officiate at his funeral.

In the course of the eulogy, I said that his work had been an ongoing commentary to the story of the Exodus. I knew that Isaiah, though in many respects a secular Jew, was always punctilious in holding a Seder and telling the story. As a child in Riga, he had lived through the Russian Revolution, which is what brought his family to Britain. He knew what totalitarianism could look like, and he had experienced his own personal exodus. He knew also that Judaism was born in the journey from slavery to freedom, and that this was something every Jewish child knew, because of the Seder night and the Haggada.

In one of his relatively few statements about Jewish identity, he wrote this:

All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews are steeped in history. They have longer memories, they are aware of a longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived.... Whatever other factors may have entered into the unique amalgam which, if not always Jews themselves, at any rate the rest of the world instantly

⁵ Commentary inset by Roderick Logan

recognizes as the Jewish people, historical consciousness – sense of continuity with the past – is among the most powerful.⁶

This is surely true, but it elides an important distinction. The best way of seeing this is by way of a paradox. Jews were the first people to find God in history. They were the first to think in historical terms – of time as an arena of change as opposed to cyclical time in which the seasons rotate, people are born and die, but nothing really changes. Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the first historians. Yet **biblical Hebrew has no word that means “history”** (the closest equivalent is *divrei hayamim*, “chronicles”). Instead **it uses the root *zakhor*, meaning “memory.”**

Twenty-one times in Deuteronomy, Moses uses the verb Z-KH-R, to remember. Fourteen times he warns the people not to forget. There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. **History is “his story,”⁷ an account of events that occurred sometime else to someone else. Memory is “my story.”** It is the past internalized and made part of my identity. **History is an answer to the question, “What happened?” Memory is an answer to the question, “Who am I?”** We are what we remember. As with an individual suffering from dementia, so with a culture as a whole: **the loss of memory is experienced as a loss of identity.**

“Broadly speaking, there are two types of memory: those that are explicit and those that are implicit, the former being conscious and the latter relatively unconscious... Conscious explicit memory is only the tip of a very deep and mighty iceberg.”⁸

Examples of an explicit memory are conscious recall of the first time we met someone dear to us or items on a shopping list. Examples of an implicit memory are a sense of familiarity when we catch a whiff of a particular aroma and our ability to perform certain tasks; such as our morning routine after awakening from a night’s sleep, riding a bicycle, or the route you might take driving to work or a store you frequent.

“When we recall a past experience with a subjective sense that we are remembering something, we are retrieving explicit memory... By contrast, implicit memory relates to experiences that are not accompanied by an internal sense that something from the past is being remembered.”⁹

Explicit and implicit memory are two distinct memory systems, fulfilling separate functions in helping a person to navigate life’s challenges, and are regulated by different neuro-anatomical brain structures.

Cultures in which intentionality, purposeful action, and control are given emphasis and priority, tends to ignore the reality of unconscious processes, and the countless aspects of life and functioning over which a person has no conscious control. In other words, the more rigid, inflexible, and higher the expectations to comply and acquiesce the more implicit memory reacts from a base of fear. God is not a tyrant. He is a benevolent teacher, and we are His learners.

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 317.

⁷ This is a simple reminder, not an etymology. *Historia* is a Greek word meaning inquiry. The same word came to mean, in Latin, a narrative of past events.

⁸ Levine, P. (2015) *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

⁹ Ogden, P., Minton, K. & Pain, C. (2006) *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.

Moses' concern with Israel "loosing their memory" is not like loosing your car keys, one moment you have them in hand and the next moment you cannot remember where you left them. The issue is not about forgetting. It is about not remembering, l'dor v'dor. The two are not the same. The loss of national memory is a parenting and leadership issue, failing to teach; demanding compliance and efficiency at the cost of relationships of trust and transparency.¹⁰

That is why a passage in *Parashat Ki Tavo* is so important. It describes the bringing of first fruits to the Temple. This was a dramatic occasion. A mishna in Bikkurim (3:4) describes the joyous scene as people converged on Jerusalem from across the country, bringing their first fruits to the accompaniment of music and celebration. Merely bringing the fruits, though, was not enough. Each person had to make a declaration. That declaration has become one of the best-known passages in the Torah because, though it was originally said on Shavuot, the festival of first fruits, it later¹¹ became a central text expounded in the Haggada on Seder night:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, there becoming a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5–8)

Here for the first time *the retelling of the nation's past became an obligation for every citizen of the nation*. But this passage, known as *vidui bikkurim*, "the confession made over first fruits," was nothing like epic history engraved in stone on the walls of temples or national monuments. Nor was it the neutral, detailed account of events of the kind that the early Greek historians pioneered. It was simple, elemental. It was to be spoken, not read. It is, compressed into the shortest possible space, the entire history of the nation in summary form. In a few short sentences, it outlines

the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic prehistory, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the land of Israel, and throughout – the acknowledgement of God as lord of history.¹²

Most importantly, it is written in the first person: "*My father.... The Lord brought us out of Egypt.*" **This is history transformed into memory. This is not a detached tale of some disembodied past. It is the story of where I came from and who I am.** It is history internalized. It is what led the sages of the Mishna to say, "In each generation, every person should see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt" (Mishna Pesachim 10:5).

¹⁰ Commentary inset by Roderick Logan (except as noted)

¹¹ Some scholars believe that this happened already in Second Temple times.

¹² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 12. 7.

Matthew 5:23 *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there **remember** that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Matthew 16:5 *When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶ Yeshua said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ⁷ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” ⁸ But Yeshua, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹ **Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember** the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How is it that **you fail to understand** that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*

Philippians 2:12 *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed (shema), so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation** (yeshua) with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

It is impossible to overestimate the impact this had on the Jewish people from then to now. Identity is not just a matter of who my parents were. It is also a matter of *what they remembered and handed on to me*. Personal identity is shaped by individual memory. Group identity is formed by collective memory.¹³ The mere act of telling the story, regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood – land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination – and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign, where God alone is king.

In our time, it has been the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who has emphasized the importance of narrative to the moral life. “Man,” he writes, “is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” It is through narratives that we begin to learn who we are and how we are called on to behave. **“Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”¹⁴ To know who we are is in large part to understand of which story or stories we are a part.** Moses wanted the people never to forget of which story they are a part.

Jews have told the story of who we are for longer and more devotedly than any other people on the face of the earth. That is what makes Jewish identity so rich and resonant. In an age in which computer and smartphone memories have grown from kilobytes to megabytes to gigabytes, while human memories have become foreshortened, this remains an important message, not just to Jews but also to humanity as a whole. You can delegate history to computers, looking it up when you need it. But you cannot delegate memory. **Memory is inherently, inescapably personal. It is what makes us who we are. If you seek to sustain identity, you have to renew memory regularly and teach it to the next generation.** That is what Moses taught the Israelites, and what we have done ever since.

¹³ The classic works on group memory and identity are Maurice Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Jacques le Goff’s *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

The gift of collective memory is precious. Winston Churchill once said: “The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward.”¹⁵ Those who tell the story of their past have already begun to build their children’s future.

¹⁵ Chris Wrigley, *Winston Churchill: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002), xxiv.