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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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Parshat Ki Tavo

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FINE PRINT

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is nothing more disheartening than a curse. And this week the Torah singles out specific violations that are worthy of the epithet, “cursed is he who...” The Torah tells us that the nation was divided into two parts. Six tribes stood on Mount Grizim, and the rest stood on Mount Ebal. The Levites began to specify the sins that the Torah prefaced with the harsh warning, “accursed is one who,” and the nation would respond amen. Included among the terrible crimes are one who moves his neighbors’ boundary and one who misleads a blind man on the road. The curses also include carnal sins and striking a person covertly (Deuteronomy 27:12-25). In fact, almost each curse is directed toward a sin that entails some degree of surreptitiousness. All except the final curse, “Accursed is the one who does not uphold the words of the Torah to perform them” (Deuteronomy 27:26). Rashi explains the last admonition as a general warning to heed all the laws in the Torah lest one suffer the curses.

The Ramban, however, softens Rashi’s severe interpretation. He explains that the curse is not cast on one who actually commits a sin, but rather on those who scoff at the validity of the Torah’s laws.

Following his simple explanation, the Ramban writes something startling. “It appears to me that the words ‘accursed is the one who does not uphold the words of the Torah’ refers to one who is called upon to do the hagbah ceremony in the synagogue and does not stretch out the Torah wide enough for the congregation to see the words.”

For years I was terribly disturbed by that explanation. I could not fathom the sense of comparison. How can the Ramban equate one who does a poor hagbah with those who surreptitiously undermine the welfare of their neighbor or create clandestine instability within the family? How can we attribute the harsh words of accursed to one who does not have what it takes to do a proper hagbah?

On a whistle stop tour during his term in office Calvin Coolidge’s train stopped in St. Louis where a crowd of nearly 2,500 people gathered to hear him. He was sleeping in his rail car when the train stopped at the station and Colonel Starling, Coolidge’s personal assistant and agent-in-charge, nudged him awake. “Mr. President,” he said while tapping him on the shoulder, “there are almost three thousand people who are waiting to hear you!” The remarkably restrained Coolidge and the first lady stepped out onto the train’s observation platform. The crowd applauded wildly. Then the local master of ceremonies called for silence. “The President is about to speak now!” The President stood silently with his wide smile. He straightened his jacket and smoothed his hair and appeared very presidential. The crowd waited anxiously for him to begin his speech. The President waited, too. Just then, there was a hiss of air as the brakes were released and the train began pulling away from the station. The President, still smiling, raised his hand, waved, and spoke. He said, “Goodbye.”

Perhaps the Ramban is telling us more. When one displays the parchment of the Torah but does not unfurl the columns, he deprives a congregation of seeing the true essence of Torah. He parades with a Torah scroll with the shiny handles and the traditional parchment. It looks beautiful, and majestic. It even looks very Jewish. And the crowd waits for the real context to be shown and seen. But if those columns are not unfurled for the congregation to read, the stark reality of G-d’s command is hidden behind the splendor of the moment. The one who does hagbah is in effect misleading the blind, sneaking a false border and making overt displays of honesty that are rife with deceit. For in reality a serious truth is being underhandedly hidden. And for that, the Ramban links him with the definitive consequences of those who morally deprave Torah ideals. Obviously, one who proudly unfurls the truth and tells the story as it appears, is worthy of the greatest blessings offered in the Torah. For there is no greater blessing than the open honesty and true teaching of Hashem’s will. Lifting a Torah, unopened, in front of a waiting audience is nothing more than disappointing an excited crowd who are waiting for a substantive speech. You may be waving enthusiastically, but all you are saying is goodbye.

Thanksgiving: A Jewish Perspective

By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg

We, the American citizenry, are a thankful lot. Our calendar is dotted with days when we express our gratitude to various individuals and entities. On Veterans Day, we thank the members of the Armed Forces for their dedicated service. On Memorial Day, we show our gratitude to those courageous men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice while defending our liberties and democratic lifestyle. On Labor Day, we express our appreciation to the industrious American workforce, the people who keep the wheels of our economy turning. On other selected days, we pause to thank different historic individuals who have made valuable contributions to our nation.

And then there is Thanksgiving. The day when we thank G-d for enabling all the above—and for all else He does for us.

There is no doubt that this great country's historically unprecedented success and prosperity is due to the fact that its Founding Fathers recognized that there is a Supreme Being who provides and cares for every creature. They understood that since G-d sustains and gives life to every being, it follows that every being has certain "unalienable rights" upon which no government can impinge.

These strong morals upon which our republic was founded express themselves to this day in American life. Looking at the dollar bill and seeing "In God We Trust" is a reassurance that, as a people, we still recognize and acknowledge the Source of all our achievements.

As Jewish citizens of this land, we always look to the Torah for a deeper perspective and additional insight. What light does the Torah shed on the wonderful trait of thankfulness?

Actually, there is one particular mitzvah which is completely devoted to expressing gratitude—the mitzvah of *bikkurim* (Deuteronomy 26:1–12). During the Temple era, every farmer was commanded to bring to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem the first fruits which ripened in his orchard. There he would recite a passage thanking G-d for the Land and its bountiful harvest, and the fruits were given to the *kohanim* (priests). The Midrash extols the great virtue of this mitzvah, going so far as to say that the Land of Israel was given to the Jews as a reward for the mitzvah of *bikkurim* they would observe after entering the Land!

While the importance of expressing deserved gratitude is self-understood, it is difficult to comprehend the special significance of *bikkurim*. Isn't the Jewish day jam-packed with "thank you's"? The first words we utter when waking in the morning express our thanks to G-d for returning our souls to our bodies. Thrice daily during the course of prayer, we thank G-d for everything imaginable. Before and after eating, we thank G-d for the food. There is even a blessing recited upon exiting the restroom, thanking G-d for normal bodily function!

With all the thanking which occurs on a daily basis, why the need for a specific mitzvah to emphasize the point? And why the great reward for this particular form of expressing thanks?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out one obvious difference between *bikkurim* and all the other ways we thank G-d: *bikkurim* involves more than just words—it requires a commitment; the gratitude must express itself in deeds. *Bikkurim* implies that our thankfulness to G-d cannot remain in the realm of emotions, thoughts, or even speech, but must also move us to action.

While the mitzvah of *bikkurim* in its plainest sense is not practicable today, its lesson is timeless. Our gratitude to G-d must express itself in the actions of our daily life. Giving back the "first of our fruit," the choicest share of the crop, is the only appropriate way to thank G-d for giving us *all* our fruit.

Cultivating Gratitude

by Rabbi Ron Jawary

One of the underlying themes of the Torah is the importance of developing a sense of gratitude, both to God for all the blessings He has given us, and to anyone who does anything for us.

In fact, the Torah tells us that gratitude is one of the keys to experiencing real joy in life and the means by which we can live our lives to the fullest. That is one of the reasons why the first word that a person is expected to say in the morning is "thank you" -- to be grateful for another day of life and to put us in the right frame of mind for the day ahead.

This week's Torah portion tells us three times that the key to experiencing real joy in life is through gratitude and the cultivation of a good heart (Deut. 26:11, 27:7, 28:47). The essence of a good heart is an intrinsic ability to share with others. In fact, one of the reasons why it "isn't good for man to be alone" is because you can't live in God's presence -- or, in fact, in anyone's presence -- if you are unable or unwilling to share, and in order to share, you must have a sense of gratitude and a good heart.

The Talmud teaches us that in physical, mundane matters we should always look at those who have less than us, but in spiritual and moral matters we should always look at those who have more. This will inspire us to be grateful for all our blessings, while at the same time inspire us to become better people and leave our mark on the world.

Interestingly, you will notice that those who really inspire us and who are truly happy usually happen to be those who are grateful for everything they have and who can give graciously of life's gifts.

G-d in the Fast Lane

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Can one plan to be blessed? Obviously, we believe that when we live life as G-d intended us to, we will find or lives blessed in many ways. Even if we do not always see the results tangibly or immediately, we certainly are aware of many blessings that come with the territory of leading a G-dly life. But there is a verse in our Parshah, which promises us blessings we never even dreamed of.

If you will listen to the voice of G-d... and observe the commandments... All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you... (Deuteronomy 28:2)

What does it mean that blessings will overtake you? Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, one of the classic Biblical commentators, suggests that it means you will be blessed even when you made no effort to seek those blessings. It will come out of the blue, an unexpected windfall.

The story is told of the saintly Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev that he once saw a young man running down the street. The Chassidic master stopped him and asked, "Where are you running?" The fellow answered, "To make a living, rabbi." To which the Berditchever responded, "So how do you know that your living lies in that direction and you're running after it? Perhaps your livelihood is to be found in the opposite direction, and you're running away from it?"

Do we ever know for sure? How often do the best laid plans of mice and men come to naught? Haven't we all had the experience of trying our hardest to do a deal, and yet with all the planning and strategizing nothing whatsoever materialized? And on the other hand, there may have been times when we put no work into it at all and suddenly from nowhere we landed the deal of the year? The truth is we don't know where the blessing of our livelihood lies.

And so it is with spiritual blessings. There are times when we make the effort and remain uninspired and there are times when we become inspired effortlessly. According to the Baal Shem Tov, our unconscious soul may hear something on a higher plane and it filters down to our conscious soul and we are touched, moved or inspired.

We live in an era of much confusion. Many are lost, floundering about in spiritual wildernesses. But many are finding themselves too. There have been many who didn't necessarily go looking for G-d but G-d found them. "How did you get inspired?" "To tell you the truth, I'm not really sure. I was minding my own business and I bumped into this Rabbi." Or, "I was sitting next to this fellow on the plane..." Or, "I was just a tourist at the Western Wall but something moved me." Everybody has a story. In some stories we went looking for G-d, in others He came looking for us. So if you feel the spirit overtaking you, don't speed up. Slow down. Let it catch up with you. May the blessings of G-d overtake you and transform your life.

“It will be when you enter the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance and you possess it and dwell in it” (26:1)

In the opening section of this week’s parsha, the Torah repeats over and over again that Eretz Yisrael is “the land that Hashem gives to you.” This is meant to reinforce our knowledge of the fact that we do not possess Eretz Yisrael because we are strong and mighty, but only as a gift from Hashem. The retention of this gift is dependent on our continued obedience to the One who gave it to us. That is why this repetition is found specifically in the laws of **ביכורים**, the first fruits. One must dedicate the first fruits of his crop to Hashem and bring them to the **בֵּית הַמִּדְשָׁן** in recognition of the fact that everything in our possession comes to us as a gift from Hashem. The Sifri says on this posuk that the connection between the gift of Eretz Yisrael and the mitzvah of **ביכורים** is that in the merit of giving **ביכורים**, the Jewish people would receive the land. The obvious question is that **ביכורים** only apply in Eretz Yisrael. How could they give **ביכורים** prior to entering the land in order to earn entry to it? The Yalkut Maamarim says that it was not necessary to have actually performed the mitzvah of **ביכורים**. The Sifri means to say that they would receive Eretz Yisrael as a reward for accepting to fulfill the mitzvah when it would become applicable. This acceptance was done by internalizing the mitzvah’s underlying reason, the understanding that Hashem gives us the land as a gift. The merit of such a commitment is sufficient in order to earn the right to Eretz Yisrael. (See also a similar Rashi in Shemos 12:28.) We learn from this that when one accepts to fulfill a mitzvah, it is considered as if he already did the mitzvah. Thus, if a person makes a commitment on Rosh Hashana to do certain mitzvos or to improve in certain areas in the coming year, it may be considered as if he has already done those good deeds.

“You have distinguished Hashem today to be a G-d for you and to walk in His ways and to observe His decrees, His commandments and His statutes and to hearken to His voice” (26:17)

The Sefer HaChinuch (611) counts the obligation “to walk in His ways” and a positive commandment. He writes that, in order to fulfill this mitzvah, all of our actions must be carried out with kindness and compassion at all times, as Hashem acts in this way. If any part of our behavior does not live up to this standard, we have transgressed the commandment to walk in Hashem’s ways and to imitate Him. When we act unkindly to others, it is not just impolite. It is a transgression of a Torah commandment. The mitzvah to act with chesed applies constantly and at all times.

“You shall observe the words of this covenant and you shall perform them, so that you will succeed in all that you do” (29:8)

Based on this posuk, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 99b says that one who teaches someone else’s child Torah, it is as if he has made the child into his own. “Observing the words of the covenant” refers to the study of Torah because through studying the laws we are able to fulfill the Torah and bring about the ultimate purpose of mankind. “Performing them” can be taken to mean “making them,” i.e. creating the one who is the recipient of your teachings. Since the teacher helped the child grow and shaped him, he is entitled to consider him as his child. A person’s completion is not just through his physical existence. It is through his reaching his purpose in life. If one guides him there, it is as if he created him. Perhaps this idea can help us understand a Gemara in Avoda Zara 9a, which describes the first 2,000 of world history as “nothingness,” i.e. devoid of Torah, and the second 2,000 years as an era of Torah. The turning point and the beginning of Torah is when Avraham Avinu was 52 years old. It was at this age, says the Gemara, that Avraham began teaching the world about the existence of Hashem. Incidentally, this is described by the posuk as “the souls that he made” (Bereishis 12:5) and is also mentioned in the previous line of the Gemara in Sanhedrin 99b as one who is considered to have created his students. It is neither Avraham’s birth nor his recognition of a Creator that ushered in the era of Torah, but the moment that he began to share this knowledge with others. Perhaps this teaches us that the study of Torah only fulfills its fullest potential when it is shared with others. Many people have the opportunity to teach others Torah. They must realize that teaching others is tantamount to having created them and shaping their souls. This should give teachers a better appreciation for the importance of their work. People who are capable of teaching should look for opportunities to give of themselves and their time to share their knowledge with others who need guidance.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Sweet Smell of Success

By Sheldon Stern

Chaim took an extended hiatus from his shul and after three years of traveling and business he returned to a warm greeting from his beloved Rabbi, "Nu Chaimel, vus mahts di?"(how are you doing?"") Rabbi, I couldn't be better. I got this broker. He's unbelievable. Gets me in on all the hot stocks before anyone hears about them, my portfolio is through the roof. "So how are you doing?" the Rabbi asked again. I'm glad you asked. I went to the Princeton Longevity Center this week and I'm in tip-top condition. They put me through a battery of tests and it cost me a small fortune, but the doctor said my internals are like someone in his 30's and I'm 73 years young. Baruch Hashem the Rabbi responded and then asked, "But Chaimel vus macht di?" Chaim's quizzical look prompted the Rabbi to explain. The Gemara says, "Hakol Bidei Shamayim Chutz Miyiras Shomayim." So when you tell me you're well off. that's from Hashem. And when you tell me you're in excellent health that's also from Hashem. But I want to know how YOU are doing. Our Parsha addresses this issue.

Last Shabbos morning I attended Rabbi Zelikowitz's minyan and he told an interesting story. He has a family member who's well-off but non-observant(Ain Bayis Asher Ain Shom Mes). The Rabbi's mother gave this fellow some Mussar, "You're someone who's risk averse. Using that approach you amassed a "farmeigens" focusing on investment vehicles which rarely, if ever, failed. This said, why do you take such a risk with Olam Habo. If we're right you'll lose everything." Now obviously these words went in one ear and out the other. The silent Holocaust that followed WWII is far worse than what Hitler perpetrated. How can I say such a thing? It's Mifurash a Rashi in Parshas Ki Teitzei that one who harms someone spiritually is worse than one who does him physical harm. The six million are safely ensconced in Olam Habo, but there are no such assurances for those who spend their lives pursuing Sheker and vices.

So is there a solution? The last verse of our Parsha gives us some insight. Moshe tells the nation, "If you keep the covenant you'll be successful in everything you do." Normally the word for successful is Matzliach. Indeed Sefardim use a Siddur called Ish Matzliach, a reference to Yosef Hatzaddik who proved that one can succeed in the material world while remaining steadfast in his devotion to Hashem and His Torah. And in doing so, he established a paradigm that luminaries like Rambam and Abarbanel followed. Our Parsha however, uses the word, "Tazkilu" whose root is Seichel. So Moshe was saying that the secret to success is that one must think. He has to take stock of himself and understand where his life is going. As Dylan wrote, "How does it feel to be on your own with no direction home like a complete unknown like a rolling stone?" There has to be a direction in your life. If Hashem has blessed you with wealth use it for the right purposes and one can't reject the Torah as did Rabbi Zelikowitz's relative. George Harrison has a lovely post-Beatles song, "Living in the Material World" which is an unabashed attack of Gashmius. As an example, "When I'm living in the material world, not much giving in the material world, got a lot of work to do, try to get a message through and get back out of this material world." Judaism rejects this all-or-nothing approach. Rashash was an extraordinarily successful businessman who produced the most sublime Torah so the two can coexist, but one must have his priorities in order. Former Mayor Koch's catchline was, "How'm I doing?" He asked that question rhetorically but when G-d gave him the answer it was too late. Just saying.

A Tale of Two Tochachas

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Chaza”l in many places contrast the Tochacha of Parshas Ki Savo with that of Parshas Bechukosai [end of Leviticus, as above]. There is a significant difference between the two. At the end of the Tochacha of Parshas Bechukosai, the Torah ends the Curse with words of consolation: “And I will remember for them my covenant with Yacov, and even my covenant with Yitzchak, and even my covenant with Avraham I will remember, and I will remember the Land” [Vayikra 26:42].

The Tochacha in this week’s Parshas Ki Savo, however, ends off on a terrible note. “The L-rd will return you to Egypt in boats along the path that I said to you ‘You will no longer see it’; and you will be offered for sale to your enemies for slaves and handmaidens and no one will even want to buy you (v’ein koneh).” [Devorim 28:68]. That is how the Tochacha ends. This is strange. At least the Tochacha in Bechukosai ends on a positive note. G-d promises us that He’ll remember us. The Tochacha in Ki Savo ends with the ominous promise “You’ll be sold and people won’t even want to buy you”.

The Zohar HaKodosh writes: “This question was asked in the study hall – how come the Tochacha in this week’s parsha has no consolation at the end and the Tochacha in the book of Vayikra has a consolation at the end?”

Rav Shimeon Bar Yochai provides an answer. The Tochacha in Sefer Vayikra needs a consolation, but the Tochacha of this week’s Sedra needs no consolation, because included in the words of this week’s Tochacha we already have the biggest comfort.

What is this big comfort? The Zohar HaKodosh explains that the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai contains the terrible words “And if you will walk with me out of happenstance (keri) so too I will walk with you in a wrath of happenstance (keri)” [Vayikra 26: 27-28]. My relationship to you, G-d tells the Jewish people, will be reciprocal. If you show no concern for My ‘needs’, I will show no concern for your needs. This week’s portion, however, has the comforting expression “The L-rd will smite you...” [Devorim 28:27] – G-d Himself will smite you. This is this biggest consolation.

What is the Zohar HaKodosh saying? Rav Meir Bergman says that the worst thing that can happen to the Jewish people is that they can be left on their own. If Klal Yisroel, the Nation of Israel, acts as if the Ribono shel Olam [Master of the World] is not an integral part of their life, then the Ribono shel Olam’s response will be “I’m going to step back and I’m going to let Teva (nature, statistics) take its course. Teva will take care of you.” This is terrible. When that happens, the bond between G-d and Klal Yisroel is broken. There is no longer that closeness.

However, when the Ribono shel Olam ‘smites,’ even though it is a ‘klap,’ a smack – that in itself is a consolation, because at least we know that there is that relationship. Albeit it is a relationship of punishment, but it nevertheless is a relationship. Who feels more alone? The child who gets spanked when he misbehaves, or the child who has no father, Heaven forbid, to spank him?

The Tochacha in Bechukosai is the story of a people without a father, Heaven protect us; a father who stands in the background and lets whatever that happens, happen. The Tochacha of Ki Savo, however, is “The L-rd will Smite you” – I’ll ‘klap’ you, but at least you will know that there is someone concerned and taking care of you. Hitting you, but taking care of you, nevertheless. The Talmud says in Brachos [7b]. “A Psalm of David (Mizmor l’Dovid) when he was fleeing before Avshalom, his son”. [Tehillim 3:1] The Gemara asks, should we call this a Mizmor (Psalm of praise) of Dovid? It should be called a Dirge of David (Kinah l’Dovid)! The Gemara answers that when G-d had prophesized to Dovid, “Behold I will raise up evil against you from the midst of your house” [Shmuel 2 12:11], Dovid feared that it would be a slave or a mamzer, but when he saw it was his own son, Avshalom, he was greatly relieved and said a Psalm to G-d.

Rabbi Yonason Eibshitz explains in his Yearos Dvash that for a slave or a Mamzer to rebel, that is Teva — that’s natural. The last thing Dovid HaMelech [The King] wanted was that his relationship with G-d would be a Teva relationship, subjecting him to the whims and statistics of nature. However, if his own son rebels, it is apparent that the punishment came from the ‘Hand of G-d’. The fact that G-d Himself is doing the punishing, Himself, is the biggest consolation and source of comfort. That is why Chaza”l tell us that the Tochacha of Parshas Ki Savo needed no consolation. Since it was clear that G-d, Himself, was administering the punishment, we need no consolation. The Tochacha of Vayikra, however, where G-d ‘steps aside’ and lets nature take its course, needs consolation.

The Kotzker Rebbe, zt”l, once said that the month in which the most tragedies befall the Jewish people is called, of all things, the month of “Av” (father). The Kotzker explained that from a smack, one can recognize a father. From our extraordinary national tragedies we have built-in consolation — we know we still have a Father in Heaven who is concerned with our behavior.