

**Parshat Ki Tavo:**  
**Acquiring a Heart That Knows**  
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*Ki Tavo* is a challenging *parsha*, rife with searing *tochecha* (castigation) from God to the Jewish people. To those who follow in God's ways, God promises "all the blessings" (Deuteronomy 28:2). But woe to those who do not. "All of the curses shall come upon you and overwhelm you" (Deut. 28:15).

On the other side of this nightmarish depiction, drawing our *parsha* to a close, a more temperate scene is described. Nearing his death yet further, Moshe assembles the Jewish people and states the following:

(1) Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: (2) the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. (3) Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart/mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. (4) I led you through the wilderness forty years... (Deut. 29:1-4)

א ויקרא משה אל-כל-ישראל ויאמר אליהם אתם  
 ראיתם את כל-אשר עשה ה' לעיניכם בארץ  
 מצרים לפרעה ולכל-עבדיו ולכל-ארצו: ב  
 המסות הגדולת אשר ראו עיניך האתת  
 והמפתים הגדלים ההם: ג ולא-נתן ה' לכם לב  
 לדעת ועינים לראות ואזנים לשמע עד היום  
 הזה: ד ואולך אתכם ארבעים שנה במדבר...  
 (דברים כט: א-ד)

Having offered a picture of the twisted place that their collective journey could end, Moshe reminds the people where it all began—in Egypt, a land of oppression but also a site of miracle. It was in Egypt that the Israelites first bore witness to God's might and majesty. There they became acquainted with the divine through "wondrous feats." There they "saw...before [their] very own eyes" the reality of God.

Or not.

Despite the Torah's repeated references, in verses 1-2, to "*re'eyat eynayim*," to the vision of the eyes, the very next verse makes a stark claim to the contrary.

Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart/mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

ולא-נתן ה' לכם לב לדעת ועינים לראות  
 ואזנים לשמע עד היום הזה:

You might have had some unusual sense perceptions, Moshe seems to be telling the people, but recognize now, 40 years later, that you did not, could not, really see then. You did not fully understand the ramifications of your experience, or its complexity or its depth. You did not know the God whose power you observed, and so you could not synthesize the meaning of all that you encountered. Only after years of walking together in the desert can you now begin to see and hear and understand. Only now.

This means that all those years spent wandering were years of relationship-building, but not years of intimate knowing. At Mount Sinai, amidst of the chaos of thunder, lightening, and the booming voice of the divine, the Jewish people did not *really* hear God. In the barren expanses of the desert, as wells sprung up and manna fell down, they did not *really* see the hand of God. And as they came to know the laws of God, they did not *really* open their hearts to the love of God. Only on the other side of this hard, uneven journey--and on the other side of God's expressions of both extreme beneficence and extreme ferocity--would the Jewish people finally come into consciousness of the fullness of God, in both heart/mind and body.

Based on this assertion of the necessity of time for the cultivation of a "knowing heart" (*lev la'daat*) and "seeing eyes" (*eynayim lir'ot*), Raba, in Tractate Avodah Zara, deduces the following:

Said Raba: From this you can learn that it may take one forty years to know the mind of one's master. (BT Avodah Zara 5b)

אמר רבה, ש"מ: לא קאי איניש אדעתיה דרביה  
עד ארבעין שנין. (עבודה זרה ה:)

Real learning of any kind does not come easily, neither from on high nor down below, he argues. Relationships of trust must be built. Ideas must marinate. No amount of pyrotechnics can shock a person into wisdom. It can only be acquired painstakingly, laboriously, and, most importantly, slowly. Hence a student can only begin to understand the fullness of her teacher's mind after decades at her side. Only in the precious mix of deep relationship and deep ideas can eyes actually open.

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This message serves as a fine counterbalance to the sometimes frenetic energy that frequently characterizes the run-up to the high holidays and the holidays themselves. The call for *teshuva* (repentance) asks us all to believe in the power of transformation; to embrace the possibility that people can change, that relationships can change, that healing and wisdom and understanding can be achieved through intense inner-work and copious prayer, all performed within a matter of weeks. "There are those who can acquire the world-to-come instantaneously [lit. in one hour]," "יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת," cries Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (BT Avodah Zara 10b, 18a). And indeed, some really can alter their very beings, and open their eyes, ears, and hearts on account of a moment of truth. The season of self-reflection welcomes just that.

But perhaps our *parsha* comes on the precipice of Rosh Hashanah to remind us of the other half of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi's statement:

...And there are those who acquire the world-to-come over time [lit. in several years]. (BT Avodah Zara 10b, 18a)

... ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים.  
(עבודה זרה י: , יח.)

It's okay to slow down, he indicates. It's okay to take your time. The path toward God or wisdom or transformation or healing can be meandering, hard, laborious, and lengthy. It might be characterized by misperceptions, times when we think we see clearly when in fact we are still in the dark. It might be full of misunderstandings and blunted hearts. It might take years, a whole lot of years, to get it right. That effort is also *teshuva*.

The Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Neibuhr comes to mind:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
 Courage to change the things I can,  
 And wisdom to know the difference.

In that spirit, may we grant ourselves, this holiday season, the permission to slow down where necessary, the drive to truly see and to listen where possible, and may we be granted a "*lev la'daat*," a knowing heart, to discern the difference.



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