

Ki Tavo 5780  
Overcome by a Little Good  
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Parashat Ki Tavo comes to us as Moshe is giving the nation of Israel final instructions, summations, and moral enhancements of earlier laws, before they cross the Jordan and settle the land of Canaan. So much collective energy will be demanded of them and Moshe wants to make sure they understand how high are the stakes if they do not follow the sacred covenant and way of life to which they are accountable.

So it strikes me as strange and really quite touching that they should be given the particular ritual of the *bikurim*, first fruits, at this particular moment. Moshe tells the people: "Take some of every first fruit of the soil...put it in a basket and go to the place where God's name is celebrated in ritual. When you get there, find the priest in charge, and state your purpose. The priest will then take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar. And then, you will recite a particular formula that I'm about to teach you. It expresses your humility and gratitude for those first fruits" (based on Deuteronomy 26:1-5).

Suddenly the reader's eye has shifted its focus from destroying the nation of Amalek to this personal, humble, pilgrimage, sweet and delicate in detail. One can imagine the farmer gently loading those precious fruits into a basket, covering them gently with a cloth, and then handing them over with reverence and joy, hoping they will find favor and that the very act of presenting them will be received with kindness and blessing.

We are living in a moment when a simple gesture like delivering a basket of fruit and handing it over directly to another person can be a profoundly moving activity. Our in-person interactions with other people are few and far between. The places that help us feel God's presence, like this sanctuary, are largely off-limits due to a pathogen that limits us to a bare minyan in this beautiful sanctuary, a minyan comprised of people who may only show half their faces and are not allowed to sing. How joyful it would be for us to approach one another with a basket of just-picked fruit and share a sacred, grateful moment together--plain, simple, and unmasked.

Yet we do have blessings to count, and this Shabbat is a great day to open our hearts to those blessings.

An amazing feature of gratitude for seemingly small things

is its power, not only to change our emotional, mental, and even physical state, but also to move us to extend blessing to others. When we realize that even something as small as a basket of fruit comes to us by the grace of God, we are moved to feel compassion for those who feel, and are, less fortunate than we.

The *bikurim* come as a result of a long chain of events. The formula the farmer would recite refers all the way back to Yaacov, saying: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with nothing, but there he became a great and prosperous nation. When the Egyptians dealt harshly with us, and oppressed us, we cried out, and Lord heard us, and saw our misery. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and wonders. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, here I am, with the first fruits of the soil with which God has blessed me" (Deuteronomy 26: 5-10).

So much national history, collective experience stored in his cultural DNA, internalized and stored up in this one farmer. So much awareness of how little our own agency has to do with what we are fortunate enough to receive. So much opportunity for empathy with those who are oppressed. So much gratitude poured over a little basket of fruit.

We can learn a lot right now from a teaching that takes a break from national existential issues on the verge of conquest to savor the anticipation of that depth of gratitude, especially when we are living through a time when so much feels uncertain, lonely, and just plain wrong.

An 18th century hasidic work known as the *Degel Machaneh Efraim* picks up on the power of radical gratitude from this narrative of *bikurim*. The author notices the word used to describe the harvest. The text could have said, "When you harvest from the land, take some of the first fruits," but instead it goes out of its way to say this: "Take some first fruit that will come from your land" (Deuteronomy 26:2). The fruits will come, and the farmer is to lift up what has come to him. It's just a little produce, but the *Degel Machaneh Efraim* says, "Notice that the fruits don't just grow, and they are not just picked. The fruits will **come**. The word "will come--תבוא in Hebrew--also means "to overcome." With that in mind, the produce overcomes the farmer. We, too, can seek to notice and be shaken by the blessings that come to us, the small miracles that don't have come, but by some entwined trajectory of history and spirit, they do. When we notice them, we would do well to feel that they are so precious that if we could, we would place them in a basket and share our good fortune in the holiest place on earth.

I invite us all to try living into the idea of letting one small good thing overcome us this Shabbat. Try to remember. When you pick up one thing today--be it a piece of challah or fruit, an article of clothing you really like, a book, or a pair of sunglasses, take a moment to savor what has come to you that did not have to be. Mentally walk back all the things that had to happen in order for it to come to you. (Here, the Rabbi shared that she is savoring the people and technology that made it possible for us to produce a live streamed service and the kahal that is taking part in it from home.)

The Shabbat, we take respite from a world rife with existential turmoil. When Shabbat is over, it will be time to give of what we have. Maybe we'll open our hands more easily after we've opened our hearts a little more. I hope so, for the need is great. May we all let a little goodness overcome us today.

Shabbat shalom.