# Sermon on *Ki Tavo*
# West London Synagogue of British Jews
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The Torah *parasha Ki Tavo* contains a strange paradox. It begins with the words, "When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle it…." It then goes on to give instructions about bringing the first fruits of the soil at each harvest to Jerusalem and offering them to God as a token of thanksgiving. This is to be accompanied by a proclamation of historical and theological content (incidentally, this is one of the few statements which Jewish law requires to be made in the original Hebrew, not in translation); it is familiar not only from this parasha but because it was incorporated into the Pesach Haggadah: *Arami oved avi va-yered Mitzraymah*…, "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt," continuing to recount the flourishing of the Israelites, followed by their oppression and enslavement, then God's liberation and guidance into the land flowing with milk and honey. The section ends, "You shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household." At this point the people is settled peacefully in a fertile and productive land, not a hint of any type of problem. If we read only the first 11 verses of the parasha (and in some congregations, that's all they will read), we would have a story with a truly happy ending.

I suspect that this is the passage that 95% of the rabbis discussing the parashah will focus on this year. But it does not end here. Two chapters later, we are given another mixture of history and theology. Thirteen verses outline all the good things that will happen to the people if they obey God and faithfully observe all of the divine commandments. Then come 54 verses explaining the antithesis: the curses that will befall the people if they do *not* faithfully observe all the commandments. This passage contains the most terrifying litany of various kinds of Jewish suffering in our classical literature. You know that the Shabbat lections are traditionally divided into 7 sections, for each of which there is an *aliyah*. The minimum number of verses for an *aliyah* in is 3; this, at 54 verses, is the longest *aliyah* of the Torah? Why? Because the sages did not want to break it into two so that God's name would be praised twice whilst recounting the fearsome punishments. Because of its content, o one wanted to have this aliyah, which was sometimes given to the town fool. In traditional practice, it is chanted at breakneck speed in a soft voice, loud enough to hear but only if one strains a little.

In order to appreciate its power, we need to spend a few moments reviewing in detail. It *begins* by saying "The Lord will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out." Then come the specifics: diseases of various kinds (Egyptian inflammation, with hemorrhoids, boil-scars, and itch from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head, from which you shall never recover; madness, blindness, and dismay). Climatic anomalies (scorching heat and drought bringing down dust and sand from the sky),

Then come the foreign enemies that will invade and occupy the land, seizing and consuming all its wealth, humiliating and oppressing the occupied population "until you are driven mad by what your eyes behold." The famine in the besieged towns will become so severe that the people are driven to cannibalism, eating "the flesh of your sons and daughters that the Lord your God has assigned to you, because of the desperate straits to which your enemy shall reduce you." Women will eat secretly the flesh of their own babies and refuse to share with their husband.

And finally, exile and dispersion "from one end of the earth to the other." Yet there will be no peace among the nations, where the exiles will worship gods of wood and stone, and offer to sell themselves into slavery, though none will be interested in buying them. All this is in the Torah, "the terms of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to conclude with the Israelites." The Torah of which we say, "Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." Not much pleasantness and peace in these 54 verses.

As you may imagine, there is a fascinating history of interpretation for individual verses in this litany of horrors. To take just two examples: the verse that warns that the people of Israel will be exiled *ad ketzeh ha-aretz*, to the *end of the earth* (28:64), was used by Menasseh ben Israel on his mission to London in 1655. Since he believed that Jews had been discovered in the New World, he argued to the Protestant fundamentalists in Cromwell's Protectorate that this verse mentioning the "end of the earth" could refer only to Angleterre, or Eng-land – literally the end of the earth—and that by excluding Jews from England they were preventing the fulfilment of this verse, and thereby violating God's will and delaying the messianic redemption for which both Jews and Christians hoped (Beginning of "Humble Addresses").

Second, that same verse continues, *ve-avadta sham elohim aherim*, "There you shall serve other gods". Rashi, apparently deeply disturbed by this statement, wrote, "Not the actual worship of [false] gods, but that they will be subjected to taxes and levies which will be used to support idolatrous priests" (by which he meant contemporary Christian worship). But some took this more literally. In 1497, all Jews living on Portuguese soil, including the most learned and pious among them, were compelled by the government to convert to Christianity. As time elapsed, some of them were content to become assimilated into Portuguese Christian society. But others retained a sense of Jewish consciousness. This verse, "There you shall serve other gods," gave them a sense that their ordeal was part of a mission: They were fulfilling the prophecy of the Torah, which had to be fulfilled before the redemption could occur. Thus their living openly as Christians was in accordance with God's will, and a prerequisite for the culminating of the drama of redemption. [Shabbatai Sevi]

But the larger question, that transcends the individual verses, is, What are we to make of this extraordinarily powerful and disturbing passage, indicating the most severe punishments imaginable, both in the Land of Israel and throughout the world, for Jews who fail to fulfil their part of the covenant by observing all of the commandments? We certainly do not accept the fundamentalist, Orthodox belief that every word in this passage was God's literal revelation. Progressive Jews hold that it was written by human beings, presumably out of the sincere belief that this was consistent with the substance of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. How are we to imagine the intention of an author writing these words? It seems to me that there are two possibilities, both of them problematic.

The first is that the author intended this passage as it is presented: a *warning* to the people, mobilizing the most fearsome threats that the mind could conjure in order to impel the people to remain faithful to their God. Do what God wants, the author says, because otherwise you and your children and future generations will suffer punishments more grievous than you can imagine. In re-reading the material this past week, I thought of a scene in a book I read as an undergraduate English literature major: James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I doubt that anyone who has read that book will forget the sermon delivered by a Catholic priest to a group of young boys, perhaps 12 years old, on a spiritual retreat, in which he outlines to them the nature of the eternity of torment in hell that awaits them if they should sin: the torment of being so crowded with other sinners that they will be unable to move a single limb, the torment of utter darkness, of awful stench, of searing fire, of torture by other sinners and by companies of hideous devils. Each of these is described at length, in excruciatingly vivid detail, and having heard this the hero of the book – the young Stephen Dedalus – "came down the aisle of the chapel, his legs shaking and the scalp of his head trembling as though it had been touched by ghostly fingers. . . . Every word for him!" p. 124).

But is this the way we want to motivate the religious life – either for individual children, as in Joyce's vignette, or for the entire people, as in the passage from our parashah? Can the terror of threatened punishments produce a sustained commitment to piety, or to goodness? The noblest achievements of human beings are impelled not by threats that produce anxiety and fear, but rather by providing positive models of piety and commitment and empathy and holiness.

A second explanation for the passage is that it was written not primarily as a warning about the future, but as an actual description of the historical experience of the people of Israel in Biblical times presented as an object lesson. It was written by an author who knew about what had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel—how the Assyrian armies had swept through the land, destroying city after city and finally the capital city of Samaria, imposing massive deportations of the population and bringing in other peoples to settle the land, scattering the exiles throughout the Assyrian empire, prohibiting them from maintaining their own religious institutions. Rather than conclude that this traumatic experience was simply a matter of superior military might and international power politics, the author wanted to communicate the message

- that it was consistent with God's will,
- that the cause of the disaster was the religious failings of the northern kingdom,
- that God is in control of historical events even when the divine presence seems hidden and inscrutable,
- that the covenant still remains intact.

In this reading, the passage is a response to a catastrophe that has already occurred, perhaps warning that it might be repeated.

Throughout our history, Jewish religious thinkers and moralists have tended to explain Jewish suffering in this way: we suffer because we have sinned, and the challenge is to identify the sin and to rectify them. It is, to be sure, a blame-the-victim approach, and this is one reaction that modern psychology teaches us to avoid at all costs. When a person suffers, the most important message is to reassure that person by saying, "It's not your fault." Yet this normative traditional response did at least communicate that there was a meaning to the suffering, and that what we need to do in response is to keep the faith, strengthen our loyalty to tradition, try even harder to be good Jews.

After the Holocaust, of course, this traditionalist interpretation of suffering as divine punishment has been relegated to the lunatic fringe of fundamentalist theologies. It is the kind of thinking that led Israel's Rav Ovadiah Yosef to assert last year that Hurricane Katrina was a punishment for President Bush's pressure on Israel to withdrawal from Gush Katif in Gaza and for the lack of Torah study in the largely black population of New Orleans; and then, not to be outdone, the evangelical preacher Pat Robertson four months later proposed the same explanation of divine punishment for Prime Minister Sharon's devastating stroke. Any efforts to apply the worldview of Deuteronomy 28 to the actual Jewish experience in history, or of human beings suffering anywhere, from hurricanes or tsunamis or Katyusha rockets, seems abhorrent and blasphemous, simply a non-starter for us in a post-Holocaust world. Even the suggestion that the behaviour of Jews might lead to the destruction of the State of Israel and the loss of the Jewish homeland *as a divine punishment* seems appalling.

I see no way of salvaging these terrifying 54 verses from the Book of Deuteronomy except as a passage of literary and historical interest. It is part of our Sacred Scripture, but a part from which we must dissent. Neither this vision of unmitigated horrors nor the depiction of serene enjoyment of the bounty of the land flowing with milk and honey earlier in the parashah reflects our experience of history, or our understanding of God's relationship to history. Perhaps then it is best to conclude not with the parashah, but with the Haftarah—which has its own problems—but contains within its *promise* for a better future a hauntingly resonant verse—*Lo yishama od hamas be'artzekh* – "Violence (*Hamas*) shall no more be heard in your land, *Shod ve-shever bi-gvulayikh*, Desolation nor destruction within your borders, *Ve-karaat yehu'ah homotayikh, u-sha'arayikh tehilah*, But you shall name your walls Yeshu'ah, Salvation, and your gates, Renown. *Ken yehi ratzon*.