

Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo, September 13, 2014

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By

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When visitors first enter the sanctuary of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, they often gasp in awe and amazement at the sheer beauty and dignity of this sacred space. It is grand without being overly ornate; it is graceful, understated and powerful. Years ago, I led a tour of visitors to the synagogue. Upon entering the sanctuary, almost all of our guests reacted as almost everyone does: what a beautiful synagogue!

As our forefather Jacob said in a different context: How awesome is this place, this is nothing else but the house of the Lord, and this is the gate of heaven! However, the eyes of one of our visitors did not focus on the grandeur of the building. Rather, she looked up at the lofty ceiling and saw a bit of peeling paint. (The building has long since been repainted.) She pointed at this one flaw and asked me about it. I answered as politely as possible, but in my mind I was thinking: how I pity this person! She walks into a synagogue filled with splendor and the first thing she notices is a small bit of peeling paint. She overlooks the beauty and focuses on the flaw. She must be a misery to her family and acquaintances...and to her own self. There are so many people who tend to see the worst in things, the worst in others, the worst in themselves.

Instead of being grateful for the many blessings they enjoy, they are bitter because of things they lack. Instead of living happy and hopeful lives, they are constricted by bitterness. They may be healthy and wealthy...but they are far from wise. Their internal bile contorts their lives and the lives of others with whom they have contact. This week's Torah portion begins with the laws of bringing bikkurim, first fruits, as offerings to the Almighty. The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino biblical commentary, pointed out that those who brought the first fruits of their fields were not only fulfilling a mitzvah: they were also internalizing important values. They learned to be generous, to be gracious, to be humble, to be grateful, to recognize that God is the Master of all. In short, this mitzvah helped people develop a positive, optimistic and sharing worldview. The Torah itself describes the proper mindset of those who bring bikkurim: "And you shall

rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your household, you, and the Levite and the stranger that is in your midst” (Devarim 26:11).

By fulfilling this commandment, one experiences happiness; one’s happiness spills over to the entire household. One learns to share blessings with others, especially those who are in need of an extra show of kindness. Happiness is linked to an attitude of appreciation for all the blessings God has bestowed. It flows from an attitude of contentment and generosity. Those who constantly see faults and flaws, those are perpetually dissatisfied or hold grudges, those who lack generosity to others—such people fritter their lives away in self-imposed unhappiness. They drag themselves down, even as they attempt to drag others down. If only they internalized the lessons of bikkurim, they could live happier and better lives. Rabbi David and Tamar de Sola Pool, in their book “Is There an Answer?” make the following observation: “It is we ourselves who can and who must make life worth living. In the face of the harshest realities, we must cling to life and exalt it by giving to its positive values a commanding place in our consciousness....To look constantly on the seamy side of life is false to the totality of existence. We must gratefully remember life’s goodness and blessings. We must discern what is transient in experience and what is abiding in our consciousness” (p. 23).

Mark Twain wrote: “Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you too can become great.” Developing a positive and generous outlook on life is a fundamental teaching of Judaism. Our Torah and mitzoth aim at helping us to become happier and better people; they prod us to be as good and as great as we possibly can be.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)