Physical and Spiritual Survival: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo
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In his essay “Fate and Destiny,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik delineates two aspects of Jewish peoplehood: the camp and the congregation. “The camp is created as a result of the desire for self-defense and is nurtured by a sense of fear; the congregation is created as a result of the longing for the realization of an exalted ethical idea and is nurtured by the sentiment of love. Fate reigns in unbounded fashion in the camp; destiny reigns in the congregation….”

The camp is concerned with our physical survival. We join together to fight against our enemies. We mobilize our resources to defend ourselves from attack. The camp is our means of maintaining our existence in a hostile world.

The congregation is concerned with our spiritual survival. Yes, we need the camp to protect us from danger; but we also need to know the purpose and meaning of our community. Why are we fighting? What are our goals? Survival in and of itself is not enough; we need to survive in order to fulfill our role as a congregation. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes: “The congregation is a group of individuals possessing a common past, a common future, common goals and desires, a common aspiration for a world which is wholly good and beautiful and a common unique and unified destiny.”

This week’s Torah portion includes the passages to be recited by farmers when they brought their first fruits to the Temple. This recitation reviews Israelite history: our ancestor was a wandering Aramean; we were slaves in Egypt; we overcame many obstacles and much suffering. The text reminds us of our history as a camp. We were endangered; we were afraid; we were victims of a negative fate.

But then the recitation continues by expressing gratitude to the Almighty for bringing us to the land of milk and honey. It puts life in context of the Divine

promises to Israel, and the many blessings enjoyed by the people of Israel. The Torah then makes it clear that we are a congregation with a destiny, not merely a camp forced to defend itself. “This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances; you shall therefore observe and do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have avouched the Lord this day to be your God and that you would walk in His ways, and keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His ordinances, and hearken unto His voice.” (Devarim 26: 17-18)

Throughout our history, the people of Israel has had to view itself and act as a camp. This continues in our own time. The State of Israel and the Jewish People are constantly under physical and political attack. Our survival is threatened by tyrants and pundits, by extremists and bigots, by missiles and potential nuclear attack.

First and foremost, we need to strengthen ourselves as a camp, as a strong and determined people dedicated to defending ourselves from vicious enemies. Not one of us is safe unless we ensure the safety and security of all our camp.

Yet, throughout our history, the people of Israel has understood its nature as a holy congregation. We have stood tall and strong in promoting the great vision of the Torah; the messianic idea that teaches peace for all people; the dedication to God and kindness to our fellow human beings. We have known “why” we survive; we have been a people with a revolutionary and powerful devotion to righteousness, compassion, respect for all human beings.

Just as we need to devote tremendous energy and strength to maintaining our camp, so we need to devote tremendous energy and strength to maintaining ourselves as a congregation. Our physical survival is a primary responsibility; our spiritual flowering is equally vital.

Some Jews are “Jewish” only (or mainly) in response to anti-Semitism or anti-Israel attacks. They are “camp” Jews. Some Jews are “Jewish” only (or mainly) in their fulfillment of the rituals of our religious tradition. They are “congregation” Jews. In fact, though, we each need to play our role in both domains. We need to fortify our camp and activate our congregation.

Some years ago, Israeli families were forcibly evacuated from Gush Katif as a peace
gesture on the part of the Sharon government. One of the families, whose son was murdered by Palestinian terrorists, was reluctant to leave their home. The

Israeli military insisted that the evacuation had to take place by orders of the Israeli government. The family left its home, but the father asked to return to his house to retrieve two items. The army officer gave him permission to do so.

The man returned with two items: an Israeli flag from above the front door; and the Mezuzah which had been on the doorpost of the front door.

The Israeli flag: a reminder of our need to be a camp, a powerful State that can defend itself from its enemies. The Mezuzah: a reminder of our need to be a congregation, a spiritually vibrant, compassionate and idealistic Torah community.

May the camp of Israel forever be strong in defending our nation. May the congregation of Israel forever be a beacon of light, illuminating ourselves and others with the ideas and ideals of a compassionate, righteous and meaningful Torah.

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Please see Rabbi M. Angel's blog on "marketing Rosh Hashana"
https://www.jewishideas.org/blog/marketing-rosh-hashana-blog-rabbi-marc...

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