

Lessons on Leadership and Responsibility
Parashat Ki Tavo
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Recently I sat on an interfaith panel and noticed once again the differences between Judaism and Christianity. In particular I am thinking about the role of religious leaders in their communities. I also reflect on this frequently as I start this new position and make decisions about next steps. What is the role of clergy in the Jewish community? Are we intermediaries between God and the Jewish people? Or are we facilitators and guides? Do we say prayers and study on behalf of our congregation or alongside our congregation?

At the beginning of our Parasha this morning, the answer is clear. Each Jew is responsible for his or her relationship with God. The religious leader is there to assist, facilitate and guide but not to DO in place of the individual Jew.

Two sections of Ki Tavo teach us this lesson.

The parasha begins with a description of the Bringing of the First Fruits ceremony. This ceremony was done by the individual after the harvest had yielded its first fruits. In the Torah this ceremony is not connected with a specific holiday. The timing is dependent on the individual harvest which comes at different times of the year depending on the fruit of the land. Later this ceremony has been associated with Pesah because the pronouncement of the first fruits presenter became integrated into the body of the Passover haggadah...

Important to our question is the teaching that each individual must bring and present his first fruits. Although the priest is present and assisting, the individual must present his gifts and he can not use a substitute. Even a king must present himself, according to the Mishnah, and not put someone in his place.

From the description in Mishnah Bikkurim: A group from an area of the country would go up to Jerusalem with all of the first fruits of the village. They would be met outside Jerusalem by a delegation which would accompany them to the Temple, where each person would go up to the Temple himself, carrying his basket and make the proper declaration before the Priest. [I did not adjust this to say his or her because only the man was allowed to enter this far into the Temple precincts...but I'm sure his wife helped with the harvest!] Even the king would carry his own basket—not using an intermediary or agent.

The task and the declaration were made by each individual not by the priest as an intermediary. There did come a time during which the question arose regarding how the priest should behave. There came a point where not everyone knew the proper declaration nor knew how to recite it and it was asked whether the priest should say it for the presenter.

The teaching in Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 is: At first all those who knew how to recite would recite and all those who didn't know how to recite would be helped to recite. [The priest would say part and the presenter would repeat and they would continue in this way.] After people help back from coming [out of embarrassment because it would be clear that they didn't know how to recite in contrast to others that did], the rabbis instituted the rule that all would be prompted whether they knew the declaration or not.

It would have been much easier and quicker if the priest just recited the declaration for the presented who didn't know how. But, no, the rabbis said. It was important for each individual not only to bring his gifts but also to state the meaning behind them and make his personal connection with God. And, when it was clear that people might be embarrassed or made to feel uncomfortable because of their varying levels of traditional knowledge, the rabbis leveled the playing field. Everyone would be prompted. No one would be shamed.

The second section that speaks to our question comes in chapter twenty-seven, verses one through eight. When the children of Israel enter the promised land they are to set up large stones and engrave upon them *et kol divrei ha-Torah ha-zoht*—every word of this Teaching *ba'er heteiv* most distinctly. My friend Len Wanetik suggests that the meaning of *ba'er heteiv* is “in a way that is easy to understand.” Every Jew must be able to read and understand the laws of the Torah so that every Jew can fulfill his or her obligations. Why does God command this Mitzvah to Moses and the elders, to the leadership of the community? They are being reminded that they are not to be the experts and so the intermediaries for the people. They are to be the teachers and the guides. They are to help facilitate each Jew's journey through Jewish life.

At the time of Elul, as we reflect on this past year and for what we need to atone, I invite you to focus on the positive as well. What have you done over the past year that has moved your Jewish life forward? What has helped you to learn more and do more? And what are you going to do next year so that you can continue to learn and grow Jewishly.

It is up to each one of us to continue our Jewish learning and it is my privilege to serve as your rabbi and your guide on your Jewish journey.

Shabbat Shalom.