



Parshat Ki Tavo - Words to Remember

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The sounds of silence. That is what one finds among the verses in the third book of the Torah *Vayikra* (Leviticus). Among all of the details poured into the opening chapters of *Vayikra*, what you will not find among them is a single word of prayer or song. It is as though the entire priestly system of *korbanot* (ritual offerings) was performed in utter silence.

In contrast to this, the book of *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) focuses on the power of the spoken word. For example, when Moshe tells the next generation about Mount Sinai, he reminds them that they did not see anything; they only heard a voice from heaven. In fact, the entire contents of *Devarim* are Moshe's speeches to Israel about their past and what they need to do when they enter the land of Israel.

For another example, this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, opens with a famous recitation: "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean..." This brief "national biography" (occupying just over 70 words in the original Hebrew) was originally recited by farmers bringing their first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem on *Shavuot* as a token of gratitude for having been taken out of Egypt and brought into the land of Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey. It is likely that because this recitation was so well known, the Rabbis appropriated it and made it the core of *Maggid* for the *Pesach Seder* to help us tell the story of our freedom. This short version of our history has maintained our people as a distinct and cohesive people for over two thousand years.

Right after the recitation for First Fruits comes a second recitation: the words to be recited after an Israelite finished making their tithe to the Levites, orphans, widows and the poor in the land:

"I have removed the sacred portion from the house and also I have given it to the *Levi*, to the stranger, to the orphan, to the widow according to your commandment that you have commanded me. I have not transgressed your commandments, and I have not forgotten. I have not eaten anything from it, and I have not ruined any of it with ritual impurity, and I have not given any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the voice of *Adonai* my God, I have done all that You commanded me. Look down from Your Holy Palace from the Heavens and bless Your people Israel, and the land which You have given us as You swore to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Devarim 26:12-16)

With these two recitations, we find nothing less than the two most important narratives of Judaism: The Exodus: God gives us Freedom. Mount Sinai: God gives us Law. We would be incomplete as a people without one narrative or the other. If we were not a free people, we could not have received *Torah*. If we had not received the *Torah*, we would not have the framework to remain a people. Without freedom there is no law, and without law there is no freedom. This is the core of what *Torah* is all about. When we learn *Torah* together, whether in school, in our synagogues, or in our homes, we reaffirm our connection to our common past, our present and our shared destiny.

This year, as Gross Schechter Day School turns 30, we have the rare opportunity to engage in the writing of a *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll). I can think of no better way for a learning community of students and their families to celebrate this milestone.

By the end of this school year, you will be able to walk into the Merkaz on any Monday or Thursday, and will hear words of *Torah* chanted by our students from the scroll that we wrote together.

AS A FAMILY:

1. Tell family stories that connect you to your past, like stories of family coming to the US from Europe or other places.
2. The First Fruits recitation takes up about 70 words in Hebrew. Try to tell your personal biography in 70 words. Try to tell your family's story in 70 words. How does what you choose to put in illustrate what is most important to you?

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [KI TAVO](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What does Moses ask Israel to set up when they cross the Jordan and? What do they write on these items?
2. Moses tells the twelve tribes to go and stand on top of two mountains after they enter into the land. What are they supposed to do when they are on top of the mountain?
3. What are the blessings that God promises Israel if they keep the mitzvot?
4. What are the curses that God promises Israel if they do not keep the mitzvot?
5. Are there more curses or blessings? Why do you think that this is the case?
6. Which of the curses do you think is the worst one? Explain.