



Parashat Ki Tavo:

"Blessed are you in your coming, and Blessed are you in your leaving."

Dear Friends,

Parashat Ki Tavo is wonderful! It is full of pearls of wisdom and tips for a life worth living, although the messages of the Torah are encoded and require explanation.

One of the sweetest verses in this parasha is "Blessed are you in your coming, and blessed are you in your leaving." (D'varim 28:6) Our Sages, whose role it was to uncover the biblical codes, wondered: coming and leaving - but from where and to where?

In the rabbinic collection of midrashim, Midrash Rabbah on Deuteronomy, our Sages cover all of the different possibilities of transition: from the house to the field, from the field to the house, from the walls of the city to the world outside and vice versa, etc. Because we are in the middle of the month of Elul, I would like to dwell on two other very important transitions in our lives mentioned in the Midrash: birth and death: "Blessed are you in your coming", i.e. in your arrival in the world, and "Blessed are you in your leaving", from the world.

Rabbi Birchiya expands on this possible interpretation, quoting Kohelet 3:2 "'A time to be born and a time to die.' Do we not know the time of a person's birth or the time of their death? [of course we do! So what is Kohelet teaching us here?]. Rather, lucky is the person whose death is like their birth [i.e., it is a great blessing to have one's death be like their birth]: At the time of birth a person is clean, so at the time of death he is clean. This is 'blessed are you in your coming and blessed are you in your leaving.'"

When a child is born he is clean of all conditioning, complexes, education, anxieties, etc. In the course of his life he will collect much baggage that will enrich him on the one hand, and burden him on the other.

We all know elderly people – though there aren't many – who manage to remain light (not necessarily physically) despite the burdens of life, clean (again, not physically), and innocent (though definitely not ignorant)

Rabbi Birchiya is suggesting something very deep, which may change our lives and give them new vitality and blessing.

A baby, fresh and clean, is blessed, according to Rabbi Birchiya. Why is he blessed? Because he is born? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Until recently life was so difficult and frightening, and even today, with modern medicine and technology, a person will have to withstand endless trials and challenges. The newborn is blessed, says Rabbi Birchiya, because he is clean (not physically, of course)! He has just arrived from the Einsof - the expanse of infinite possibilities. He may still become almost anything he chooses to! He is not yet formed, educated, limited by loving adults and by the society he has just joined. He has not yet eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, does not yet distinguish

between Good and Bad, is not ashamed, and has no calculations of social debts and credits.

But slowly he will! He will be molded. He will learn what is allowed and what is forbidden, what is acceptable by his parents and what isn't. What will earn a smile and love, and what is unacceptable and repulsive. Then he learns "facts" and stores information, and thinks the facts he has learned are the truth. because they must be, they are written in books, in newspapers, "the teacher said", "my father said"...

He will also acquire formative experiences – some good and enriching, and others traumatic and frightening. As his abilities grow, the scope of his vision will actually shrink to what is permissible to "see" and what isn't. He will learn to reduce and contract himself. No longer the infinite possibilities with which he came into the world, as a rather undefined human being (with innate qualities, of course, yet still having the ability to develop in an infinite number of directions). He will become a very specific person, defined and identified, with a clear personality, characteristics, and modes of behavior that are set and fairly predictable.

The blessing of infinite possibilities with which he came into the world will be reduced (Tzimzum, in Kabbalistic Hebrew), and with this reduction the blessing will become less apparent and of less use.

And then he or she will reach the age of forty – today possibly fifty, give or take – and he will be a mature adult, with a family, a career, and a mortgage. For forty years he has been formed (the root of being formed in Hebrew is ב.ע.צ.), and now sadness sets in (the root of sad is also ב.ע.צ.!) He will then experience his first life crisis. He will hear inner voices calling out to him, wondering what has happened to him. Where has his joy of life gone? Where is the blessing? How did all of these boundaries and limitations appear? When did he first begin to feel so narrow and crowded within himself? And – he will wonder – where do these unfamiliar voices come from? Where did this discomfort and doubt originate? Apparently, from the Einsof, from that infinite “place” from which he came, and to which he will one day return. Rabbi Akiva ben Halal said "[Know from where you came and to where you are going.](#)" (Pirkei Avot 3:1)

At this point in life - junctions of crisis - people differ in their response. Indeed, there are a few different ways to deal with mid-life crises and reconnect with our primordial blessing. There are those who desperately seek out new excitement, trying to recapture the fire of youth. Others abandon all limiting frameworks – quit their jobs, move somewhere far away for a few years, or leave their families. Some will reinvent themselves through new careers or extensive home renovations. Some will continue to dally, hoping that the crisis will pass and peace will return to their hearts.

Avodat Halev - The Service of the Heart

(This new section appears regularly in the Hebrew drashot, and appears in English for the first time this week. It contains suggestions for inner work, in the spirit of our upcoming Wednesday night classes in Hebrew):

Rabbi Birchiya is hinting at another option: T'shuva, return - undoing the process which has formed and limited us. Return from the finite to the infinite, to the expansive and

blessed Einsof. This is a process of peeling off layers of learning, conditioning, and expectations, and reopening the arteries of infinite possibilities which have become blocked. Just as God promises Moshe that He will take Bnei Yisrael from the narrow place (Mitzrayim) in which they were living their lowly lives, to the Land that is “big, good and wide”, so too, each person is invited to leave their narrow places and return to the great expanse of the Infinite.

This option that Rabbi Birchiya is suggesting is not simple! It requires guidance and direction. That which has been built and planted within us with great effort and with the best intentions of teachers and parents, now requires an even greater level of wisdom to release and undo. Be warned, though: this is not an act of breaking, smashing, or uprooting!! The process I am talking about must be delicate, much like the way we undo a bundle of knotted string.

We are in the month of Elul, the month of forgiveness and return. Forgiveness too, requires delicacy; it cannot be accomplished by force.

My way of returning to a clean and pure place is by questioning everything that I know. Our thoughts – backed-up as they may be by the knowledge acquired over the years – become unbending, and with them, so does our emotional world. At the core of every emotion lies a thought. A person in distress cannot be thinking joyous thoughts, and vice-a-versa.

Our thoughts were not always so inflexible. That “beginner's mind” with which we were born was curious, open and childlike. As our thoughts developed and evolved they came together to form our worldview. We started fitting - often even forcing - our surroundings into the ever-limiting molds we created.

Times of crisis – whether moments in the day or a period of a few months – hint that our thoughts have become so stuck that they have stopped flowing. New blood can never flow in the calcified arteries of stuck thinking.

Times of crisis are there to remind us of a great truth: that these thoughts are only... thoughts! They have absolutely nothing to do with truth. We received them or adopted them at some point in our lives, and for a variety of reasons they have taken hold of us.

Crises are tough, because we are not aware of the rigid thoughts that underlie them. Furthermore, it is not at all easy to remove, cancel or erase these thoughts – our ability to control our thinking is partial at best. We have thousands of thoughts a day and they come and go. But there is one thought that can help us remember what is true: that these thoughts are only... thoughts, and have – as I said – nothing to do with truth.

Once doubted, these thoughts will lose their grip on us, and our hold them will loosen too. If we can genuinely accept this idea, new life will come pouring in.

Thoughts are like clouds which block the light. They come and go. But just like the clouds, they pass or make way for other, newer and fresher thoughts. Those new thought/clouds may contain rain; they may bring new tidings from the sea, new vibrancy, new life. The rain that comes will quench the thirst of the dry fields, will wash away the old and clear the burdens we have accumulated, gently erasing that which has been written on the our hearts.

And then, clean as the day we were born, we will return to the infinite source from which we came.

Just as at birth he is clean, so he is at death. May you be blessed in your coming and may you be blessed in your leaving! said Rabbi Birchiya.

Amen!

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha