

Parashat Ki Tavo
15 Elul 5759 / August 27, 1999
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The other day I attended an event (it doesn't matter what or where -- not at BCC) and when it was over, I walked out just in front of a group of people who immediately began to criticize what had gone on in there. "That speech was sooo long," said one. "I thought those costumes were ridiculous." "It was so hot in there."

Personally, I had liked the event, but as I listened to them I started to think of other negatives about it. Soon I found myself both critical of the event and annoyed at these strangers who I now blamed for turning my positive experience into a negative one. I began to wonder what sort of conversation the people behind me might have had if the first one who spoke had said something like, "wow, that was terrific." Would the others have immediately contradicted with their negative assessments? Or would they have followed the lead, and also remarked on the good things?

Or, perhaps better yet, what would have happened if the friends had walked out together in silence, each absorbing the event on his or her own, reflecting privately on what it had been or what it might have meant to them?

I remembered a section of Rabbi Telushkin's book, *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* -- a book, by the way, that I have copies of and would love to share with you if you're interested in one. Rabbi Telushkin remarks on this common tendency to criticize an event on the way home from it. Even as he acknowledges that he's too often been guilty of such things himself, he considers the harm, the hurt, of, for example, leaving a dinner party with your spouse or friends and critiquing the evening all the way home. Thinking of the effort he and his wife make when they invite people over for dinner or a party, how hurtful, he comments, to think his guests might be driving home sharing their critical observations about the evening or his family [p.16].

I know well what Rabbi Telushkin is saying. I'm sure we all do. We've all been guilty of such behavior, and victims of it. Indeed, I thought to myself, who knows what I might have said when I left that event the other day, had I been with friends instead of alone? Or what might I have said to myself if I'd been in a negative mood, or an insecure one, and had been looking for things to criticize in the work of others?

Last night, as is our custom, the Torah study group chose the Torah verse of the week to share with all of you. You can find it later at the top of your seat bulletin, if you haven't seen it already. "Blessed be you in your coming in; blessed be you in your going out." Nice verse. Simple enough (even if we had changed the translation, as we were tempted to, to make it even more relevant: "Blessed be you in your coming out; blessed be you in your going in.") Simple, I said, but what does the verse mean? Many of us who went on the BCC trip to Israel 3 weeks ago, knew what it felt like to be blessed in our "going out," as we gathered at BCC the Shabbat before we left to receive the congregation's blessing -- your blessing -- for us, that we might have a safe and sacred journey. And, I think, many of us -- I know I do -- have felt blessed upon our return (our coming in . . . our coming home) to be so warmly welcomed home by the BCC friends who didn't come with us.

Some people might appropriately take the verse to mean "may you be blessed every time you come in and go out." I thought about the anticipation I had when I walked into that event the other day. The excitement, the expectation, just the interest, those were blessings as I came into that room and sat down. I thought about how I would have felt when I went out from that room...IF I hadn't heard those negative remarks, IF I hadn't thought any myself. I would have felt blessed.

I don't think the verse, "blessed may you be in your coming in and blessed may you be in your going out" is just a wish, just a hope for what God may bring us. I think it's, partly anyway, a statement about what we can bring ourselves and each other. Do we think how our words or lack of them might affect someone before we use those words or withhold them? Do we enter each new moment, each new day, each new stage of our life with enthusiasm and expectation? with interest? with curiosity? Or are we more likely to hold negative expectations? Are we expecting blessings or curses? When we leave a day, a moment, an event, a phase of our lives, are we more likely to look back with regret and criticism or appreciation, gratitude, maybe even delight?

Later in this week's Torah portion, there is another verse. In it Moses is speaking for God to the Israelites very near the end of their 40 year journey in the wilderness. The verse is usually translated: "I led you through the wilderness forty years. . ." [Deut. 29:4]. But the Hebrew says, va-oh-leich et-khem. Not, "I led you," but "I walked with you forty years in the wilderness."

If, when I walked out of that event the other day, I had been thinking, God is walking out of here with me, I wonder if I would have been so easily thrown by that group of critics behind me. Better yet, what if all of us had been feeling that God was walking with us?

Those of you on the Israel trip know that we all got along really well; some of you who weren't with us have heard folks comment about it. Why was that? It wasn't that we were all perfectly matched with each other. We weren't all friends before we left, nor will we all be dear friends for the rest of our lives (though I hope we'll all be friendly and happy to see each other for the rest of our lives). Did we just happen to mesh? maybe . . . But I think it was something else. I think we felt, many of us, that we were on a sacred journey; I think we felt, many of us, that God was walking with us. . . And those among us who might not quite have felt God's presence themselves, knew and appreciated and respected the fact that others among us DID. It was wonderful, awe-inspiring, truly.

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But here's the trick: Can we always feel that way or is it only about going to Israel? Do we think, any of us, that God dwells only in the Holy Land, only at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? Do any of us think that only that place, that land, is holy, is sacred? When Moses speaks for God at the end of this week's Torah portion, God doesn't say, I walked with you in the Promised Land, God says, "I walked with you forty years in the wilderness." The wilderness is precisely NOT the Promised Land; it is the opposite of the Promised Land, and yet, there was God, walking with us in it.

The Days of Awe will soon be upon us -- it will feel sooner to some of us than to others! -- and we are in the exact middle now of Elul, the month before the Days of Awe, the month that Jewish tradition sets aside for us to be self-reflective, to examine our lives and souls, to consider what the past year has been, who we have been in the past year. It is the month in which we are to do tshuvah -- repentance and turning. In this time of year we are to be making amends to those we have hurt, including ourselves, and we are to consider how to live our lives in the future so that we do not do such damage again. It is a month in which to figure out when in the past year we failed to remember that God was walking with us.

While we were in Israel, I don't think God waved a magic wand over the BCC bus and said, you will all get along, you will all respect each other. I think we did that for ourselves. But the fact that we could, the fact that we wanted to, the fact that we were delighted by doing so, all that I think, is evidence that God was walking with us. It wasn't just that we wanted to feel blessed that made us feel blessed, and it wasn't just where we were and the amazing things we saw that made us feel blessed, it was the ways we appreciated one another -- our respect for one another was truly a blessing.

Let me offer us, then, a variation on the verse of the week: Whether we are here in Los Angeles or in the Land of milk and honey . . . no matter where we are -- may we FEEL blessed each time we come in; may we FEEL blessed each time we go out. May we live our lives so that we can FEEL God's presence, walking with us, in all the twists and turns of life, in all its ins and outs, in all the comings and goings of which our lives are made. *Shabbat shalom*