Parasha Ki Tavo

וְהָיָה כִּי-תָבוֹא אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וִירִשְׁתָּהּ וְיָשַׁבְתָּ בָּהּ: וְלָקַחְתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית | כָּל-פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה ...

Our sages teach that one can determine the condition of a person's **lev** (heart) not merely by what he says, but by what he offers. That observation forms the heartbeat of **Parashat Ki Tavo** (Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8). At first reading, the parasha appears to concern agriculture, tithes, blessings, and curses. Yet beneath the surface lies a far deeper question:

What kind of people can be trusted with God's blessings?

The Torah opens with the words: **וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבוֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ**

Ve'hayah ki tavo el ha'aretz—"And it shall be, when you come into the land."

Immediately the sages ask an obvious question. Why does the Torah say **when** you come instead of **if** you come? Rashi reminds us that the Holy One, blessed be He, speaks from the certainty of His covenant. The inheritance of the land rests not upon Israel's military genius but upon the irrevocable promise given to Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promises are never wishful thinking; they are covenant realities awaiting their appointed fulfillment. Yet this raises another question. If the conquest of Canaan lies immediately before Israel, why does Moshe begin with a basket instead of a battle? One might expect military instructions, strategies for dividing the land, or commands concerning warfare. Instead, the first mitzvah after entering the land concerns **Bikkurim**, the offering of the firstfruits. The order is intentional. Before Israel learns how to possess the land, she must learn how to possess it without allowing the land to possess her. This is one of the Torah's recurring themes. Material blessing is never the final goal. Every blessing becomes a test of covenant faithfulness. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch observed, prosperity often proves a greater spiritual test than adversity. In the wilderness Israel depended upon manna each morning. In Canaan the danger would no longer be hunger but forgetfulness. The Hebrew word **bikkurim** comes from the root **בכר** *(b-k-r - bikur),* meaning "first," "chief," or "that which opens." Throughout Scripture the first belongs to God because He is acknowledged as the source of everything that follows. The firstborn son. The firstfruits. The first fleece. The first harvest. The first moments of the day. The principle remains unchanged: **what is first reveals what is most important**. The Mishnah (Bikkurim 3) paints a vivid picture of this ceremony. As the first figs, grapes, olives, or pomegranates ripened, the farmer would tie a reed around them and declare, *"Harei elu bikkurim"*—*"Behold, these are firstfruits."* Weeks later, villages journeyed together toward Jerusalem. An ox adorned with olive branches led the procession while musicians played the flute. Pilgrims sang the **Shirei HaMa'alot**, the Songs of Ascents, as they approached the Holy City. Notice the atmosphere. This is not reluctant obligation. This is **simcha**—holy joy.

The Torah never portrays worship as gloomy resignation. Genuine **avodat Hashem**—the service of God—is marked by gratitude.

Later in our parasha Moshe will warn Israel because they *"did not serve the LORD with joyfulness and gladness of heart."* The tragedy was not merely disobedience; it was joyless obedience. Our sages frequently observed that a mitzvah performed without love resembles a body without breath. The action remains, but the life has departed. This brings us to the declaration every worshiper recites: **אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד אָבִי -** *Arami oved avi;*
"A wandering Aramean was my father." Few phrases in the Torah have generated more rabbinic discussion. Who is the Aramean? Was Jacob wandering? Or does the verse refer to Laban, the Aramean, who sought Jacob's destruction? The **Sifrei Devarim** and the Passover **Haggadah** interpret the verse as referring to Laban. Pharaoh sought to destroy Israel physically, but Laban attempted to destroy the covenant family before the nation even existed. Thus the Haggadah declares, *"Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob."* Whether emphasizing Jacob's humble origins or Laban's hostility, the message remains the same. Israel's story begins with weakness. The covenant begins not with kings but with pilgrims. Not with palaces but with tents. Not with abundance but with dependence. This pattern appears throughout the Tanakh. Avraham leaves Ur without knowing his destination. Moshe confronts Pharaoh carrying only a shepherd's staff. David defeats Goliath with five smooth stones. Again and again, Adonai delights in demonstrating that redemption comes not through human strength but through covenant faithfulness. Ramban comments that the worshiper recounts Israel's history so that gratitude will never become detached from memory. This is more than history; it is **zikaron**—covenant remembrance. The Hebrew verb **zakar** means far more than recalling information. In biblical thought, remembrance always produces action.
When God "remembered" Noach, the floodwaters began to recede.
When God "remembered" Rachel, He opened her womb.
When God "remembered" His covenant in Egypt, redemption followed.
Memory in Scripture is never passive. It is covenantal.
Likewise, Israel is commanded not merely to remember the Exodus but to live in light of it. Every generation is to see itself as though it personally came out of Egypt. ***L'dor va'dor***—*from generation to generation* — the story becomes our own.
The worshiper then places his basket **lifnei Adonai**, before the Lord. Think about what is happening. The basket contains only a small portion of the harvest, yet it represents the whole harvest. The firstfruits sanctify everything that follows. The sages compare this to a king who entrusted vineyards to his servants. Before enjoying the harvest, they first brought the earliest fruit to the king, acknowledging that the vineyard had always belonged to him. Likewise, Israel's offering declares, *"Nothing I possess originated with me."* How desperately our generation needs that reminder. Modern culture celebrates self-made success. The Torah celebrates faithful stewardship. Moshe will later declare, *"Remember Adonai your God, for it is He who gives you power to acquire wealth."*
Even our abilities are gifts.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once asked a wealthy merchant, *"When you stand before the Heavenly Court, what will remain yours?"* The merchant answered, "Nothing." The rabbi smiled gently and replied, *"Then perhaps everything you called yours was only entrusted to you for a little while."* That is the wisdom of **Ki Tavo**. The firstfruits are not ultimately about fruit. They are about trust. They reveal whether prosperity has produced gratitude or entitlement. Only after Israel learns to say "thank You" with a basket in her hands is she ready to hear about blessings, curses, and covenant renewal. Gratitude is not the conclusion of covenant life—it is its beginning. A heart that remembers God's faithfulness will find obedience a joy rather than a burden, for true **emunah** (faithfulness) always grows in the soil of grateful remembrance.

Having taught Israel that gratitude is the doorway into covenant life, Moshe immediately shifts from the basket of firstfruits to one of the most dramatic covenant ceremonies in all of the Torah. The movement is deliberate. The firstfruits teach Israel **how** to enter the land; Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal teach Israel **how** to remain there. The Torah commands that after crossing the Jordan, six tribes are to stand upon **Har Gerizim**, the Mount of Blessing, while the remaining six stand upon **Har Ebal**, the Mount of Cursing (Deut. 27). Nestled in the valley near Shechem, these two mountains form a natural amphitheater. Even today, visitors remark that a voice spoken from one slope can often be heard clearly from the other. The geography itself becomes a living classroom. Here the Torah invites us to ask another rabbinic question. **Why did God choose two mountains?** Would one mountain not have been sufficient? The Midrash answers by suggesting that life is lived between blessing and curse, obedience and rebellion, life and death. Israel is literally positioned between two voices, and every generation must choose which voice it will heed. This echoes Moshe's later declaration: *"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life."* Notice that God never forces covenant faithfulness. The **brit** (covenant) is entered freely. Love cannot exist apart from choice. Adonai desires not coerced obedience but willing devotion. The great commentator **Sforno** observes that blessings are not magical rewards arbitrarily bestowed, nor are curses acts of divine caprice. Rather, they are the natural consequences of either living within or outside God's created order. Just as planting wheat yields wheat and sowing thorns yields thorns, so righteousness bears life while rebellion produces destruction. Centuries later, the Apostle Rav Sha'ul would articulate the very same Torah principle: *"Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap."* Rav Sha'ul is not introducing a new theology; he is drawing from the well of Deuteronomy. One of the most intriguing commands concerns the construction of an altar upon **Mount Ebal**. Moshe instructs Israel to build it from **אבנים שלמות** *(avanim shelemot)* —whole, uncut stones. No iron tool is to touch them.
The sages ask, **Why uncut stones?**

The Mishnah (Middot 3:4) explains that iron symbolizes warfare and instruments that shorten life, whereas the altar symbolizes reconciliation and atonement, which preserve life. Therefore, that which destroys life must never shape that which restores it. There is beautiful theology hidden within this command. God's altar is not fashioned by human ingenuity. It is fashioned by divine provision. Salvation is never the product of human craftsmanship. The worshiper contributes the sacrifice, but God determines the means of approach. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that uncut stones also remind Israel that the covenant cannot be improved by human innovation. Every generation is tempted to reshape God's standards according to contemporary tastes. Yet the altar teaches that holiness is received, not reinvented. Perhaps the most profound question of all is this:
Why is the altar erected on Mount Ebal—the mountain of curse—instead of Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessing? Surely an altar belongs on the mountain of blessing. Yet the Torah intentionally places the altar where the curses are proclaimed. The **Midrash Tanchuma** hints that God's mercy is always found where humanity most desperately needs it. The altar standing upon the mountain of curse proclaims that judgment is never God's final word. Even where sin deserves condemnation, the Holy One provides a place of atonement. For those of us who follow Yeshua as our Messiah, the symbolism becomes unmistakable. Rav Sha'ul writes in Galatians that Messiah became a curse for us so that the blessing promised to Avraham might come upon the nations. Long before Golgotha, Mount Ebal quietly anticipated the mystery of redemption. The place associated with judgment became the place where mercy was revealed. Moshe next commands that the Torah be written upon large stones coated with plaster. Again, the commentators ask, **Why write the Torah publicly?** Rashi suggests that the commandments were to be clearly displayed so that every Israelite could read them. The Torah was never intended to become the possession of an elite class of scholars. It belonged to the entire covenant community. The Talmud (Sotah 35b) even preserves the tradition that the Torah was written in multiple languages so that the nations might recognize God's righteous instruction. Whether understood literally or symbolically, the message is clear: the God of Israel is not a tribal deity. His righteousness is intended to become a light to the nations.
The image is striking. Before Israel builds cities... Before vineyards are planted... Before armies march... The Torah itself is publicly established at the center of national life. Civilization flourishes only when God's Word occupies the center rather than the margins. How desperately our own generation needs this reminder. We have become skilled at displaying our opinions while hiding God's truth. Ancient Israel did the opposite. They publicly displayed the Torah so that every future generation would know the foundation upon which the nation rested.

Following the construction of the altar, the Levites proclaim twelve covenant curses. At first glance these appear to be a random collection of offenses, yet the sages noticed a remarkable pattern. Nearly every sin listed concerns acts committed in secret.

"Cursed is the one who makes an idol in secret..."
"Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's boundary marker..."
"Cursed is the one who misleads the blind..."
"Cursed is the one who accepts a bribe..."
These are sins that often escape human justice. Why begin here? Because covenant holiness begins where public recognition ends. Anyone can appear righteous before a crowd. The true measure of **yirat Adonai**—the fear of the Lord—is who we are when no one else is watching. Pirkei Avot teaches*: "Reflect upon three things and you will not come into the power of sin: know what is above you—an Eye that sees, an Ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book."* This is not intended to create fear alone. It cultivates integrity. A righteous person is the same in private as in public because he lives continually **lifnei Adonai**—before the presence of God. Yeshua echoes this very principle in the Sermon on the Mount. He speaks of giving in secret, praying in secret, and fasting in secret—not to discourage public worship, but to remind His disciples that the Father searches the **lev**, the heart, rather than merely the outward act. Among the twelve pronouncements is the prohibition against moving a neighbor's boundary marker. To modern ears this sounds insignificant. In ancient Israel it was a grievous offense. The land was not merely property. It was inheritance. It represented God's covenant gift to each tribe. To move a boundary stone was to steal not merely from one's neighbor but from God Himself. Rabbi Hirsch expands this principle beyond geography. Every generation inherits moral boundaries established by the Torah. Whenever society redraws those boundaries according to convenience rather than revelation, confusion inevitably follows. Proverbs therefore warns: "Do not remove the ancient landmark." Our culture celebrates innovation in nearly every sphere, yet covenant faithfulness sometimes requires resisting the pressure to redefine what God has already established. This does not mean refusing every cultural development. Rather, it means recognizing that truth itself is not subject to majority vote. God's character remains constant.

Therefore, His standards remain trustworthy. As each curse is pronounced, the entire nation responds with one word: **Amen.** We often think of "Amen" as the conclusion of a prayer, but in Hebrew it comes from the same root as **emunah**—faithfulness, firmness, reliability. To say *"Amen"* is to declare, *"This is true." "I stand under this word." "I submit myself to God's righteousness."* Every Israelite publicly affirms that the covenant is just. No excuses. No negotiations. No selective obedience. Only wholehearted agreement with the God who has already redeemed them. Here lies one of the central lessons of Ki Tavo. Israel does not obey in order to become God's people. Israel obeys because she already is God's people. Grace precedes commandment. Redemption precedes responsibility. The Exodus came before Sinai. Deliverance came before instruction. The same pattern continues in the New Covenant. Messiah redeems us by grace, and His Spirit empowers us to walk in faithful obedience.

The Torah was never intended merely to regulate behavior; it was given to shape a holy people whose lives would reflect the character of the One who called them. Thus, standing between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, Israel learns that every covenant choice begins not on the battlefield but within the heart. Before cities are conquered, the **lev** must be surrendered. Before enemies are defeated, gratitude must replace entitlement. Before blessings can be fully enjoyed, God's people must once again say, with one united voice: **Amen.** Having renewed the covenant at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, Moshe now unfolds the longest section of the parasha—the blessings and the **tochachah**, the covenant admonitions of Deuteronomy 28. Every year, when this portion is read in the synagogue, the reader traditionally lowers his voice during the rebukes. The congregation listens with solemnity because these words are not merely history; they are covenant warnings addressed to every generation. Again, the sages ask an important question.

Why are the curses so much longer than the blessings? If God delights in blessing His people, why devote so much space to warning? The answer is found in the heart of a loving father. A father spends little time describing the joy of walking safely but much time warning his child not to run into danger. The lengthy warnings do not reveal a God eager to punish; they reveal a Shepherd determined to preserve His flock. The blessings begin with one of the most significant Hebrew expressions in the Torah: **וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמַע**

Vehayah im shamoa tishma... "And it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey..."

The phrase **shamoa tishma** literally means, *"hearing, you shall hear."* Hebrew frequently repeats a verb to express intensity. Moshe is not speaking of casual listening but of attentive, responsive hearing. This brings us once again to the great word of Judaism:

Shema. To the Western mind, hearing is primarily intellectual. To the Hebrew mind, hearing is relational. One has not truly heard until one has obeyed. This is why the **Shema** of Deuteronomy 6 remains the daily confession of Israel. It is not merely a declaration of monotheism; it is a pledge of covenant allegiance. The Talmud (Berakhot 13a) teaches that in reciting the *Shema*, one accepts upon himself the **ol malchut shamayim**—the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. How beautifully this harmonizes with the words of Yeshua: *"Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"* True hearing always produces faithful living. The blessings Moshe describes touch every sphere of life:

"Blessed shall you be in the city." "Blessed shall you be in the field." "Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb." "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl."

This comprehensive blessing teaches something profoundly Jewish. There is no separation between the sacred and the ordinary. The marketplace belongs to God.

The home belongs to God. The courtroom belongs to God. The harvest belongs to God. The Sabbath belongs to God. All of life is lived **lifnei Adonai**.

Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote that Judaism sanctifies time. Yet the Torah goes even further. It sanctifies work, family, business, hospitality, agriculture, justice, and worship because all of life is covenant life.

Holiness—**kedushah**—is not escape from the world. It is bringing God's presence into the world. Yet after only a few verses, the tone changes dramatically as Moshe describes the consequences of covenant unfaithfulness. Disease. Fear. Confusion. Famine. Exile. The language is sobering because the consequences are real. Jewish commentators have often observed how tragically these warnings unfolded throughout Israel's history—from the Assyrian conquest to the Babylonian exile, from the destruction of the Second Temple to the long centuries of dispersion. Yet even here we must read carefully. The purpose of prophecy is never merely prediction. Its purpose is **teshuvah**. Repentance. Every warning in the Torah is an invitation to return before judgment becomes necessary. This has always been God's heart. The prophet Hoshea captures it beautifully when the Holy One cries, *"How can I give you up, Ephraim?"* Justice demands judgment. Love seeks restoration.
One verse deserves special attention because it reveals the true root of Israel's problem: *"Because you did not serve Adonai your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart..."*
The issue is not simply disobedience. It is joyless obedience. The Hebrew word **simcha** means more than happiness. It describes the deep delight that flows from walking in fellowship with God. The Baal Shem Tov often taught that despair is one of the enemy's greatest weapons because a discouraged heart loses sight of God's goodness. While emotions rise and fall, the covenant life is sustained by remembering the faithfulness of God. Notice where Moshe began this parasha. Not with curses. Not with commandments. But with **thanksgiving**. That is no coincidence. Gratitude guards the heart against forgetfulness. An entitled heart easily wanders. A thankful heart remembers. Our sages tell of two farmers who harvested identical vineyards. One constantly complained about what he lacked. The other thanked God for every cluster of grapes. At the end of the season, someone asked the rabbi which farmer possessed the greater harvest. The rabbi answered, "The one who knew how to rejoice in it." The difference was not abundance. The difference was perspective. How often we pray for greater blessings when what God desires is greater gratitude. Moshe then reminds Israel, *"Remember Adonai your God, for it is He who gives you power to acquire wealth."* This verse destroys both arrogance and laziness. Our labor matters. Our diligence matters. But every gift, every opportunity, every ability ultimately comes from Heaven. As James later writes, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above."*

The sages observed that Egypt—**Mitzrayim**—comes from a root suggesting narrowness or confinement. Israel's redemption was not simply an escape from slavery but a journey into covenant identity. The same is true for every disciple of Messiah. Salvation is more than forgiveness. It is transformation. It is learning to think, worship, and live as citizens of God's Kingdom. Jeremiah foresaw this day when he declared that God would establish a **Brit Chadasha**, a New Covenant, writing His Torah upon the hearts of His people. Notice carefully what changes. The Torah does not change. The heart changes.

Ezekiel likewise promises that God will remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh, placing His Spirit within His people so that they might walk in His statutes. This is precisely what Messiah accomplishes. Yeshua does not abolish covenant holiness. He internalizes it. He becomes the living Torah, demonstrating perfect obedience to the Word and empowering His followers through His Ruach HaKodesh to walk in faithful covenant relationship. Now the opening image of Ki Tavo returns with greater beauty than ever. The **bikkurim** were never merely an agricultural offering. They were prophetic. Rav Sha'ul declares in 1 Corinthians 15 that Messiah is **the Firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. Every Israelite understood the symbolism. The first sheaf guaranteed the coming harvest. One did not fear that no harvest would follow because the firstfruits were already accepted before the Lord. Likewise, Messiah's resurrection is Heaven's guarantee that death will not have the final word. The resurrection of Yeshua is God's declaration that the final harvest has already begun. This transforms our understanding of covenant life. We no longer bring baskets filled with figs and barley to the Temple. Instead, as Rav Sha'ul writes in Romans 12, we present ourselves as **living sacrifices**. Our time. Our gifts. Our resources. Our worship. Our obedience. These become the firstfruits we lay before the King. Rabbi Moshe Alshich beautifully observed that the firstfruits sanctify everything that follows. In the same way, when we dedicate the first and best of our lives to God, every other area of life is brought under His lordship.

As we conclude this study of Ki Tavo, four enduring truths remain.
First, **gratitude is the foundation of covenant faithfulness**. Israel's first act in the land was not conquest but thanksgiving. Worship precedes victory. Second, **obedience is the fruit of love, not the price of redemption**. God redeemed Israel before giving the Torah. Likewise, Messiah redeems us by grace and then teaches us to walk in holiness. Third, **remembrance protects the covenant heart**. Forgetfulness is the seedbed of idolatry, while continual remembrance keeps us near the God who has redeemed us. Finally, **every firstfruits offering points to Messiah**. He is the faithful Son of Israel, the perfect offering, the One who bore the covenant curse so that the blessing promised to Avraham might reach all nations. Therefore, brothers and sisters, each Shabbat we stand spiritually where Israel once stood—between blessing and curse, remembrance and forgetfulness, life and death. Every week the Holy One invites us to renew our covenant, to bring Him once again the firstfruits of our hearts. May our worship never become routine. May our obedience never lose its joy. May our gratitude never fade into entitlement. And may we continually fix our eyes upon **Yeshua HaMashiach**, the Firstfruits of the resurrection, the Mediator of the **Brit Chadasha**, and the One through whom the covenant promises of the Torah find their ultimate fulfillment. ***Ken yehi ratzon****—may this be His will.*

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")