

TIMELESS TORAH

KI TAVO: THE MOMENT OF TRANSITION

Setting the Stage

Dr Lisa Miller, Professor and Director of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University, explores the relationship between spirituality and mental health in her 2021 book, *The Awakened Brain*. She distinguishes between what she calls 'achieving awareness', in which our focus is on planning, solving and controlling, and 'awakened awareness'.

Awakened awareness is more receptive. It means becoming conscious of the routines that fill our lives and of the spiritual possibilities around us. Miller argues that when we consciously cultivate this awareness, we strengthen the neural pathways associated with spirituality.

There is something similar in Moshe Rabbeinu's message to the Jewish people in this week's parshah. Having completed the summary of the mitzvot that occupies much of the sefer, Moshe prepares the nation for the covenant with Hashem that will take place at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. In a statement with dramatic implications, he declares that 'on this day, Hashem your God has commanded you to observe all of these statutes', before going on to describe the profound connection created by the mitzvot between Hashem and the Jewish people (26:16-19).

The emphasis on the word 'today' is immediately apparent. In this short passage it appears three times, and four more times in the passage that follows. Rashi explains that although all the mitzvot were commanded at Har Sinai, Moshe is urging the people to keep the inspiration of Sinai fresh. Today, and every day, they should approach the Torah as though they were experiencing it for the first time.

The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743), however, understands Moshe to be announcing a significant change. Until now, many of the mitzvot had remained theoretical. The Jewish people had studied and explored their details throughout their years in the Wilderness, but many could only be observed in Eretz Yisrael. Now that was about to change. Very shortly they would cross the Jordan, and the time had come to put theory into practice.

This is where Lisa Miller's distinction becomes particularly relevant. The challenge facing the Jewish people was no longer simply to understand the Torah in the unique spiritual environment of the Wilderness. They were about to enter a world in which farming, commerce and the demands of ordinary life could easily take over. The question was whether they could carry that awareness with them and continue to strengthen the spiritual pathways that connected them to Hashem.

A Unique Entity

This idea of making constant choices that strengthen our spirituality echoes Moshe Rabbeinu's underlying message in this passage. With their acceptance of the Torah and mitzvot, he tells the Jewish people, they enter into a profound reciprocal relationship with Hashem: *Et Hashem he'emarta hayom... vaHashem he'emircha hayom* - 'You have affirmed Hashem today... and Hashem has affirmed you today' (26:17-18).

The term *he'emarta* is unusual. Rashi writes that it has no parallel elsewhere in Tanach, and the commentaries discuss its precise meaning. According to the aggadic interpretation cited in Masechet Berachot (6a), it means that we declare Hashem to be single and unique.

The people are on the cusp of a new national existence. Soon they will settle into their homes and become occupied with the ordinary business of farming and commerce. Yet rather than allowing those concerns to become all-consuming, they declare their focus on Hashem and His mitzvot, consciously making space for Hashem within their lives.

In return, Hashem affirms us as a unique entity amongst humanity, 'a treasured nation' (26:19). Indeed, the Gemara states metaphorically that these verses are written in Hashem's tefillin, mirroring the Shema declaration that is written in ours.

Along similar lines, the Chizkuni suggests that *he'emarta* is related to the word *temurah*, mean



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ing exchange. By choosing to place the mitzvot at the centre of their lives, the Jewish people actively exchange all other deities for Hashem, and Hashem, in return, exchanges all other nations for the Jewish people.

This, then, is the backdrop to the covenant of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. Life in the Wilderness had provided spirituality without the same need for effort. The transition to life in Eretz Yisrael would require something different: the conscious strengthening of those spiritual neural pathways.

Divine Democracy

After this introduction to the covenant, Moshe, together with the elders who would assume leadership after his death, instructs the people that assume leadership after his death, instructs the people that when they cross the Jordan, they should take several large stones and set them up at the place of their crossing and at Mount Gerizim. The stones would form part of the covenant, with the entire Torah inscribed upon them in several languages.

The Netziv (d. 1893) explains that the emphasis of this covenant was not simply the personal commitment of the Jewish people to the Torah. They were also committing themselves to becoming a beacon of morality and monotheism to the nations around them.

Almost paradoxically, however, these instructions are addressed not to the leadership but to the *am*, the general populace (see 27:1 and 11). Although the whole Torah formed the basis of this covenant, its fulfilment would not be confined to the leaders and scholars of the nation.

Here, ordinary people, including those unable to delve deeply into the intricacies of the law, would demonstrate the truth of Hashem to the nations of the world. Again, as the Jewish people moved from a nomadic existence to becoming a settled nation in their own land, the emphasis shifts from theory to action. The beauty of the Torah and the reality of a life connected to Hashem would be demonstrated through the commitment of each individual, whatever their level of scholarship.

The Kli Yakar (d. 1619) points to another aspect of this democratisation of the Torah. He notes two differences between the *Tochachah* (Admonition) of this parshah and that of Parshat Bechukotai. Firstly, the *Tochachah* in this week's parshah is twice the length of the earlier one, containing ninety-eight curses rather than the forty-nine of Parshat Bechukotai. Secondly, while the curses in Bechukotai are written in the plural, those in Ki Tavo are conspicuously addressed in the singular, even when they concern the nation as a whole, such as drought or invasion.

The crucial point, explains the Kli Yakar, is that this second *Tochachah* comes after the covenant of *arvut*, collective responsibility. While the first *Tochachah* was addressed to a nation of individuals, this one is twice as long because each individual now bears a measure of responsibility for everyone else.

As the Netziv taught, the final message of the Wilderness era is that the Torah, mitzvot and the task of demonstrating Hashem's presence in the world are not the responsibility of a spiritual elite. It is a shared mission, carried by the entire Jewish people.

The challenge of entering Eretz Yisrael was therefore not simply to remember what had been learned in the Wilderness. It was to ensure that the spirituality of the Wilderness could survive the transition into ordinary life, when the demands and distractions of a settled existence would inevitably compete for people's attention.

That may be the challenge for us as well. Spirituality rarely disappears in one dramatic moment. More often, life simply becomes busy and routine takes over. Moshe Rabbeinu's repeated message of *hayom* is a reminder that our relationship with Hashem has to be renewed continually. In Lisa Miller's language, it requires us to cultivate that 'awakened awareness': to remain receptive to the spiritual dimension of lives that might otherwise become consumed by everything else.

**NITZAVIM & VAYEILECH: The Courage to
Continue: Finding the Strength to Move
Forward**