

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

The Great Assembly

Ki Tavo

This week's Torah reading has some famous and fascinating vignettes. Best known is the text for bringing BIKURIM, First-fruits, which becomes the script for retelling of the Exodus story at our annual Seder. The parsha also has the dreaded TOCHACHA or curses which is chanted solte voce to lend an even more spine-chilling mood. But this year I would like to discuss an aspect of the instructions in the middle of the parsha for a great assembly or gathering in Shechem after entering the Holy Land.

The Torah goes out of its way to describe the awesome scene:

And it shall be, on the day when you cross the Jordan River to the land which God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime. You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over into 'a land flowing with milk and honey,' just as the God of your fathers promised you. Therefore, it shall be, that on Mount Eval you shall set up these

stones, which I command you today... And there you shall build an altar of stone to God... and offer burnt offerings on it to God... and shall eat there, and rejoice before God. Then Moshe and the kohanim, the Levites, spoke to all Israel, saying, "Be silent, and listen, O Israel: This day you have become the people of God. Therefore, heed the voice your God, and observe His commandments and His statutes which I command you today." (D'varim 27:2-10)

At that point, they are instructed to assign six Tribes to stand on verdant, fertile Mount Gerizim and six Tribes to face them from the barren, brown Mount Eval. Then the leaders, gathered in the valley between, will declare curses on people that commit certain crimes in secret. The gathered nation will respond to each curse with a hearty 'AMEIN!'.

There's so much to discuss in this quote about the unique experience, but I will limit myself to one point. The word for 'be silent!' is HASKEIT. This word appears nowhere else in Tanach, which obviously makes translation difficult. The Aramaic translations (followed by Rashi) seem to opt for 'pay attention' or 'heed'. S'forno says 'illustrate', which hints at visual aids, maybe the white washed rocks. As a former middle

school teacher, I like that. But the Hebrew expert Reb Ya'akov Mecklenburg suggests 'be silent!'. Which has become, I believe, the most popular translation.

The Talmud (B'rachot 63b) offers two more options. The word could be related to the word for KITA, a class or learning group. Perhaps, it's related to a word for grinding, because Torah study requires such hard work.

This is all remarkable. Here we have one of the largest public gatherings in history and the first word spoken is incomprehensible! Is that good pedagogic style? Maybe. This massive meeting is being told to accept the Torah that very day (both in verse 9 and verse 10). This is understood to mean that every Jew must accept the Torah personally every day anew. Here's a word which can mean different things to different individuals. 'Heed', 'Quiet', 'Toil', 'Share', or 'Imagine'; every participant must renew their commitment to Torah daily, but in their own personally satisfying way.

Then there's the list of 11 sins for which perpetrators should be cursed, to which all present proclaim their assent. Amein! However, we then have an item which seems out of place: Cursed be whoever will not

uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them, and all the people shall say, 'Amein!' (verse 26). This curse seems to be about positive Mitzvot which are not performed. But the rest of the list are prohibitions or negative Mitzvot, which are transgressed.

So, there are commentaries who agree that we have one catch-all curse for non-compliance with positive commandments. There are others who claim that this is a summarizing verse, referring to the enumerated 11 sins.

Reb Aharon Lichtenstein z"l takes a different and, I think, radical approach to this verse. The verse is discussing those with the potential and opportunity to not only keep the whole Torah, but help others to, as well. He suggests:

So too, those who have learned Torah but do not perform, anger God more than those without knowledge or potential... Whoever has the potential and the opportunity but doesn't use them, is held more responsible than one who never had any conception of what was expected of him... Those who have the opportunity, have an obligation to strengthen Torah for the entire community at large...

In Elul, where it is incumbent upon of

all of us to perform introspection, we must recognize what opportunities are given to us, what potential we have, what realms we can succeed in. For B'nei Torah especially, there can be no doubt that our obligations are so much greater because of the opportunities within our reach. These responsibilities may be heavy, and we pray that God will help us in our burden of achieving spiritual growth and moral success, both for ourselves and for the community as a whole. (Delivered at Yeshivat Har Etzion, 1995)

This idea is very potent and fits in well with the entire scene being portrayed by the parsha of the entire nation standing as one. I think, as well, that Moshe Rabeinu began and ended this remarkable spectacle with two very powerful messages. The first is very personal: Every day we must commit fully to Torah. The final is communal: Everyone must do what they can to encourage the ultimate success of the Jewish Nation, and that means fulfilling the Torah, everywhere and everyone for all time.

