Ki Tavo: Devarim (Deuteronomy)

What's it all about?

Moses instructs the Israelites **to settle and work the Promised Land** once they enter it, bringing *bikkurim*, or the first-ripened fruit, to the Temple in gratitude of God's generous abundance. The laws of tithes are mentioned, and Moses reminds the Israelites again that they are God's chosen people. The parsha concludes with Moses's rebuke, a long account of **all the terrible things that will happen to them if they fail to follow God's commandments.**



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"Until this day, God did not give you a heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear"

Take a deeper dive

"One reason religion has survived in the modern world despite four centuries of secularization," the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote, "is that it answers the three questions every reflective human being will ask at some time in his or her life: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?"

These are questions that neither science nor technology could possibly address. "The result," Rabbi Sacks observed, "is that contemporary culture sets before us an almost infinite range of possibilities, but does not tell us who we are, why we are here, and how we should live." This week's parsha goes a long way towards addressing these profound, seminal questions, and they do it by telling a miraculous story, **the story of us.**

Each year, Moses instructs the people, as you bring your *bikkurim*, your first-ripened fruit, to the Temple as an expression of gratitude, that "you must raise your voice and you must say before God, your God: 'An Aramean sought to be the destroyer of my forefather. He went down to Egypt and sojourned there with his family, a small number of people, and he became a great, mighty, and populous nation there.'" The story goes on, recounting the Exodus and its miracles and concluding with the inheritance of the Promised Land.

You might expect, Rabbi Sacks continued, that when celebrating the soil and its produce, we would be commanded to thank God for creating nature and its life-sustaining bounty. But instead, **we're commanded to recall our history.** The story we're commanded to tell, Rabbi Sacks wrote, "is the story of our ancestors. It is a narrative explaining why I am here, and why the people to whom I belong is what it is and where it is. There was nothing remotely like this in the ancient world, and there is nothing quite like it today… That is why Jewish identity has proven to be the most tenacious the world has ever known: the only identity ever sustained by a minority dispersed throughout the world for two thousand years, one that eventually led Jews back to the land and state of Israel, turning Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living speech again after a lapse of many centuries in which it was used only for poetry and prayer. **We are what we remember**, and the first-fruits declaration was a way of ensuring that Jews would never forget."

And not forgetting isn't just a tool to make sure we always recall the past. "The longer you can look back," Winston Churchill wisely observed, "the further you can see forward." As we tell the story of our forefathers, we're telling, too, the story of generations to come.

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