

Out in the Field : Dvar Torah for Ki Tavo and Elul 2020

They put their hands in the earth, they care for animals and for the land, and if all goes well, they are blessed with produce to feed themselves, their families and their communities.

They are farmers – and other agricultural workers - people who are intensely and directly connected with the growing of food, and with the earth. This week's parsha, Ki Tavo, lays out a beautiful ceremony that those who own and work in the fields were to perform once they entered and lived in the land of Israel: the presentation of the first fruits – *bikkurim*. When they harvested their first fruits each year, a person was to stand before the kohen – the priest – with an offering of this produce in a basket. The Israelite farmer would then recite a formula expressing gratitude for God's liberation of our people from slavery in Egypt and gratitude for the bounty of the land to which God has led them.

Presenting the basket and saying the formula evoked both humility and gratitude. The ritual was a reminder that the bounty of the land was a gift from God.

The farmer would hand over the first fruit, but after that, all the other fruit of the harvest belonged to the farmer and his family. It then became - simply – their food. Or not so simply. Because having brought the *bikkurim*, the produce was now infused with the spirit of the first fruit offering. From the ordinary, the food became holy.

Judaism always invites us to find holiness in the most mundane daily activities, such as eating. In our time, we might do this by reciting brachot – blessings – for food, or by eating food that is healthy for us. We may bring holiness into the act of eating by consuming food that is produced in a sustainable manner, and by workers who are treated fairly. All of these ways to eat with intention raise the act of eating to a higher spiritual place. And they remind us continually that we can meet the Divine in the most earthly of activities.

In the month of Elul, for this Torah portion, we might think about the following beautiful idea. A Hasidic parable imagines God is like a King, a metaphor often used in these parables. All year long, the king resides mostly in the palace. Those wishing to approach the king must journey to the capital and pass through many gates, corridors and watchful guards before coming to the throne room. Those procedures can be daunting. It is not easy to access the king.

But there are times when the king comes out into the fields where people are toiling and growing their food. At such times, anyone can approach. The king receives all with a smiling face. The farmer with his cow can be as close to the king as the highest ranking minister in the royal court.

The month of Elul – this month we are in *now* – is a time when the king is in the field. As we are approaching the High Holy Days and preparing ourselves spiritually to come closer to God, God is “in the field,” walking among us, so to speak, waiting to be approached.

So imagine that we are preparing to meet the king. The encounter could be very powerful. How can we make the most of it? Certainly, we might want to prepare in advance.

We consider what we want to say, to ask for, to be grateful for. That is the work of Elul, the work of preparation. Through this month of preparation, as we toil in the field, or in our offices or homes; as we eat and sleep and go about the normal routines of our days, let us choose one or two of these mundane routines and think about how they are or could be holy. Let us infuse our earthly activities with an awareness that the king is in the field, that God's presence is close, and that we can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and the holy.

Shabbat Shalom