

פרשת כי-תבא

OVERVIEW

Every year the Jewish farmer pays homage to the Master of his destiny by bringing the first fruit of his harvest to the temple.

The people's first act on entering the land will be the solemn declaration to respect and carry out the Torah's laws and teachings to be pronounced in the form of blessings on Mount Gerizim and curses on Mount Ebal.

The sidrah concludes with an ominously realistic recitation of the string of disasters that will befall the people if they defect from G-d's law.

COMMENTARY

The Declaration at the Offering of the First Fruit

The text of this declaration spoken at the moment of intense joy and satisfaction characterizes the farmer who tills the Jewish soil. It is a moment when he normally experiences a sense of elation at having successfully subdued the land whose proud master he is. The Jewish farmer bows down to his G-d and declares humbly, "My ancestors were slaves in Egypt from where G-d freed them. We did not own land, knew no prosperity. G-d gave us both". The awareness of the nation's humble beginning and the glorious epos of its national birth formed the essence of Jewish independence that is the sole guarantee for the secure future of the Jewish people.

By adhering conscientiously to the laws regarding the poor, the farmer will experience a sense of moral strength and satisfaction. This inspires his declaration

before G-d: "I have supported the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow... I have not transgressed any of the commandments that you have commanded me and have forgotten nothing.... I have not eaten of it (the first fruit) at a time of mourning or in a state of uncleanness and I have used none of it for the dead" (26: 13-14).

Here the law alludes to the heathen custom of stocking the tombs and graves with large amounts of provisions to sustain the dead during their long journey into the unknown. In stark contrast to this and similar customs, Judaism does not allot material benefits to the dead. This is neither lack of respect nor indifference. It is an attitude reflected in the simplicity of the Jewish funeral rites and the coffin and clothing of the dead. Life is supreme. It is our duty to transform our earthly existence into a true divine service through self-sanctification and the faithful fulfillment of G-d's laws.

Ebal and Gerizim

Man is distinguished by his ability to choose between good and evil, between life and death. The two mountains that face each other in the vicinity of the city Shechem symbolize this choice. Gerizim, verdant with vegetation and flowers, is the very picture of life. Ebal, naked rock and boulders, symbolizes desolation, death. The twelve tribes, divided in two groups, position themselves on the mountaintops. The Holy Ark and the levites are placed in the area between the two mountains. Although the text lists only the curses that the levites address to the tribes on Mount Ebal, each curse was preceded by a blessing alluding to the opposite of the act that was cursed and pronounced in the direction of Mount Gerizim. To each pronouncement the people responded with "Amen" as an expression of its firm determination to adhere unconditionally to the entire body of Sinaitic teachings.

Four solemn ceremonies were to be performed immediately on the people's reaching the land:

1- The Torah was to be engraved on the twelve stones that are erected on the bleak summit of Mount Ebal (not on verdant Mount Gerizim, to emphasize that the observance of the Law of G-d does not depend on any earthly condition).

2- These stones are to be formed into an altar.

3- The covenant with G-d is renewed by way of these symbolic acts.

4- The pronouncements by the levites and the response by the people.

Here for the first time we find the formulation "and Moshe commanded the people on that same day" (27:11). He does not address the nation's representative eldest but the whole nation as guarantors of Israel's loyalty to G-d.

According to the text (27:3), every word contained in the Pentateuch was inscribed on the twelve stones. The purpose of these twelve monoliths was not to serve as a memorial monument designed to outlast the centuries. They were directed to the generation of Joshua as a grandiose proclamation of the Torah's supreme role in the life of the Jewish nation. There would be no need to perpetuate this timeless message in the form of inscriptions and engravings. Jewish archeology records relatively little evidence of such ancient practices. The dramatic evidence of Jewish Tradition is the most powerful medium of immortalizing the achievements of the Jewish people.

### The Warnings

With incredible clarity and precision Moshe advises the people of the consequences of its conduct. The warnings and predictions of the curses and the misfortune that will

befall the people if it will break faith with the law of G-d are far more extensive and detailed than the blessings that the nation as a whole may expect. Doubtless this is due to Moshe's prophetic insight regarding the real danger of the people's being tempted to desert its G-d.

We need not enumerate the terrifying sequence of the ominous prophecies that all too often have become tragic reality.

The common denominator of these punishments is that they apply collectively to the guilty and the innocent, to the old and the young, dwellers of the east and of the west. One positive effect will be the closer bond between people that was often lacking during the centuries of dispersion.

Here we confront one of the most emotionally upsetting chapters in the Torah that is so tragically illustrated by the traumatic events of our own time, Verse upon verse spells out the drama of the Jew at the mercy of the oppressor "Your sons and your daughters will be given to another people, your eyes will see it... but your hand will be powerless.... there will be no place of rest for the sole of your foot.... you will be in terror day and night...".

The warnings became reality because the people failed to heed them and deserted their G-d and His Torah. By the same token, the curse will not persist, for the time will come when "G-d will bring about our return to Zion and we shall awaken as from a dream. Then our mouth will fill with laughter and our tongue with exultation" (Ps. 126).

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