

## THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF G-D, GO WE...

A commentary on *Parashat Ki Tavo*  
By Rabbi Sybil A. Sheridan

‘When you enter into the land...’ Moses urges the people in this *Parasha*, they must take of the first fruits of the harvest, bring them to the Tabernacle and give them to the High Priest saying the words made famous through the Passover Haggadah:

“A fugitive Aramean was my father...”

In a formula that describes the going down to Egypt, the slavery and the rescue from Egypt by the Eternal...

“Who brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with great awesomeness and with sign and with wonders.”

Though we read this passage at Passover, the context here, the giving of the first fruits associates it with the Festival of *Shavuot*, - although it could also refer to *Sukkot* and *Pesach* - the other harvest festivals. We read it just two weeks before the start of the *Yamim Noraim* - *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. The phrase, therefore, and the memory it conjures of Jewish History - of the going down and the coming up out of Egypt is key to every major holy day of the year. The message is clear. Though we may be entering a new stage of settlement, this is not ‘blood and soil’ ideology.

The people of Israel have come and gone from the land in the past... they are immigrants, tolerated in the land only because of the grace of G-d.

*We are always moving - not only physically from place to place, but also materially from blessings to curses, from prosperity to poverty and back again, and spiritually - wavering between goodness and its opposite*

Later in the *Parashat* we read of the many blessings the land will bring - and we read of the many curses that will come to us if we fail to observe G-d’s *mitzvot*. The blessings and curses are to be delivered to the people in a particular ritualistic manner. Once they have crossed the Jordan, the leaders of six tribes will climb mount Ebal, the mountain of blessings and the leaders of the six other tribes will climb mount Gerizim, the mountain of curses. As the people pass through the valley below, the blessings and the curses are shouted out, so the people receive the message while they are moving...on the march to their final destination.

We are always moving - not only physically from place to place, but also materially from blessings to curses, from prosperity to poverty and back again, and spiritually - wavering between goodness and its opposite. We Jews today are very fortunate for while we still tend to move around, it is largely through choice, not compulsion and, unlike our ancestors, we live comfortably in two worlds, that of our Jewishness, and that of the general culture around.

But others, as we are all too well aware, keep moving, not through their own volition but because of war or famine, prejudice or persecution. The constant reminder is in our texts, our liturgy and our tradition of our origins as slaves. Our rescue from Egypt, through some miracle, chance or circumstance - certainly not through any merit of our own - should make us aware of the chance and circumstance that brings other nationalities to our door. We know, when we look into the face of a stranger, that ‘there but for the grace of G-d, go we ...’

The first fruits brought to the priest were to be shared between the Levite and the stranger, the orphan and the widow - those who are impoverished and who cannot work the land for themselves. From the very first moment when we thank G-d for our newfound safety in a land of our own, our obligation to help others newly come to the land must be realized.