

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Ki Tavo

Let's say you walk out to get your mail, and beneath the normal dispiriting heap of bills and solicitations, you notice an envelope from the White House. It says on the front, "Personal Message – Urgent." Let's suppose for a moment that it really **is** a personal message to you from the President of the United States (not merely some form letter), composed on official stationery in the hand of the Commander-in-Chief himself.

I bet you'd sit down immediately – perhaps even before pouring yourself another cup of coffee – and read the letter with the utmost attention (if not with fear and trembling), carefully considering every single word and phrase contained therein (regardless of your own political persuasion, or whether you support all the policies of this particular president). You'd most likely read it through once, and then go back and read it a second time (with coffee). And what if you found that, in this letter, the President of the United States is summoning **you** to carry out an important mission involving national security, something genuinely serious, and that he is asking for your personal help **now**, today?

I think most people would jump (or at least stumble) to attention, ready and eager to contribute their efforts in the present hour of pressing need. In fact, they'd probably feel flattered that they had been singled out to help on such a weighty matter.

Okay, if you're still not convinced, imagine that the same letter arrives from some other important (and benevolent) authority figure of your own choice, summoning you to a special assignment, **now, today**. There has to be somebody each of us would listen to.

Each of us **does have** a missive, addressed personally (and lovingly) to us, from the Master of the World, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the real Commander-in-Chief. This message calls each of us, individually, to the most crucial (and cosmic) assignment we could possibly imagine: to make ourselves (and all of Creation) holy. It must be done **now** – today.

The "letter" is our Torah.

The Torah is not ancient (read "archaic") history. The Torah is here and now (or, hear and now!). It is present tense; it calls to us today. If you don't take my word for it – and I won't blame you if you don't – at least lend your ear to Moshe, our teacher, in this week's portion.

"This day, the Eternal, your God, commands you to perform these decrees and the statutes, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul" (26:16).

What did Moshe mean by telling the Children of Israel that God had commanded them "this day" to perform the *mitzvot* of the Torah? Moshe was speaking at the very end of his life (his last hours, really), as the Children of Israel readied themselves to enter the Land of Israel, decades after the Law had been given. God had commanded them to keep the Torah 40 years previously, and Moshe had faithfully taught them the laws in all their detail during the travels in the Wilderness. "This day"?

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Rashi cites a famous Midrash to explain what Moshe had in mind. (And let's teach these words diligently unto ourselves, now and forever after.) "Every day, let them [the commandments] be new in your eyes, as if you were commanded regarding them **today**."

(Interestingly, the wording of the actual text of *Midrash Tanchuma* is slightly different: "Every day, let the Torah be beloved to you, as if you received it from Mt. Sinai **today**.")

In fact, there is another Midrash (also cited by Rashi) that comes to explicate a similar verse from the Shema: "And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:6). Why does Moshe say "this day"? Rashi writes: "Let them [the words of Torah] not be in your eyes like an antiquated edict, to which nobody pays attention, but like a new one that everyone runs to read!"

The Torah is not some old solicitation. We should see it as a **new** set of assignments and responsibilities, a **new** book of instructions, each and every day. The mission is, indeed, urgent. Rambam (Maimonides) famously writes that a person should imagine the whole world as evenly balanced between merits and transgressions. Your next mitzvah is needed to tip the balance and redeem the whole world!

So it is not enough just to study Torah, though that is a tremendously great achievement. (Every last word.) We are called upon to learn it with the same enthusiasm (and sense of immediate obligation) we would give to perusing that personal presidential letter in our mailbox. We must see the Torah as **new** every day; we must accept the commandments upon ourselves anew each and every day. The Torah is a personal message from God to each one of us. Given when? **Today**.

Though this concept is true all the time, it is especially apropos in this sacred month of Elul, as we approach the Days of Awe. After all, this is the season dedicated to *teshuva*, to self-transformation, when the shofar blast has the power to wake us out of the spiritual slumber in which we spend most of our days (even with all that coffee). We are approaching a **New** Year, a time to pave a new (and improved) path in our observance of Torah, and our commitment to come closer to God. We can become new people. This is what *teshuva* (repentance) really means.

An awesome task, yes, but we should never forget that God wants each and every one of us to succeed on Rosh Hashanah, and to succeed in becoming a new person in the New Year ahead. He is (always) ready to give us Divine help in purifying ourselves, but we have to show we're interested in going that route. We have to make the effort to turn back to Him, to approach the Torah – and its commandments – with a sense of enthusiasm and a new spirit. There's no better time to start than **today**. Don't bother checking your mailbox. The message is right here:

"This day, the Eternal, your God, commands you to perform these decrees and the statutes, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul."

Shabbat Shalom!

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