

Ki Tavo – September 4, 2020

Our ancestors had been travelling in the desert for almost 40 years, and God makes a surprise disclosure in tonight's parsha Ki Tavo, telling the Israelites that during those 40 years, God had ensured that we did not have "hearts to know, eyes to see or ears to hear." But now, God was giving them back to us. Think this through with me. For 40 years, we actually lived without things that are a natural part of how we live, our hearts, our eyes and ears. So, what was that all about?

In the preceding lines, God recalls what our ancestors had witnessed: everything that happened to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, then all the great trials and signs and wonders in the desert. And there were also small miracles that lasted for 40 years – clothing that never wore out and shoes that never needed mending. God made sure we were not distracted by the minutiae of daily life. It seems God had only one purpose for us in those 40 years....to only see to God.

So, why then would God have withheld our hearts, our eyes and our ears? After all, these seem to be essential tools for how we shape our reality and how we navigate our lives. Even here, at Temple Shalom, in our sanctuary, it is our eyes and ears that help us engage in prayer and participate as part of our community – as we read, pray, listen and sing.

And of course, we add our hearts to the mix, adding our thoughts and feelings, our intuition and our past experiences to how we view the world.

These are our trusted tools, and I suspect that each of us reckons we've got this pretty much down pat. Tonight's parsha Ki Tavo suggests that we probably don't.

There is a message here. In withholding, God saw our go-to tools as hindrances, not helpers. How could that be? We are told specifically: our heart does *not* know, as a reminder that our thoughts and feelings and intuitions are not reliable. Similarly, our eyes cannot be trusted to really see. It's true: We are limited to a narrow field of vision, conditioned to see what we want or need to see and to

interpret all that visual information against the filters of our own experience. And we see what is in front of us with no knowledge of what came before or what will come after. And our ears do *not* hear everything. We sort out all the noise and again, we hear only our preferred truths.

Even here tonight at Temple Shalom, we can acknowledge that each of us will experience our service differently. We are all receiving the same camera feed, the same words and music, but we will each have a different experience, a different memorable moment, maybe a prayer or a single word or a melody or note that hits the right emotion, perhaps joy or sorrow or healing, something unique to each of us tonight.

And if we think about the centuries that our ancestors had endured in slavery, their senses would certainly colour how they viewed the new world they were facing.

So, instead, those filters were all turned off, for 40 years. As individuals and as a nation, our ancestors instead saw, felt and heard exactly the same things: They were given an equal glorious opportunity to simply experience the unknowable, the unexplainable, the magical, the miracles, the great signs and wonders, the sublime, with no human filters. For 40 years, they didn't eat bread or drink wine that would dull their senses, and they weren't distracted by the minutiae of daily lives, like tending to our clothes or our shoes. We, they, were simply asked to be present.

Tonight, in Ki Tavo, after 40 years, God trusted that by this time, we could again be given access to our hearts and eyes and ears again, and that we could hold it all in balance: Experiencing God directly for so long had helped our ancestors open wider the limits of what our hearts could know, what our eyes could see, and what our ears could hear. The Divine had a comfortable place within them.

Our modern era does not make it easy for us to find this balance today. The Enlightenment which gave rise to our movement was based on rationalism, the

rise of science and double-blinded research. Truth became defined by what can be observed and recorded, not what was felt. And as a broad societal movement, the Enlightenment pushed down and away superstition and spirituality, the unknowable. And religions, all religions including Judaism, have taken a huge hit over the past two centuries, with science and its certainty winning out over the spiritual, the unexplainable and the unknowable.

Yet, beauty and nature, music and art, births and deaths and the experiences of sacred communities and sacred music all suggest that there is something more, a higher order, a moral and ethical code far above the mundane laws of our land, what we might call the God experience. This is the lesson of Ki Tavo.

We are reminded that we are profoundly limited if we experience the world only with our eyes, ears and heart. Instead, we are encouraged to experience the joys and wonders that lie beyond, to sense the extraordinary without asking “why” or “how.” And Ki Tavo challenges us today in how we are to express Judaism and our way of life: Our covenant with God is not met by following the letter of the covenant but rather by living in its spirit.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God’s will.