



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 5, 2015

Ki Tavo

A Tale of a City and a Field



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

We are getting close. Tonight we begin to recite the *Selichot* prayers, indicating that Rosh Hashanah is a week away.

As one year comes to a close and another is about to begin, we could use these final days of 5775 to look back at what was, appreciate what we have accomplished and, above all, scrutinize our lives, talents, opportunities and skills to see how we can make the coming year even better.

If you could fix one thing in your life, what would it be? Say God was standing right in front of you – and He is – what single blessing would you ask for to enhance your life, everyone around you, and the world?

Our Torah portion relates one such blessing: *You shall be blessed in the city, and you shall be blessed in the field.*

What is the city? What is the field?

The key is to keep your hands in the field but your head in the city. The secret to all success is to keep working in your field without ever forgetting your higher purpose.

A TALE OF A CITY AND A FIELD

1. Out Standing Farmer (Joke)

A man is driving down a country road, when he spots a farmer standing in the middle of a huge field of grass. He pulls the car over to the side of the road and notices that the farmer is just standing there, doing nothing, looking at nothing.

The man gets out of the car, walks all the way out to the farmer and asks him, “Ah excuse me mister, but what are you doing? Why are you standing in the field like that?”

The farmer replies, “I’m trying to win a Nobel Prize.”

“How?” asks the man, puzzled.

“Well, I heard they give the Nobel Prize ... to people who are out standing in their field...”

2. Blessing for Fields and Cities

I would like to talk to you today about fields, fields and cities: being outstanding in your field and being blessed in your city.

It is an apt subject as we get close to Rosh Hashanah. Tonight we begin to recite the *Selichot* prayers, indicating that the High Holidays are just a week away.

As one year comes to a close and another is about to begin, we could use these final days of 5775 to look back at what was, appreciate what we have accomplished and, above all, scrutinize our lives, talents, opportunities and skills to see how we can make the coming year even better.

If you could fix one thing in your life, what would it be? Say God was standing right in front of you – and He is – what single blessing would you ask for to enhance your life, everyone around you, and the world at large?

Perhaps we can find one such blessing in this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Ki Tavo*.

And when we do, I think we will also find that being outstanding in a field requires something more than simply standing out in a field.

I think we will find that it takes a city.

3. Parshat Ki Tavo

Before we discuss this special blessing of *Parshat Ki Tavo*, let me ask you this question:

Would you agree that one of the big things that most people would like to improve is their family life, their work life, and the harmony between the two?

If you look back on the year just past, do you not recollect a few (or more) times when who you are and what you do conflicted? Perhaps you were too busy working to focus on your relationships. Perhaps, due to an important business meeting, you couldn't be there for your kids. Perhaps, to feed those kids, you had to work late and they went to bed without seeing their dad/mom. Perhaps you had to respond to an important text message while your spouse looked across the dinner table at you with a look that could melt cast iron.

How can you – and all of us – rectify such shortcomings in the new year?

The blessing that addresses the dichotomous relationship between where we live and where we work – which is found in this Torah portion – states:

*You shall be blessed in the city, and you shall be blessed in the field.*¹

¹ Deuteronomy 28:3.

Why does this blessing specify a city and a field? How do the two differ and what makes the blessing for each unique? Does a blessing in a city not hold in a field? Does a blessing in a field not hold in a city?

4. Talmud and Midrash

The Talmud² states that *you shall be blessed in the city* means that your home should be near a synagogue, and *you shall be blessed in the field* means that your assets should be close to the city, so that it shouldn't be burdensome to transport your produce from the field (where it is produced) to the city (where it is traded, sold, consumed and enjoyed).

Furthermore, the Midrash³ states that *you shall be blessed in the city* as a result of the mitzvot you perform in the city (i.e. at home), such as building a sukkah and lighting Shabbat candles; and you shall be blessed in the field as a result of the mitzvot you perform in the field, such as allowing the poor to collect fallen grains, and leaving the corners of the field unharvested for the needy.

What is the city? What is the field? What are the Talmud and Midrash teaching us?

5. A Tale of One City and One Field

We live our lives on two fronts: home and work. The *ir*, the city, represents our homes and families; the *sadeh*, the field, represents our workplaces and careers. The city is defined by where we dwell; the field is defined by where we work.

² Bava Metzia 107a.

³ Deuteronomy Rabba 7:8.

Of course, an actual city is comprised of many homes.⁴ Indeed, the *Sefer Yetzirah* – the “Book of Formation,” the oldest work of Kabbalah – describes all of creation in these terms. It says that every letter is like a building block (a home); two letters build two homes (AB or BA) and so forth. When all the homes come together in one collective whole, with one goal and a cohesive plan to reach it, this is called a city.

God created existence with letters; the letters formed homes; and when these homes come together as one incorporated unit, a city came into being, *Ir Elokeinu*, the City of God.⁵

Our macro purpose in building Jewish homes, schools, synagogues and communities, is to implement God’s vision by uniting all facets of creation in one complete city, inhabited, domesticated, elevated.⁶

The field is a little different. No one actually lives in the field. (We live in our homes, in our cities.) Rather, the fields are our places of production, our workplaces.⁷

We go out into the field – not an agricultural field anymore but a field of finance, medicine, education, etc. – and we try to be outstanding. We work to cultivate the metaphorical soil and reap the harvest.

The nature of the city, of how we interact at home, is very different than of our fields/workplaces. Also the skills needed for each are uniquely different.

Thus the Torah blesses both our homes and our workplaces separately.

6. Homes as Sanctuaries

When the Talmud states that the verse, *You shall be blessed in the city...* means that our homes should be near a synagogue, it means that literally. Our cities should be cohesive and we should live as a close-knit

⁴ See Torah Ohr, Vaeira, p. 55aff.

⁵ See Torah Ohr *ibid*.

⁶ See Ohr Hatorah, Ki Tavo, p. 1089-90.

⁷ See Sefer Hasichot 5750, vol. II, pp. 642-648.

community centered on the synagogue – the mini-sanctuary (*mikdash me'at*). But it also means that metaphorically. Our homes should resemble synagogues, places of spirituality and holiness – they should be sanctuaries for our families and guests or micro temples. In other words, close to the synagogue in proximity but also close to the synagogue in ideology.

And when the Talmud states that the verse, *And you shall be blessed in the field...* means that our assets should be close to the city, it means that we must ensure that our work should be not as an end in itself, but directed toward holy purposes; our field, should be close to our homes, to our private lives, to our spirituality. It should not be disconnected from who we are, but reflecting our purpose here on earth.

Often times our homes, our domestic lives are very different than our fields of endeavor. We compartmentalize so that we may work one way and live another way. Says the Torah: “You should be blessed in your fields so that your assets should be near to how you live – your work life should be close to your private life.” It shouldn’t be burdensome to transport your produce. There shouldn’t be a schism between what you produce in the field, the fruits of your labor, and the city, the home in which you live.

How does such a blessing become reality?

By living a Godly life which permeates both our homes and our workplaces – infusing our cities, our private homes, and our fields, our workplaces with higher values, with holiness, selflessness, and Godliness.

How do we do that?

The Midrash tells us how very clearly: *You shall be blessed in the city* as a result of the mitzvot you perform there and you shall be blessed in the field as a result of the mitzvot you perform there.

When your home, your city, is infused with light-generating mitzvot, and when your work, your field, is saturated with a higher calling – including feeding the poor and helping humanity – then, surely, *you shall be blessed in the city, you shall be blessed in the field.*

Marketing guru, Guy Kawasaki, puts it this way:

The best reason to start an organization is to make meaning; to create a product or service to make the world a better place... Great companies start because the founders want to change the world... not make a fast buck.

How to create symmetry between home and work, family and career? By infusing both with Torah and mitzvot. By making your home a spiritual sanctuary. By making sure there is no distance between how you live and what you produce, between the person you are and the assets you own.

7. Chassidic Story (Humor)

Such a goal is not easy to achieve, and we must be always vigilant not to take our eyes off the prize, so to speak.

A disciple of Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch, the fifth Chabad Rebbe, once opened a plant for the manufacture of galoshes.

Soon his every waking hour and thought was completely consumed by his new and flourishing business.

Said the Rebbe to him: "To insert one's feet into galoshes is a fairly common practice; but to insert one's head in galoshes...?"⁸

8. The Lesson for Us (Conclusion)

The lesson for us is clear:

Our homes, collectively our city, must emulate the House of God. They must become micro temples. This is the ultimate blessing that may be bestowed upon our homes.

⁸ Yanki Tauber in Once Upon A Chassid (Kehot).

And our work, our productivity, our assets, should endeavor to be close to our “homes” – to our spiritual abodes. Our hands should work overtime to create, shape and produce. But the focus of our work – our heads, our philosophies and ideologies, our beliefs and principles – must always remain on target: turning the many fragmented bricks into homes, the many homes into the city – the City of God.

By closing 5775 and entering 5776 with this principle in mind and heart, surely the year past shall be elevated and blessed, and the year ahead shall reap fruit that only the most beautiful field can produce, and *nachas* from our families and offspring that only our glorious homes can yield.

And the ultimate city, God’s City, the City of Jerusalem, shall be blessed and rebuilt completely and eternally and immediately with the coming of the Final Redemption! Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!