

## **Ki Tavo 5779**

### **The Fruits In The Basket**

Imagine what it was like the very first year of the Jewish calendar.

That happened thousands of years ago, when the people liberated from Egypt built a sanctuary in the desert – the *Mishkan* - to gather together, bring offerings and worship.

On the very first festival of Shavuot, fifty days after celebrating Passover, the ritual of the first fruits – that I described when I spoke to Taj – took place. Every person would bring the choicest fruits from their early harvest to the priest. Wheat and barley, vines and figs, pomegranates, olives and honey – the very best they had.

In the Zohar, the mystical commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Abba teaches that those fruits prompted a holy flow of energy from heaven along the route of the river that ran out of the Garden of Eden. That river carried all the secrets of the Torah directly from the Tree of Life into the world.

We might think that fruits of this kind of value would need to be very carefully carried. Perhaps in a golden container like the Ark; perhaps in a silver cup or on a bronze tray, at the very least.

But in fact, the reverse is the case. These most precious things were to brought to the priest in a *tene* – a basket. Not even the sort of basket we used this morning for the candy, but a dirtier, more humble basket that was used every day for carrying earth.

And yet, the first fruits were accepted by the priest, and the festival of Shavuot began.

There is a profound spiritual lesson in the relationship between the fruit and the basket.

Many faith traditions teach about finding the spiritual in the acts of the everyday. Opening or closing a door, changing our posture, even washing the dishes – all of these acts can be infused with a particular way of being present that elevates the moment and fills it with meaning (though as always with practice, this is easier to say than do – try it next time you are washing the dishes!).

As for us, we are often taught that Judaism is a ‘real-world’ religion, or practice, or faith. The earliest Rabbis taught very emphatically that we shouldn’t waste time contemplating how the world came into being or what lies beyond our own reality and the universe in which we live. *Barukh she-amar ve-hayah ha-olam*, the prayerbook says – we bless the One that took care of all those dimensions. But we are not that One.

This explains why our tradition puts so much emphasis on the everyday. The way we wake up in the morning, the food we choose to eat, the way we eat it, our family relationships, our private interactions with each other, the way we come together in community, our noting of the passage of time – all of these aspects of our everyday lives are governed by the holistic system of *mitzvot* – sacred obligations – set up over two thousand years ago and still being developed and refined today.

That system of *mitzvot* is the basket.

In themselves, these kind of *mitzvot* do not appear particularly appealing. Rules and more rules; restrictions and more restrictions. Can our kids glue sand to paper on Shabbat? What happens if we can’t find vinegar with kosher certification? I think that one of the tragedies of contemporary Judaism is that it can feel as though it’s become – well, a nuisance, a burden on our lives. An ugly basket we’d rather not be using, if we are honest. As we try to make our lives more meaningful, to feel spiritual, to cherish the divine spark that we know all of us contain, to find our way “back to the Garden,” why would we want to place limitations on ourselves when what we seek is expansive and transformative?

But that's when we need to remember that in fact there is something inside the basket; that it contains beautiful fruit.

And if we think about this for a moment, we know that it's true. Those everyday mitzvot are a container for some of the most precious and meaningful spiritual moments of our lives. That time we stood watching our mother light Shabbat candles and murmur the prayer; our memories of building a Sukkah or wrapping a Tallit; the moment we pause before we eat to bless our food, or the singing after we have eaten and are satisfied; the joy in a parent's eyes as their child is called to the Torah; the list goes on and on. Mitzvot are not just rituals – they are the baskets that we fill with spiritual meaning. Or in the Kabbalistic language I mentioned earlier, they form the bed of the river that flows from Eden.

In a very short while it will be Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. On those two days we evaluate our deeds from the past year – the mitzvot we performed and the opportunities we may have missed. And that is why it's so fitting that this particular Torah portion falls where it does in the annual cycle. It is there to remind us that the basket is real, that the fruit is precious; and that together, they fill our lives with meaning.

Shabbat shalom.