

This week's parasha is called *Ki Tavo* - literally, "when you come." The Israelites, remember, are near the end of their wanderings, and Moshe is giving over as much wisdom as possible before the people cross over into the land of Israel.

The parasha opens with a description of how to bring the bikkurim, the first fruits of our labors, to the place that God will elect, meaning to the holy temple in Jerusalem, as an offering of well-being.

As Chapter 26, verse 3 describes, you shall go to the Priest that serving in those days, and say, "I proclaim this day to Hashem your God, that I have come into the land that Hashem swore to our fathers to give us."

Now, the syntax is a little surprising. This is a commandment for all time, about what Israelite farmers are supposed to do, year after year. And each year, the mitzvah is to say, when bringing the first fruits, "I have come into the land that Hashem swore to give us."

Israeli commentator Nechama Leibowitz points out that the ancient Israelite farmer does not say what would perhaps be expected: "My ancestors came to the land which Hashem swore to give them." Rather, she writes, "[The farmer] proclaims in every generation, as long as the people dwell in the land, whenever he brings his first fruits, in thanks to the Almighty: *'I am come to the Land which Hashem swore to our fathers to give to them.'*"

Leibowitz writes further "The Israelites in every generation had to behave as if they themselves had just been brought there by the power and grace of their Creator. Every member of the house of Israel thus identifies herself personally with her people and its history, with what took place at the departure from Egypt, with its being brought to the Holy Land."

If you think this is midrashic nitpicking over syntax, consider that Torah commands a great deal of action from us, but Torah very rarely dictates speech. For example, none of the liturgy that we have recited or will recite tonight is commanded in Torah.

So when Torah does tell us to say specific words, it is very much worth examining the content and effects of those words.

And here, Torah is reminding us that it matters very much how we tell the story. Particularly, this directive is that we own our story in the present tense; that we place ourselves as agents in the ongoing narrative of the Jewish people.

The *mitzvah* of the *bikkurim*, of the first fruits and their declaration, remind us that we are not passive recipients of our history. We are celebrated, we are implicated, we are complicit.

When we place ourselves within the history, when we see ourselves as part of the unfolding action, there are implications. The haggadah reminds us each to understand ourselves as if we have been brought out of Egypt. Parashat Ki Tavo reminds us each to understand ourselves as if we have come into the land.

We say, “I have come into the land,” and Torah instructs us to tell a fuller story just a few verses later, beginning with, “My father was a wandering Aramean,” and continuing to describe slavery in Egypt, redemption and arrival in the land.

We place ourselves into the memory of starting in slavery, in degradation. Of being redeemed by God. And, it must be acknowledged, of conquering the land, of killing soldiers and women and children to gain our holding in the land. Torah tells us to tell the story of how we got here, placing ourselves as an agent in that story, claiming our own responsibility for the its ongoing unfolding.

Of course, the land that is referred to is the ancient land of Israel. Torah isn't just talking about when we arrive in any land, but when we arrive in the particular land, which Torah again describes us as conquering and settling.

Last night, at the invitation of the Israel Program Task force, Reuben Zahler presented part one of a two part history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Specifically, in the first session, he dealt with the history of the Jewish - and Arab - relationship to that land from ancient Israelite times to 1948. Not bad for an hour and a half.

It was an excellent overview, and even if you missed it, I want to particularly encourage you to come this coming Thursday for part 2. But one thing kept occurring during the question and answer session that particularly struck me. People asked many questions in the third person; for example, “Did the Jews ever do x? “When did the Jews do such-and-such?”

Now, we as a community are able to take the leap of imagination and say around Passover that we were slaves in Egypt, and now we are free. But it seems like sometimes it’s difficult to talk about contemporary Israel and it’s history without distancing ourselves, and putting it in the third person.

There are real reasons for this. Some of us feel we don’t have the right to talk about Israel in the first person, since we don’t live there. Others perhaps feel discomfort, either because of their lack of understanding of what is going on there, or because they do not approve of the policies of the Israeli government, and so want to keep distance.

But one of the contemporary takeaways of Parashat Ki Tavo is that we ought to be able to take the same leap in relating to the land of Israel, ancient and modern, that we are able to take in relation to the Exodus from Egypt, far away and long ago as it occurred.

If we came out of Egypt, and if we defeated the Greeks at Hanukkah, and if our Temple was destroyed at Tisha B’Av, we would do well to remember that, too, in 1948, we fought the war that became Israel’s Independence and the Palestinian nakba.

We are part of the people who are creating start-up nation, even if we aren't there. We are part of the people who are occupying the West Bank and blockading Gaza. We are part of the people who are living in fear of terror attacks. We are part of the people who are creating a renaissance of Jewish culture, and who are struggling with infighting between secular and religious, between Sephardi and Ashkenazi. Everybody else knows this - it's the reason Israelis call on all of us, all over the world to support Israel. It's reason that non-Jews speak and behave as if the actions and policies of Israel reflect on all Jews, as if we are responsible. They do, and we are.

For this reason, as we approach the new year - a year in which for sure American politics are going to give us plenty to chew on - I want to encourage us all to remember to own our place in the Jewish narrative. Israel is not just something to be ignored until a major wave of terror strikes, God forbid. Each of us, as far across the world as we are, are part of the story of Israel.

This is a mandate that transcends politics - whether one's primary relation to Israel is defending it against double standards, or is criticizing its government, or basic indifference, we could all use a little more of the first person. Parashat Ki Tavo reminds us, we must own our role in the story of our people's relationship to the land. It's not some other Jews. It's each of us.