

One of the most painful lessons the Israelites have had to learn is that whether free or enslaved, actions always have consequences. On the eve of their deliverance from Egypt, HaShem had issued instructions on how they were to prepare themselves and their homes, what they were to eat, and how they were to eat it. In addition, they had received commandments for celebrating Pesach, the first holiday in our liturgical calendar, and the first of the three “pilgrimage festivals.” The overarching theme of all three festivals is gratitude. We are not born with the attribute of gratitude. Very young children expect their needs to be met immediately and unequivocally. They must be taught to share, to wait, and to say please and thank you – basic social skills that are the prerequisites for successful interpersonal relationships, as well as for the society the Israelites are to establish. At the end of the Book of Leviticus, following the litany of blessings and curses in Chapter 26, we encountered the unique word *keri* (indifference, aversion, carelessness, insensitivity). *Keri* refers to our attitude toward HaShem. If we treat HaShem’s *mitzvot* with indifference, HaShem will treat us with indifference. Despite all the miracles HaShem had bestowed upon them, those former slaves had continually complained, even growing tired of the *manna* that HaShem provided for their daily sustenance. And whenever they felt insecure, they had longed for their old lives in Egypt. In short, they had behaved like children, which is understandable, since they had never experienced freedom and had no idea what was expected of them. Now their progeny, little better than teenagers emotionally and with precious few good role models to emulate, are standing at the threshold of a new paradigm. They have much to learn in order to carry out HaShem’s plan for them once Moses is no longer there to mentor and defend them. As we recite at the beginning of the second paragraph of the *shema Yisrael*, this begins with loving HaShem and serving HaShem “with all your heart and with all your soul ...” (11:13), not out of fear, as their elders once served their Egyptian masters, but out of gratitude for all HaShem has given us. Indeed, we have blessings of gratitude for everything, from the different foods we eat, to recovering from illness, using the toilet, and seeing natural wonders or extraordinary people. Gratitude is precisely the theme with which Moses opens this discourse: “... you shall take the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from you land, which the Lord, your God, is giving you. And you shall put them into a basket and go to the place which the Lord, your God, will choose to have His Name dwell there. And you shall come to the kohen who will be in those days and say to him, ‘I declare this day to the Lord, your God, that I have come to the land which the Lord swore to our forefathers to give us.’” (26:2-3) Rashi explains that this is to show that we are not ungrateful for all that HaShem has done. The words that follow, an encapsulation of our sojourn in Egypt and our miraculous deliverance, are embedded in our Pesach Haggadah. Whether we translate *arami oveid avi* as An Aramean sought to destroy my forefather, or My forefather was a wandering Aramean, the words are personal expressions of gratitude. After reminding the people that they are obligated to observe the commandments because they have chosen to accept HaShem as their God and HaShem has chosen them to be His treasured people (26:17-18), Moses and the priests deliver a profound message: “Pay attention and listen, O Israel! This day, you have become a people to the Lord, your God. You shall therefore obey the Lord, your God, and fulfill His commandments and His statutes, which I command you this day.” (27:9-10) The people are no longer *b’nei* (children); they have graduated into adulthood and become *am*, a full-fledged people with all the rights and responsibilities this entails. For emphasis, Moses sets up a dramatic ceremony: Six tribes are to ascend to the top of Mount Gerizim for the blessing and six tribes to the top of Mount Ebal for the curse, with the Levites between them to deliver the curses and the blessings. (In a detailed description of the ceremony Talmud Tractate Sotah 32a adds the Ark.) It is noteworthy that the curses are to be delivered first, followed by the people’s *amen* after each curse. Then, after the blessings, to which the people do not respond, comes a long and terrifying list of the calamities that will befall them if they treat the *mitzvot* with indifference. Because the people he led out of Egypt did not take the first iteration of this *tocheicha* (rebuke) seriously, Moses wants to make sure that their descendants will be sufficiently impressed by the harshness of his augmented repetition. Actually, the people hear these words twice – once from Moses and then from the Levites after they have crossed the Jordan (Joshua 8:30-35). In a discussion on the significance of this ceremony, Tractate Sotah 37b states that each member of the Jewish people received the covenant both for himself and as a guarantor for all the people. As we know, there will always be some who treat our covenant with indifference. We are free to choose, and sometimes we make poor choices. That is why our Yom Kippur confessionals *ashamnu* and *al chet* are in the second person plural. Even though we may not have committed some of these sins, “You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account” (Leviticus 19:17) applies to us all. Tractate Arakhin 16b teaches that the one giving the rebuke should not sin by publicly embarrassing the other person. Indeed, we are commanded to be responsible for each other, but the collective confessional preserves the dignity of everyone – another aspect of Judaism for which we can be grateful.

Shabbat shalom!