

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Ki Tavo**

There is a kassidic story of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Weekly, he would serve as the ba-al koreh (the reader of Torah) at his local congregation. It happened one year at the reading of this week's portion (Ki Tavo) that The Rabbi had to be away and someone else read this portion that contains a series of harsh rebukes due those who ignore the path proscribed for Israel in the Torah. As the text was read, the curses and rebukes struck at the heart of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's young son, Dov Ber. While debating whether the boy was strong enough for the upcoming Yom Kippur fast, the boy was asked, "Don't you hear these rebukes every year?" The lad replied, "When father reads, one does not hear curses."

Of course this is the sugar coated way of describing the affliction known as "selective hearing." The story points out the purity of the great Rabbi. As a parent, it also helps me to know that I am not alone when my children don't hear me talking about important things. They hear everyone else, but as their parent, I am stupid. Raise your hand if you are also so afflicted.

More profoundly, I found in this story something far more troubling (surprise). We all hear what we want to hear, and the more difficult the words we are hearing are, the harder it is for us to "hear" them. We are wonderful rationalizers. There was a company marketing team that wanted to challenge the engineering team to a softball game. After a mercy rule slaughter where the engineers celebrated victory, the next day company news letter bore the following headline, "Marketing team takes 2nd place in softball league; Engineers win only one game all season!" The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. tried to justify divestment from Israel over its outrage over "human rights abuses," while it was fully invested in nations all over the world where charges of abuses hung over governments. It took a dear friend's crusade (Rev David Renwick) to get the Church to see its own consistency, and change all of its investment policies to reflect their moral values. They boycotted companies that supported human rights violations all over the world – while maintaining their investment in the many wonderful and progressive pieces of the Israel economy. Far less responsive are the politicians running for office preaching family values only to lose public favor over some illicit affair, or the deeply religious people in this country who somehow believe that Jesus, Moses, or Mohammed would have preached that substandard health care for the needy is "justifiable in the eyes of God." There is a new trend in evangelism that preaches that garnering and maintaining wealth is now a "religious" value. Yet, even as these difficult positions play out in the public view, these people find support by many who "never heard."

A purpose of this week's text is to point out the ways in which we, in a covenant with God, are bound to observe, to serve, and to obey. The tribes are atop opposing mountains; one representing the choice of the curse, while the other represents our choice for blessings. Ultimately, we choose the curse when we fail to pay attention to each other's dignity, and ignore the blessings placed before us each day. In detailing the harsh curses, it is unlikely that one could be present and paying attention, and not be somehow moved towards humility and healing. In fact, not paying attention is the foundational choice that leads us to the curse. Neither of these can be possible, if we have not first "heard" and paid attention to the nature of the curses stated. For Dov Ber to claim not to have heard them before,

despite being the son of a great sage, is difficult to accept. He heard them, but he did not "hear them." I guess the most disturbing piece of this story is that Dov Ber is a sage, himself touted from an early age as a scholar with deep insight. Even he ... claimed not to hear. It is not that we are bad people -- we just don't pay attention. We absorb the sounds of the words people share, but often fail to absorb any of the context or value that the words might carry.

I tell students writing their Bar/Bat Mitzvah sermons to first pick a problem in the world that needs solving. Then, as they begin writing, they need to begin with the understanding that everyone agrees that the problem exists and that it needs to be solved. Not one person believes that he or she contributes to the destructive cause. Often times it is not until our eyes are opened for us, that we understand our own failures to "hear." As with the sage, the measure of who we are, though is not always in what we heard or did not hear, rather, it is found in what we do once we have heard. The world is blessed or cursed by our responses to what we know; what we learn. Yes, we all need to pay more attention to the cries of need in this world. More directly, though, we need to help those who do hear, make decisions to choose the blessing and not the curse. Shabbat Shalom.