

Drash on Ki Tavo
By Hannah Weisman
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Shabbat Shalom! It's an honor to be here today to share my thoughts on Ki Tavo with you. Thank you, Cynthia, for the generous invitation; thank you, Rabbi Chai for the kind introduction; and thank you all for welcoming me so warmly.

For those who may not know, the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life is a community supported museum at UC Berkeley dedicated to generating new knowledge and understanding of Jewish cultures through the extraordinary collection in our care. The collection documents and represents Jewish life around the world and throughout time. My colleagues and I have the joy and responsibility to steward these materials and to create opportunities for people to benefit from them. We spend a lot of time thinking about, talking about, and implementing our commitments as caretakers of history, culture, and communal memory and facilitators of learning, meaning making, and community building. I hope you will indulge my untraditional commentary on this week's parsha as I consider its relevance for cultural heritage work.

The parsha opens, "When you enter the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a heritage" or "as an inheritance." (26:1) The people of Israel are instructed to recognize the significance of what they are receiving and the history that led them to the current moment.

"You shall go to the priest in charge ... say to him, 'I acknowledge this day before the Eternal that I have entered the land that God swore to our fathers to assign us.'
(Deuteronomy 26:3)

"My father was a fugitive Aramean...The Egyptians dealt harshly with us...we cried to the Eternal...and the Eternal heard our plea...God freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm...bringing us to this place and giving us this land." (26:5-9)

Collections, like those of the Magnes, also require us to acknowledge their significance and the history that led them to be preserved in a museum or archive. While we steward material culture—that's the industry term for "stuff," the things that people make and use—rather than land, it is likewise a privilege to care for tangible cultural heritage inherited from generations before us. And each object, artwork, and document represents individuals and communities with complex histories that need to be researched, understood, and conveyed.

The text of the parsha goes on to establish that the land is “flowing with milk and honey,” and that the people of Israel are “God’s treasured people,” but that along with these privileges comes great responsibility to “observe all the Instruction—or commandments—that I enjoin you this day.” (27:1)

These instructions establish expectations for ethical behavior within the community, much of which resonates with the work of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. Chapter 26, verses 12 and 13 state,

“When you have set aside in full the tenth part of your yield—in the third year, the year of the tithe—and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat their fill in your settlements, you shall declare before the Eternal your God: ‘I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house; and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me...’” (26:12-13)

What stands out in this passage is the requirement to engage all segments of a community. The Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow are not to be separated, but should have access to community resources in the same place as those who have the means to produce those resources.

Museums often rightfully receive criticism for being elitist or feeling exclusive, and limiting opportunities for people to engage with cultural heritage and build connections within and across communities. The collections do not belong only to the philanthropist or the scholar with a doctorate; they belong to everyone. Museums hold collections in the public trust. We have an ethical obligation to make them, their stories, and the cultural knowledge they contain available to everyone who chooses to engage. That might look like prioritizing universal design museum galleries; free or reduced admission for families receiving SNAP benefits; exhibition narratives that present inclusive and honest histories; or a menu of options for structuring a visitor experience, such as self-guiding, docent-led tours, hands-on programs, or audioguides.

Chapter 27 goes on to articulate more commandments structured as a list of curses. Notably, these curses almost entirely pertain to the ethics of responsible citizenship—or rules for happy coexistence with your neighbors.

I can’t help but be drawn to the first curse. Verse 15 states, “Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by God, a craftsman’s handiwork, and sets it up in secret.” While this verse certainly refers to the prohibition of creating, and by extension

worshipping, idols, I suggest we choose to read it incorrectly to understand that we have an obligation not to hide away or hoard the work of artists and craftspeople. That work does not exist in a museum collection only for its own sake. It is meant to convey culture, provoke curiosity, spur learning, and inspire creativity. Collecting institutions must not stash away their holdings, but must proactively create and facilitate access opportunities. We must fervently invite and welcome engagement and meaning making with the artworks and other materials in our care.

The next two curses in the list resonate with me professionally, as well:

- “Cursed be the one who insults their father or mother” (27:16)
- “Cursed be the one who moves a neighbor’s landmark” (27:17)

These speak to the ethics of collections development and interpretation, or the stories we tell about and with the art and artifacts.

When a museum acquires an object and makes it part of the institution’s collection, the museum is committing to care for that object in perpetuity, including storing it safely, conducting research on it, and exhibiting it with appropriate context. To do otherwise would be to insult the “father or mother,” if we read it as the person, people, or community from whom that material originated. It would be an insult to the “father or mother” and a disservice to current and future generations.

“Moving a neighbor’s landmark” refers to encroaching on or stealing land from a neighbor. It certainly would be unethical to install a new fence a little bit over the property line in our neighbor’s yard, and yet, we know this type of property theft happens. Likewise, museum collections often contain materials of dubious origin. At the time of acquisition, we must rigorously investigate the ownership history of an object to ensure it comes with clear title. If we learn that material already in a collection rightfully belongs to another individual, family, community, or institution, it is our obligation to work in good faith to return it or acquire it with proper permission and compensation, when appropriate.

While the parsha contains many more opportunities to explore museum ethics and obligations, I will skip ahead to chapter 28, where we learn that loss of cultural memory and heritage is at stake, and we risk repeating history, if we do not follow these instructions or commandments.

Verse 64 says:

“God will scatter you among all the peoples from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, whom neither you nor your ancestors have experienced.”

And verse 68 admonishes:

“God will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route that I told you you should not see again.” (28:68)

By failing to uphold our ethics, we risk being divorced from the culture, the wisdom, and the love of our ancestors. But museums that embrace ethical stewardship and the communities that support them can play an important role in protecting and transmitting cultural identity, building collective strength, and establishing meaningful relationships across communities.

The last words of the parsha are fitting last words:

“Therefore observe faithfully all the terms of this covenant, that you may succeed in all that you undertake.”

Shabbat shalom.