



Parshat Ki Tavo
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Ours For Now, Not Forever
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

The new NFL season begins next week. For the first time in 20 years, Tom Brady will not be playing for the New England Patriots. He will be playing for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. If you are not a football fan, here is some background. Tom Brady is widely regarded as GOAT, the Greatest quarterback Of All Time. In a league in which most players play a short time, get injured, and are replaced by a younger, healthier player—NFL stands for Not For Long—he has played 20 years and counting. In a league set up to promote parity, where every team has the chance to win the Super Bowl, and no one team is supposed to dominate year after year, Brady has led the team to an unrivaled dynasty. In his 20 years, he has led the Patriots to 17 playoffs, 13 Division titles, 9 Super Bowl appearances, 6 Super Bowl victories. His sustained excellence over two decades is literally without precedent. But instead of retiring as a Patriot, or playing another year for our team, he is going to start for another team. And my question is: how should we regard that?

Are we to be angry at Brady because he left our team? Or happy for Brady because he is doing what he wants to do, getting a fresh start, writing a new chapter? Could we, should we, bring ourselves to root for Buccaneer Brady?

This is not just a football question. This is a human question. How are we to understand that what we love in life we can seldom hold onto? In fact what we love most in life all too often slips out of our hands.

We cannot hold onto our children who grow up and grow out. I have heard from so many parents during the pandemic that the big silver lining was that they got to see their adult

child who came home, intending to stay a few weeks but staying a few months. It is the first time I have seen my adult child in life, since they from graduated high school, not just for a vacation or a holiday, but for an extended time.

We cannot hold onto our elderly parents as they face the inevitability of aging. I'll never forget the time I went to our beloved member Dorothy Adelman's 100th birthday part. She proudly introduced me to her physician. I thanked him for helping get Dorothy to this milestone. He shook his head. No, I can't take any credit for that, he said. My job is to get my 80 year old patients into their 90s, and when they turn 90, I tell them it is between them and God.

We cannot hold onto our youth, our looks, our wrinkle-free faces, our hair or hair color.

This season of the pandemic has reminded us that the health and wealth we work so hard to attain we cannot always hold onto.

Tom Brady leaving for another team raises the universal human conundrum: all too often what we love we do not own and we cannot keep.

Our Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah has so much to teach us. Sarah is first introduced to us as a barren woman, she had no child. *Vatehi sarai akarah ein lah valad*. All that we know about her is how much she wanted a child, and how painful it was to her that she could not have that child. At a certain point, she gives up hope. She is after all 90 years old. Abraham is 100 years old. The Torah confirms explicitly what we all know: that she is past her child-bearing years, and when she was in her child-bearing years, she was unable to bear a child.

The Rosh Hashanah reading begins: *Vaadonai pakad et Sarah*. God *pakads* Sarah. The question is: what does *pakad* mean? The term is always translated in this verse as remembers. God remembers Sarah. God remembers the promises God had made to Abraham that he would

be the father of multitudes too numerous to count. Belatedly, on God's time, not on our time, God remembers that promise.

That's all well and good, and that is the standard translation. There is only one problem with this translation. Rabbi Harold Kushner has pointed out that the word *pakad* occurs frequently in the Hebrew Bible. But in *no other case* does it mean remember. Rather, *pakad* usually means to entrust for *temporary* safekeeping. A famous Mishnah uses the word in this way: *hamafkid etzel chaveiro b'heimah o'keilim*, one person entrusts to another an animal or vessels to watch over temporarily. The clear sense of *pakad* is: I am going to entrust something to you to take care of, to watch over, to guard, but you don't own it. You will have to return it. Yours for now, not forever.

This definition of *pakad* most fully makes sense in this story. It is as if God says to Sarah: *Sarah, I know you have always wanted to have a child more than anything in the world. I have good news and bad news. Yes, you will have a child. You will at last finally get to hold the baby of which you have always dreamed. That's the good news. The bad news is that you won't own that baby. That baby will be yours for now, not forever. That baby will grow up and grow out, and you will have no ability to protect or to control what happens to this child you love with all your being.*

On Rosh Hashanah, our Torah reading reminds us that we do not own what we love. What we love is ours temporarily. That's true for our children, for our parents, for our health, for our life. All of which is ours for now, not forever.

How are we to respond to this sober reality? Is this a downer? Is this a sad fact to lament? Or is there another way to look at it?

Years ago, in one of the great sermons ever delivered, a sermon entitled “To Hold With Open Arms,” Rabbi Milton Steinberg was reflecting on the precariousness of his own health and life. He had been hospitalized for several weeks. He observes that we might as well make our peace with what is inevitable in life, including our own mortality. If it cannot be resisted, why resist it? Isn’t the better course to do a jujitsu move and to own it, to take the force of that energy and figure out how to make something positive out of what is?

How can we make the sobering fact that what we love is ours only temporarily, for now, not forever, into a blessing?

My oldest and dearest friend just lost his mother. This friend was my law school roommate, introduced me to Shira and sang at our wedding. His mother was named Stella. Stella Rabner.

She was born in a small town in Poland, near Auschwitz. Her sister and many of her closest relatives perished at Auschwitz. Because of mysteries no one can ever understand, she ended up not in Auschwitz, but at a labor camp in Siberia. It was beyond grueling and miserable, but it was better than Auschwitz and it ended up saving her life. As a teen age girl she had to do hard manual labor, like sawing down big trees in the forest, on virtually no food. After the war, the KGB came after her to spy on the few Jews who survived the Shoah. Rather than do this she escaped Eastern Europe by being smuggled in a suitcase and eventually making her way to freedom in America. Roll the film forward to her zoom memorial service when she dies at the age of 95.

All of her grandchildren spoke. In hearing their words, and the deep emotion with which they shared them, I realized that there are basically two kinds of grandchildren’s reactions to the death of a grandparent. There is the polite, the appropriate, the decorous, the restrained

expression of grief. And then there are those grandchildren who are deeply grief-stricken. *I called my Grandma every day. She is the person I look up to in life. She embodied the resilience I need now. I will hold onto my Grandma every day for the rest of my life.* That was what Stella inspired in all of her children and grandchildren. What was her secret sauce?

She knew only too well and only too personally that what we love is ours only temporarily, not permanently. Ours for now, not forever. And that leaves everyone of us with a choice.

We could become bitter and angry over what we have loved and lost.

Or in a world where everything is temporary, we could invest our energy and our love into making the world that we have into a better world.

When she came to America, she was determined not to be bitter, not to be angry, not to focus on what she had lost, not to complain. She never complained. If she had, who could blame her, but she did not. Instead, she was filled with gratitude and the desire to make this temporary world temporarily better. She knew Russian from her time in Siberia. In the 70s, when Soviet Jews came to New Jersey, she was a full-time volunteer. She led seders in Russian for recent Russian Jews who did not know English, they did not know Judaism, but they knew kindness when they found it, and they found it in her. Stories like that create undying love.

The pandemic has only reminded us of what has always been true: what is ours is ours for now, not forever. We could respond with anger. We could root against Buccaneer Brady. Or we could make our peace with what is inevitable and respond with grace and generosity. We root for Buccaneer Brady. We savor what we have while we have it. We try to make it better while we can. And then we let it go because we know it was never ours forever. Shabbat shalom.