



D'var Torah – Ki Tavo, Sept. 21, 2024

By Lori Kagan

Shabbat Shalom, I'm Lori Kagan and this is my 1st dvar Torah at MM and 2nd dvar ever.

I discovered something while reading through Ki Tavo, and that's that I'd never read it in its entirety. And I have a theory about why that is. During the Torah reading, if I find a line that's particularly upsetting or disturbing, I might take a little break, maybe follow along in the Hebrew for a while; maybe go get a sip of water. And if you were reading along in the English today (or your Hebrew and your hearing are very good) you probably noticed that Ki Tavo contains a few things that the average person might find disturbing.

The *Tochacha*, the series of curses or “rebukes,” seem to get steadily more horrific and stomach churning as they go on. I suspect that, in the past, I've checked out after around verse 53, where the men will be reduced to eating the flesh of their sons and daughters. I'm the type of person that not only gets easily disturbed, but easily queasy.

So when I sat down to read through the Parsha, I was a little stunned when I got to verse 63, which reads:

*And as the Lord **once delighted in** making you prosperous and many, so will the Lord now **delight in** causing you to perish and in wiping you out*

Delight in causing you to perish? Even in the midst of all these brutal and vivid curses, this just utterly stopped me. There's something so viscerally devastating about thinking about God — the ultimate parent figure — getting *joy* from inflicting punishment, no matter how horrible the crime.

It also feels especially incongruent at this moment in the Jewish calendar – during the month of Elul when Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are weeks away. The words and tune of the 13 Attributes of Mercy have been swirling around in my head. And, standing in shul now, and anticipating being in shul over the *Yamim Noraim*, a God who **delights in** causing the Israelites to perish seems the antithesis of the God we encounter in our siddurim and our *machsorim*.

My google skills may be weak, because I couldn't find any dvarai torah that mentions this line, let alone specifically addresses it. Perhaps I should have taken it as a sign that there's an obvious answer that I haven't thought of or this wasn't the best choice for a *short* dvar Torah! Still I promise you it *will* be short!

Fortunately I found rabbinic sources that refer to this line directly, thanks to Sefaria's English translations of some rabbinic texts. Although I've doubtlessly missed many references, there's a series of midrashim that together address the question of whether God could get joy or rejoice

in the destruction of his creations. This appear in several places in the *Gemarah* and are attributed to different rabbis in different places.

Before the discussion of our line from Ki Tavo, the midrash refers to a story that most of us have heard many times, a story that popped into my head when I first read line 63:

[During the Exodus, when Egyptian soldiers drown in the Sea], *God hears the angels singing and admonishes them "My handiwork are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before Me?"*

So, even before we get to our line in Ki Tavo, we do get what seems like unequivocal refutation of the idea that God gets joy in punishing the even the wicked.

The text goes on:

*"God Himself does not rejoice, but He **causes others** to rejoice."*

The proof cited is part of our line from Ki Tavo, and it's explained that:

The word used for joy or delight, *yasis* means "*will **cause rejoicing over you** to cause you to perish.*" – that is, it is not God who will rejoice, but God will cause **other people to be joyful** in the Israelites perishing. He adds that it is NOT written as the word *yasus*, which would have indicated that God himself *will have the joy*.

Someone who is more versed in Biblical Hebrew will have to weigh in on how convincing this is from a language standpoint, and God causing others to delight in the perishing of others (and indeed the *Tochecha*) have their own theological implications. But the rabbis' rejection of a God that could **delight in** causing his creations to perish seems certain.

This particular interpretive instinct of the rabbis created the trajectory where, regardless of the state of our world, we can approach the high holidays with the hopefulness that comes with appealing to our God of compassion, kindness and forgiveness.
Shabbat Shalom.