“From a Place of Modesty”

*D’var Torah* for Shabbat *Ki Tavo*, September 4, 2020

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

When our son Avi got up to chant the portion *Ki Tavo* at his bar mitzvah fifteen years ago, he let it sing out like the trumpet he was fond of playing, or like the shofar calls he gave us at Rosh Hashanah through his high school years. People joked to me that he hardly needed the microphone to be heard across the parking lot.

His mom and I kvelled at the confident sounds he could produce. But we knew that beneath his magnificent singing and chanting, he harbored the same fears and anxieties that all thirteen-year-olds have, thank goodness! He was loud, but also appropriately modest, as he should have been. As are pretty much all of our terrific kids who summon up the courage to stand at this bima.

The only bar- and bat mitzvah students who exhibit what passes for self-confidence are those that have not yet grappled with their lack of humility.

Our portion tells us that when we finally enter the Land of Israel, we will be required to bring our *bikkurim,* our first – or best – fruits each year to the Temple, and to recite a liturgy that allows us to place ourselves in the continuum of Jewish history and God’s grand plan. We were idolaters in Haran, then slaves in Egypt, and then we cried out to the one God, who liberated us and brought us to this land. Here, then, are the fruits of my labor, in partnership with the One who governs all history and all destiny. All right here in this basket.

We know the verses from the Haggadah, because the Rabbis chose this passage to anchor our annual retelling of the journey to freedom.

What strikes us, if we look closely, are the stage directions the Torah gives to the person who is bringing his basket of first fruits. As expected, the Torah says *v’amarta*, “and you shall say.” What is unexpected is the additional word *v’anita*, “and you shall respond.” Why the double direction, *v’anita v’amarta*, “you shall respond and you shall say?”

We could dismiss it as a literary flourish. Our Rabbis would *never* read the Torah that way. Each word had to mean something, elsewise it would not be there. Rashi tells us that it means “raising your voice.” *l’shon haramat kol.* In other words, walk yourself up to the Kohen, pull back your shoulders, thrust your basket of fruit toward him, and speak out like you mean it: “My ancestor was a wandering Aramean!” And so forth.

Other commentators are not so sure. Not that they question Rashi, but that they see something more in that directive. Something about being both confident, because you believe in what you’re doing, *and* humble, because you know that it’s not about *you.*

Here is the Tiferet Shlomo, who was Rabbi Shlomo Rabinovitz, the 19th century Polish Hassidic master: “The word *v’anita*, “and you shall respond,” is rooted in the word for “submission.” Likewise it is related to the word *‘ani* (with an ayin), ‘impoverished.’ When a person approaches the task of service to God, one must first submit oneself – humble oneself – impoverish one’s ego - and consider one’s lowliness as a creature of flesh and blood. Therefore, *v’anita* means ‘submit yourself’ to this self-realization, and only then *v’amarta*, ‘speak out in the presence of the Eternal your God.’”

The suggestion is that if one could get in touch with one’s ego and separate it from the message, one’s raised voice could express not arrogance (which always masks *lack* of confidence), but confidence in the universal truth of one’s declaration. As if to say, “I’m the one who finds myself uttering these words in public, but the message pertains to all of us, and in the end it’s not me speaking.”

Between you and me, I am inspired by the exhilarating outcries for racial justice and social equality we hear every day. I am grateful that people are raising their voices and letting their sense of righteousness be heard and felt.

But I am not always inspired. More like half the time. The rest of the time I find myself cringing at what sounds to me like a lack of humility in the speaker’s voice; a lack of *hach’na’ah,* a lack of *submission* to the higher purpose of the message.

It is that lack of self-recognition that renders all dialogue, all nuance, all room for disagreement, impossible. One goes back to the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and hears no shortage of confidence, but also no sense that they are telling us anything to benefit themselves, anything other than what they sense is the Divine call for *emet v’tzedek*, for truth and justice*.* They always conveyed the idea that the truth was not theirs, but God’s, and that they themselves possessed only a part of that truth.

Our parashah adjures us to bring our best fruits – the best of ourselves – as a humble offering before the eyes and ears of history, and to do so with the confidence that comes from knowing our own place as simple role players in a drama that encompasses all time, all space, all truth.