

## Ki Tavo Sermon 5777

Two construction workers are on their lunch break, up on a beam of an unfinished high rise, 50 stories above the street. One of them opens his lunch and says to the other “Tuna, tuna, tuna. Every day it’s tuna. If I get tuna for lunch one more time I swear I’m going to jump off this beam.” The other guy says “Why don’t you ask your wife to pack a different lunch?” “What do you mean?” the first one says, “I pack my own lunch.”

We often fail to connect our actions with predictable outcomes. If someone smokes a pack of cigarettes every day for 50 years, they shouldn’t be surprised if they get lung cancer. If we poison our air, land and water with massive amounts of garbage, chemicals and human and animal waste, we should not be surprised when the ecosystem begins to break down, when storms become consistently worse than any time in recorded history. These are not acts of God, they are the consequences of things we have done and which we understand have serious and long-lasting impacts on ourselves and the world around us. For us, our children and possibly for many generations to come, we will be suffering the effects of the tuna sandwiches we insist on making for ourselves.

The same is true in the moral realm as well. Ki Tavo is notable for the long list of blessings and much longer list of curses of what is known as the *tokhekhal*. The Torah sets out the consequences for either fulfilling or ignoring God’s demands upon us. The text makes clear that God’s expectations are not to be taken lightly, that the inevitable outcome of our choices will clearly reflect God’s judgment on them. But it is just as easy to read these blessings and curses as self-fulfilling. In short, if we live the kind of righteous life which God has designed for us and as embodied in Torah, we will be rewarded. If we do not, we will suffer. We can find all

sorts of exceptions of course, in the lives of the good who suffer and the evil who prosper, but that does not vitiate the overall plan. The blessings and curses are not promises of what God will do; they are predictions of what will happen based on what we do. In sum, the Torah is teaching the ideals of reaching toward righteous living and of avoiding choices that lead to disaster.

That doesn't mean that every good person will be justly rewarded and that every no-goodnik will be punished. It means that we can learn how we are to comport ourselves, that we have the capacity to choose, and that God wants us to choose well. Helping the victims of hurricanes Harvey and Irma is the right thing to do; please choose well by contributing to Federation's relief efforts on their behalf. But until we seriously address our societal choices, I fear that we will be seeing more Harveys and Irene's, more destruction, more injury and death.

What gives me hope is that the outpouring of care and support for disaster victims, around the country and around the world, shows just how connected we all feel ourselves to be with one another. We give money, we send the things that victims need to reclaim their lives, we go on missions to rebuild the homes of people we would otherwise never know. Those are also choices, and they show our capacity for choosing righteously, for caring for those who need our help and are entitled to it. Those same impulses can lead us to thinking more deeply about the structures and behaviors that lead to worsening climate conditions and to address them, to stop making the same tuna sandwich every day.

Shabbat shalom.