



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

“Translating ‘Ki Tavo’”

How would you translate the opening verse in this week’s Torah portion, *Ki Tavo* (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8)?

Here are two Jewish translations:

“When you enter the land that the Lord your God has given you...” (*JPS Holy Scripture*).

“When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you...” (*The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel*).

Neither of the above does justice to words with the root *ba*, especially as they appear in the title of this week’s *parsha*, *Ki Tavo*. I do find some satisfaction in the authoritative multi-volume Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary compiled by Evan Shushan. He prefers to

render *ba*, or *tavo*, as “to reach or achieve something of *mamashut*,” i.e., “attaining something of substance and significance.”

From Evan Shushan’s perspective, the opening verse in our *parsha* would read, in English, “When you have finally achieved the land you have longed for,” or words to that effect.

My preference for a stronger translation of *ba* originated in a lesson learned in my distant past. Permit me to tell you about it.

I received my *semicha*, my rabbinic ordination, in my early twenties. I continued to spend my days studying Talmud in the yeshiva I had attended since high school, Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva in Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

I was totally immersed in my studies and engaged in a complex discussion with my study partner when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was the principal of the entire school, Rabbi Ginsberg, who had succeeded his predecessor, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Kagan, with whom I had a close relationship since my high school years but who was, at that time, retired.

After I responded to Rabbi Ginsberg’s gentle tap on my shoulder, I turned to him, stood up, and before I could say a word, he told me that he had an important proposal to discuss with me. It seemed that the teacher of one of the high school classes, a Rabbi Pantel, was ill and a substitute was required. He wanted me to be that substitute. I told him that I had zero experience teaching a class full of teenage boys, to which he responded, “You will learn the trade

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on the job.” He then shared with me that Rabbi Pantel’s illness was dire and that I would have to discontinue my personal Torah study and commit to several months of teaching. Somehow, I found his invitation attractive. I accepted it on the spot.

Although Rabbi Kagan, the former principal, had retired, he remained active in various capacities in the yeshiva. It occurred to me that I could invite him to come to my new classroom and give me some advice on handling twenty-five adolescents and inspiring them to actively participate in the advanced curriculum. I asked him in Yiddish, “*Kenn der Rav koomen tzu mein cheder*, Can the Rabbi come to my room?”

He bristled at the word *koomen*, come. He insisted that I should have added a prefix to *koomen*, either *ankoomen* or *tzukoomen* or *dernenteren*—not “come” or even “visit,” but rather “join” or “connect” or “draw close” to me and my class.

His lesson concerned not only word choice, but the relationship between a teacher and his pupils. The semester-long dialogue that followed centered on the essentials of pedagogy. Rabbi Kagan visited my classroom several times a week throughout that semester and often summarized his message in Yiddish: “Do not relate to your students merely by ‘coming’ to class. You must approach them, draw close to them, and treat them as grown-ups—not as *kinderlach*. You must

convey excitement, joy in learning, and an appreciation of their potential and individual differences. Be a human being, not a fussy, boring old has-been.”

Near the end of our semester in each other’s presence, Rabbi Kagan referred to the first verse in our *parsha*. “The Israelites did not just ‘come’ to the Holy Land. They approached the Land. They anticipated it eagerly, they looked forward to it, they became one with the land, they experienced it as their home.”

I remember supplementing his lesson by the power of the punctuation mark. One can say, “We arrived.” Or one can say, “We arrived!” That exclamation mark reframes the statement from an ordinary comment on the end of a journey to an expression of exhilaration and an achievement of *mamashut*. Rabbi Kagan, despite his background as a Lithuanian Torah scholar and Chief Rabbi of a major Jewish community in Belgium, was adept in the English language and responded gleefully to my use of a minor change in punctuation.

That experience left me with a lifelong appreciation for the true meaning of *ba* in all of its grammatical forms. One example is in *Megillat Esther*, which refers to Haman’s arrival at the king’s palace with the phrase “*Vayavo Haman*,” chanted by an experienced reader

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with great flourish. Haman didn't just "come" to the palace, nor did he simply "arrive" there. He came enthusiastically, expecting glory and success, royal rewards of *mamashut*, tangible and substantial material benefits.

So too, we look forward at this time of year to "*LeShana haba'a b'Yerushalayim*, Next year in Jerusalem" does not mean "next year we will visit Jerusalem, period." It means "next year, with overflowing enthusiasm and boundless joy, we will merge with all that is Jerusalem, exclamation mark!"

I've just tried my best, at some length, to make my point as to the full meaning of "coming to the Holy Land." Someone who lived in eighteenth-century Morocco, who emigrated to the Land of Israel and who is buried in the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, made a similar point in his brief opening comment to this week's Torah portion. I refer to Rabbi Chaim ben Atar, the *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh*. I quote:

"*Vehaya ki tavo el ha'Aretz*. Note the word "*Vehaya*," a term used to connote joy, *simcha*. This underscores that there is no more lofty joy than dwelling in the Holy Land, as it is written in Psalm 126:

"When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion, we will be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongues with songs of joy." ■

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