

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Ki Savo

Fruit for Thought – The Mitzvah of Bikkurim

וְהָיָה כִּי תָבֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ... וְלָקַחְתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית כָּל פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה

And it will be, when you come to the land that Hashem, your God, is giving you... You shall take from the first fruits of the land.¹

INTRODUCTION: WHEN COMMANDMENTS ARE KEY

The mitzvah which opens our parsha is *bikkurim*, bringing the first fruits to the Beis Hamikdash. Commenting on the introductory words in our verse, “*And it will be when you come to the land,*” the Midrash² says:

עֲשֵׂה מִצְוָה הָאֲמֹרָה בְּעִנְיִן שֶׁבִשְׂכָרָה תִּכְנַס לָאָרֶץ

Perform the mitzvah that is mentioned in this section, for in its merit you will enter the land.

Understandably, these words of the Midrash raise a basic question. The mitzvah of first fruits can only be performed once the Jewish people have *already entered* the land. How, then, can we say that this is a mitzvah whose performance *allows us* to enter? Clearly, the intent of the Midrash that the bringing of *bikkurim* once we are in the land retroactively justifies our entry, and enables us to stay there.

What is so special about this mitzvah that makes it the key to successfully maintaining our presence in the Land of Israel?

PRAISING THE LAND – THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Although the verse states generally that the first fruits should be brought as *bikkurim*, the halachah stipulates that this mitzvah applies specifically to the seven species through which the Land of Israel is praised, as enumerated in Parshas Ekev.³ A fascinating dimension in this stipulation is revealed by the Arizal, who explains that the mitzvah of *bikkurim* serves as a rectification of the sin of the spies. Since they spoke ill of the land, the Torah commands us, in response, to bring the fruits which bring praise to

1 Devarim 26:1.

2 Sifrei, beginning of Ki Savo.

3 Devarim 8:8.

the land.

It is quite fascinating to note, in this regard, that the concept of *bikkurim* is actually mentioned explicitly in the episode of the spies. Just before they set off on their journey to spy out the land, the verse informs us that the time of year was, “יְמֵי בְכוּרֵי עֲנָבִים” – *the days of the first fruits of the grapes*.⁴ This seemingly technical piece of information takes on entirely new significance in light of the Arizal’s comment; for the very season during which they maligned the land was the one that, in time, would be the basis for its praise!

RESONANCE IN THE MISHNAH

The Mishnah in *Masechet Bikkurim*⁵ describes the beginning of the process that culminates in the fruits being brought to the Beis Hamikdash:

כיצד מפרישין את הביכורים: יורד אדם לתוך שדהו, ורואה תאנה שביכרה, אשכול שביכר, רימון שביכר; וקושרן בגמי ואומר, הרי אלו ביכורים.

How does one set aside *bikkurim*? A person goes down to his field and sees a fig that has ripened, a cluster of grapes that has ripened, a pomegranate that has ripened; he ties a reed around them and says, “These are for *bikkurim*.”

As we have mentioned, the mitzvah of *bikkurim* applies to all the seven species associated with the Land of Israel. Why, then, does the Mishnah specifically choose these three species as examples of how the Mitzvah beings?

R' Menachem Ziemba, *Hy"d*, offers a stunning explanation, based on the statement of the Arizal, that *bikkurim* comes to rectify the sin of the meraglim. The Torah relates that the spies brought back fruit through which to malign the land, specifically: a cluster of grapes a fig and a pomegranate!⁶ Accordingly, these three fruits receive special mention in the Mishnah as examples for how the mitzvah of *bikkurim* is performed.

There is room to ask: Aside from the fact that it involves fruit that brings praise to the land, is there anything about the mitzvah of *bikkurim* itself that makes it the appropriate vehicle through which to counter the slander of the spies?

To answer this question, we will need to look a little deeper into both the sin of the spies and the mitzvah of *bikkurim*...

THE SIN OF THE SPIES – ALONE IN BATTLE?

One of the striking features of the sin of the spies is their firm conviction that they would be unable to enter the land, stating that its inhabitants were too strong, and impossible to conquer. It is hard for us to relate to this assertion, for, as Yehoshua and Calev exclaimed, if Hashem is

4 Bamidbar 13:20.

5 3:1.

6 Bamidbar 13:23.

with the Jewish people how can anyone be too strong for them?

Clearly, the spies felt – and the people believed – that, somehow, Hashem would *not* be with the Jewish people in the land, at least not in the way He had been with them in the desert. As we know, life in the desert and life in the Land of Israel represent two very different modes of existence. Life in the desert was virtually free of all physical concerns – with the people’s sustenance and wellbeing being provided for directly and miraculously by Hashem. Manna fell from heaven, Miriam’s well followed them on their journeys, and they were protected from their surroundings by the Clouds of Glory. Once they cross would the Jordan River and enter into Israel, all that would change, and existence would become much more physical. The notion among the people was that this meant that they would be “on their own” in the physical world from that point. In other words, they made the equation between Divine Providence and open miracles, so that if the latter would cease, it meant that the former was likewise no longer present. Based on this perspective, left by themselves, they felt they stood no chance against the mighty nations of Canaan.

We should recognize that actually, from their point of view, the people were absolutely correct. Their error lay in concluding that Hashem would not be them in the physical setting of the Land of Israel. It was this error that Yehoshua and Calev battled to correct, proclaiming that Hashem would be guiding them in the land *through* the laws of nature as surely as He had guided them until that point *outside* the laws of nature. However, the people were not receptive to this point, and the result was the tragedy with which we are all familiar.

SETTING THE TONE

This brings us back to the mitzvah of *bikkurim*. As we mentioned, the Jewish people’s move from the desert to the Land of Israel meant that their mode of existence will become much more physical, as they will need to become involved in earthly matters on a day-to-day basis. The ideal, of course, is to implement all the Torah values absorbed in the desert and use physical existence as a basis for higher Torah living. This, however, is easier said than done. Occupation with physical pursuits can easily become pre-occupation. There is a very real danger that over the course of time, involvement in the natural order of things will cause people to forget Who it is that is providing their sustenance. As consciousness of the Divine hand fades from the picture, physical living, which should be a means toward a higher end, is in danger of becoming an end in itself.

The antidote to this attitude is the mitzvah of *bikkurim*. By bringing the first fruits to the Temple, one is acknowledging Hashem as the Source of his sustenance, as the One who guided the agricultural cycle and provided the harvest. This pilgrimage to the Temple, and the declaration of awareness of Hashem’s role in guiding the forces of nature should serve to set the tone for one’s attitude toward his crops the rest of the year.

Needless to say, this awareness is absolutely crucial to life in Israel being considered a successful venture, and thus we can understand why the Midrash says that the Jewish people’s presence in the Land of Israel hinges on the mitzvah of *bikkurim*.

LETTERS, LINES AND CIRCLES

The Baal Haturim in our parsha makes the enigmatic observation that of all the letters in the *aleph beis*, the letter *samech* is missing from the section dealing with *bikkurim*. What is the significance of this omission?

The Hebrew word for a letter is אות (*os*). The word אות also means a sign. This is because every letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also a sign that represents a concept. The idea of being trapped

inside the natural cycle, with no way of seeing beyond it, is represented by the letter *samech*. Why? The shape of the letter itself is round, representing a cycle with no perceivable beginning or end. Moreover, the numerical value of *samech* is sixty, which is an expanded expression of the number six, representing physical movement and activity, as per the six days of physical creation. The letter which has the numerical value of six is *vav*, which represents the straight line from A to B. Indeed, the letter *vav* means “and”, denoting the way that one activity naturally follows on from the next. The *samech* is thus the sum total of all of those activities; all of those individual lines join together and angle round to form a large circle which brings one back to the first act.⁷

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The Talmud informs us that we can tell a lot about the character of a letter by observing the first time it appears in the Torah.⁸ In our case, the Midrash points out that the letter *samech* first appears in the verse describing the four branches of the river which came out of the Garden of Eden. The first branch is called Pishon, and is described by the verse as, “הַסִּבְּ אֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ הַחַוִּילָה — It surrounds the Land of Chavila.”⁹ We see that the first appearance of the letter *samech*, in the word “*hasovev*,” is in the context of surrounding something. The Midrash further points out that the first time we find the letter *samech* in the context of human experience is when Hashem takes Eve from Adam’s flesh, and then “וַיִּסְגֹר בְּשׂוֹר תַּחְתָּנָה — and He closed the flesh beneath it.” The *samech* here features in the capacity of Eve’s origin’s being closed off and unidentifiable. This is the effect of the *samech* circle. It renders a person unable to see beyond it and attain a sense of where things really come from.

In light of this, we can understand why the letter *samech* is missing from the section dealing with *bikkurim*, for it is, in a sense, the “anti-letter” of that mitzvah, representing the circle of sixty that we are looking to break out of. The goal of *bikkurim* is to see Hashem as the One Force behind the manifold natural forces. Indeed, the halachah requires that the amount of first fruits that we bring as *bikkurim* be “one from sixty”, for it is looking to draw out the One from the enveloping circle of sixty.¹⁰

BETWEEN THE GAPS

Interestingly, the Baal Haturim further points out that while the letter *samech* itself is not present in relation to *bikkurim*, the number sixty is still represented by the word טבא, a basket, which is the vessel the Torah instructs *bikkurim* to be brought in.¹¹ It is very interesting that the Torah makes a point of telling us what vessel to bring *bikkurim* fruits in, something it does not do

7 The verse in Tehillim (32:9) exhorts: “אַל תִּהְיוּ כְּסוּס כִּפְּרֵד אֵין הַבִּין — Be not like a horse, like a mule who has no understanding.” The Hebrew word for horse is סוס, which has a *samech* at the beginning and end and a *vav* in the middle. This depicts the mindset of the horse that goes through life with each individual act (*vav*) forming part of a closed circle (*samech*), beyond which he cannot see.

8 The Gemara (*Bava Kama* 55a) states that if one sees the letter *tes* (ט) in a dream it is a good sign, for the word טוב, *good*, begins with the letter *tes*. The Gemara challenges this by pointing out that there are a number of negative words which also begin with the letter *tes*; how, then, do we know that the letter itself is positive? To this the Gemara responds that since the first time the letter appears in the Torah it is at the beginning of the word טוב, we know that the essential connotation of the letter is positive.

9 Bereishis 2:11.

10 *Mima’amakim, Ki Savo*.

11 Verse 2.

with other mitzvos. Why emphasize and insist on this seemingly purely logistical point? How is a basket different than any other vessel?

A basket has a significant characteristic; since it is woven together, there are gaps in the walls of the vessel. This means that although a cursory glance will show only the walls of the vessel, if one looks closer one can see through it. This is an amazing portrayal of us as we bring the *bikkurim* fruits. We are addressing the questions of “What contains us? What surrounds us? What are the forces ultimately responsible for our physical sustenance?” The forces of nature are the basket. The goal of *bikkurim* is to look closer and see through those walls to that which is beyond them.

SEMICHUS PARSHIYOS – BIKKURIM AND AMALEK

With this in mind, we can appreciate the juxtaposition of *bikkurim* at the beginning of our parsha, with the final topic dealt with in last week’s parsha – remembering Amalek.¹² How are these two matters connected?

Amalek represents a refusal to recognize Divine interaction in human affairs. Amalek’s attack against the Jewish people is described with the words “אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדַרְךְךָ — *who happened upon you along the way*”. The commentators explain that the word קָרָךְ is the motif term that represents Amalek’s position. Nothing is supervised or guided, things just “happen.” The events which immediately preceded Amalek’s attack were in a place called Refidim where, in our thirst, we wondered aloud, “הֲיֵשׁ ה’ בְּקִרְבָּנוּ אִם אֵין” — *Is Hashem in our midst or not?*¹³ We were not questioning Hashem’s existence. We were questioning His involvement “in our midst,” in our everyday affairs. The next thing that happened was we were attacked by Amalek.¹⁴ By giving voice to their credo, we empowered them to damage us.

Part of the mitzvah to remember Amalek and ultimately eradicate them is to remember the attitude which empowered them and to eradicate that as well. A decisive step in countering this attitude of Amalek thus follows immediately in the next section — the mitzvah of *bikkurim*.

In light of all this we can understand on a deeper level why *bikkurim* were chosen as the rectification of the sin of the spies, as discussed by the Arizal. It is not just a matter of praise rectifying slander. The awareness of – and sense of connectivity with – Hashem in the physical world that is reflected in *bikkurim* is the core refutation of the opposing thesis that led to the sin of the spies!

POSTSCRIPT: BIKKURIM AND PRAYER

Having discussed at length the crucial lesson to be derived from the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, we must ask: From where are we to derive this message when *bikkurim* are no longer brought? After all, the message is ultimately about all physical living, and is as relevant to the Jewish people in exile as it is when they are in Israel!

The Midrash Tanchuma in our parsha states:

צפה משה ברוח הקודש וראה שבית המקדש עתיד ליחרב והבכורים עתידים ליפסקו,
עמד והתקין להם לישראל שיהיו מתפללים שלש פעמים בכל יום.

12 Devarim 25:17.

13 Shemos 17:7.

14 Ibid., verse 8.

Moshe saw through Divine inspiration that in the future the Temple would be destroyed and the mitzvah of bikkurim (bringing the first fruits) would be discontinued, therefore he instituted for the Jewish people that they should pray three times every day.¹⁵

If the Temple will be destroyed, then every aspect of the Temple service will be discontinued, not just the mitzvah of bikkurim! Why does the absence of bikkurim specifically result in the institution of daily prayers?

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his classic work, *Derech Hashem*,¹⁶ describes the descent of the soul into the physical world, a place where conditions are not conducive to spiritual pursuits, in order to achieve greater merit by fulfilling the Divine will under such adverse conditions. He then adds:

However, as much as this descent is necessary for the soul in this world, on the other hand, it is crucial that the soul not descend further than is appropriate. For the more it gets caught up in matters of this world, the more it distances itself from the ultimate Light. Now, the Creator has prepared an antidote for this concern, namely, that first a person should draw close and stand before Him, and ask of Him all his needs, and cast upon Him his lot. This will be the beginning point (ראשית) for all his earthly involvement, so that when he then goes about his endeavors, which are the various pathways of human involvement, he will not become overly enmeshed in physicality and earthliness, having preceded them by ascribing all to God.

This presentation of the idea of prayer is most profound. Through praying at the three crucial junctures of the day, a person checks in with Hashem and establishes his awareness that it is Hashem who governs the world. This should serve to set the tone for the portion of the day which follows, much as *bikkurim* set the same tone for the agricultural year. The *bikkurim* are taken from the ראשית, the first of the fruits, the very word R' Luzzato uses to describe the effect of prayer. We thus understand why the Midrash stated that the institution of prayer was in response to the absence of *bikkurim*, for their function is one and the same. Prayer is to the day what *bikkurim* are to the year.

What is so noteworthy about this understanding of prayer is that it emphasizes that the value of prayer does not end when the person finishes praying. Rather, it continues to reverberate in every activity he engages in afterwards, until he returns to pray again. Indeed, the hallmark of a successful prayer should be that its effects are felt hours afterwards.

All of this should give us a new appreciation of the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, as one whose theme and message extend far beyond their particular context and reverberate in every aspect of our day-to-day living in the physical world.

15 Cf. Berachos 26b, where other sources for the three daily prayers are presented.

16 Sec. 4, chap. 5.