

Potomac Torah Study Center

Vol. 12 #47, September 12-13, 2025; 6 Elul, 5785; Ki Tavo 5785

NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

Because of travel, the schedule of Yom Tovim all coming during the middle of the week (none on Shabbat and Sunday), and numerous commitments, I believe that I shall not have time to prepare Devrei Torah until after Simchat Torah. I am uncertain about Bereishit; I expect at least to be able to return to print by Noach.

One of the first requirements for our ancestors upon entering the land of Israel is to bring a portion of the first fruits of the seven special crops associated with Israel, put them in a basket, and bring them to a Kohen at the place that God designates (the Mishkan and later the Temple) (26:1-10). Bikurim redeems a vow that Yaakov made when he was leaving Canaan to escape from the anger of Esav. If Hashem favored Yaakov with blessings, then when he returned safe and in peace to Canaan, he would give a tenth of all he had to God. Yaakov did eventually return to Canaan, but he never had peace in his family. His wives were never at peace with each other, and his sons battled continuously. Only at the end of Sefer Devarim do B'Nai Yisrael return to Canaan (Israel) in peace, so it is finally time to redeem Yaakov's vow.

Our ancestors have a second requirement, Vidui Ma'aser, to bring various tithes of the seven species of Israel (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives (olive oil), and dates (date honey) on the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of each seven-year Shemitta cycle. On years three and six, the tithe becomes Ma'aser Ani, tithe for the poor. Each land owner in Israel is to bring the tithes to Hashem's designated place to consume his portion – and share it with others – in Jerusalem. A landowner unable to bring his tithe to the designated place could convert the produce to cash, add a fifth, and send the funds to the designated place to be used to purchase food to be shared in Jerusalem. Ma'aser Sheni ended after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), with exile of most Jews from Israel, and when it became impossible to go to and consume the tithes in Jerusalem.

Once entering the land, B'Nai Yisrael were to assemble with six tribes each on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. Levi would stand in the valley between the mountains and proclaim twelve curses, to which all the people had to respond, "Amen." The curses, which will come when our people sin (do not obey God's mitzvot), include familiar themes: a man's fiancée will be unfaithful. He will build a home but not live there. He will plant a vineyard but not enjoy its fruit. He will fall in love but his fiancée will be taken away. His oxen will be slaughtered, and he will not even be able to eat any of the meat. His children will be sent into exile. These curses should sound familiar, because the Shotrim (enforcers) send away any

potential soldiers who have not lived in their new homes, have not tasted the fruit of their vineyard, become engaged and not yet married his fiancée (20:5-7).

Why does Moshe warn of terrible curses? Moshe reminds us that God wants us to enjoy the good that He has given to us, especially through the great gift of a wonderful land that He watches over constantly. Hashem wants us to obey His mitzvot in joy – to be happy in all the good that He has given to B’Nai Yisrael. What is good, and what is evil? Our Creator defines what is good and what is evil – these decisions are for Hashem to determine. Humans are to accept God’s definitions of good and evil – we are not to try to be in the place of creators and make those decisions for ourselves. If we obey Hashem’s mitzvot, in joy, God will bring the best of blessings to us (28:1-14). Moshe reminds the people as they are to enter the land that Hashem gives them a choice of good or evil, wonderful blessings or horrible curses.

The tochacha in Vayikra ends with a promise that when B’Nai Yisrael perform teshuvah, Hashem will remember and redeem them (26:44-45). The tochacha in Devarim, however, does not contain a similar promise of redemption. The reason for the absence of a positive ending to Ki Tavo is that the redemption comes in Nitzavim. The primary theme of Nitzavim is that God will not forget His love for B’Nai Yisrael and His promises to our Avot. When the descendants of our exiled Jews return to Hashem and perform true teshuvah, God will accept those who love Hashem with all our hearts and souls. With true teshuvah, Moshe promises that B’Nai Yisrael will return to Israel, that the land will become fertile again, and Israel will flourish for our people. We have seen much of this transformation in the eighty years since Jews have returned to Israel. The country that no other people were able to make flourish for two thousand years is now a leader in agriculture, medicine, technology, and defense. One side effect of October 7 is that various segments of Israeli society have come together for the good of the country – not completely, but more than before. Jews in other countries also seem to be cooperating more than in the recent past. May these trends continue so Israel and Jews elsewhere can all have better lives.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z”l, lived through World War II and served as a chaplain for the U.S. Navy for many years. He saw much evil and anti-Semitism during his life – although the experiences of the past two years have been worse than anything since the Nazi period (when he was a child). Ki Tavo brings a message that he would have endorsed – we Jews must work together, especially in Israel and with respect to what we can do for fellow Jews throughout the world. May our children and grandchildren keep to these goals throughout their lives.

Shabbat Shalom. Kativah v’chatima tovah,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeevi Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom and Hodesh Tov,

Haftarat Parshat Ki Tavo: Redemption In Its Time, and In an Instant

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander *
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in loving memory of Rabbi David Moss z"l on his fifth yahrzeit

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

The last verse of this week's haftara offers a puzzling vision of redemption: "*I GOD will speed it [redemption], in [its] due time.*" (Isaiah 60:22). But which is it? Will redemption come "*in due time*" – presumably after the fulfillment of preordained conditions– or will it break forth suddenly, "*with speed*"? Should we be expecting a long wait? – Or should we live in a state of constant hopeful readiness?

In the Talmud in tractate Sanhedrin 98a(, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi resolves this tension: "*If they merit redemption, I will hasten its coming. If they do not merit redemption, it will wait until its due time.*" In this reading, both possibilities stand: The Jewish people may be redeemed immediately, or the redemption might have to wait until certain conditions occur in its due time. Our behavior can tip the scales and hasten salvation; if not, it will arrive at the destined time.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's teaching challenges the normally accepted paradigm of how redemption comes about. By and large, we envision the coming of the Messiah as following a certain set script: The Jewish people repent and return to God, and this in turn leads God to have mercy on us and ending our exile and suffering. But perhaps this is not the only possible paradigm. Maybe the exile has a fixed limit, independent of the spiritual state of the Jewish people. Even without full repentance, or any repentance, if God judges that the diaspora is too difficult and may destroy us as a people, then the "*time*" of the redemption will have come, and He will save us unconditionally (in its due time).

Some have pointed out the providential nature of the establishment of the State of Israel immediately on the heels of the Holocaust. On the surface, the horrors of the war years convinced both the Jewish People and the world of the urgent need for a Jewish state. But there is also a deeper, spiritual dimension: The destruction of the vast majority of the Jewish world and the imminent danger of the collapse of Jewish peoplehood and continuity left God with no choice, as it were, to intercede and begin the process of redemption.

This is not, God forbid, a justification or explanation for the Holocaust, which still defies comprehension. But it can provide a lens through which to view why the greatest redemptive chapter in Jewish history opened so quickly after that catastrophe. And it can help us to understand why redemption began to progress even absent a mass movement of repentance and return to God among the Jewish people: God was bringing redemption "*in its due time.*"

The Ramban echoes this idea. He states explicitly that repentance is not a necessary prerequisite for redemption: "*This song of Haazinu does not condition the future events it describes on repentance or service*" (Devarim 32:40). Likewise, R. Chaim ibn Attar, in his commentary *Or Hachayim* on Parashat Behar 25:28(, writes: "*When the Master [God] sees that the people have no power to suffer more blows, and that their debts [sins] have increased so greatly that they can no longer be borne, the time of his bondage will last only 'until the Jubilee,' i.e., until the time preordained for the redemption.... This will be the end of the exile even if the people of Israel remain utterly evil.*" We likewise find many instances in Tanakh where God decides to have mercy on the people for the sake of His own great name and the covenant with their ancestors, even when they have not yet had a change of heart.

As we recite this haftara, let us hope and pray to be deserving of a redemption that comes in a flash. The Jewish people of today, in Israel and outside it, has progressed spiritually beyond recognition in the years since the founding of the state. All around us we see Jews, even those who consider themselves “*secular*,” deeply and actively engaged in strengthening their personal and collective relationship with God and Israel. This movement has only accelerated during the current war, a sign of resilience shining through the darkness of October 7 and its aftermath.

Through the crucible of conflict and strife, let us be blessed to be forged by God “*as silver is forged*” Zechariah 13:9(into a people worthy of receiving His grace in an instant.

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Ki Tavo: We Need Lots of Help!

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2007 (5767)

Then you shall call out and say before HASHEM, your G-d:

“An Aramean tried to destroy my father. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation great, strong and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. Then we cried out to HASHEM, the G-d of our forefathers, and HASHEM heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail and our oppression. HASHEM took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness and wonders. He brought us to this place and He gave us a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground You have given me, O HASHEM!” And you shall lay it before HASHEM, your G-d, and you shall prostrate yourself before HASHEM your G-d.)Devarim 26:5-10(

Everyone bringing a first fruit to the Kohen is required to make this protracted declaration year after year. By the second or third time, we can imagine that the person reciting these same words that comprise a good portion of our Haggadah is going to be learning little about our history that he didn’t already know. Then what’s the point of repeating this speech over and over and over again?

The Ribnitzer Rebbe, ztl. was widely known for his ability to facilitate miracles. The story was related to me just this week that a certain Dr. Goldstein from Queens, an ear, nose, and throat specialist, was visited by a family that had a girl that was stricken with classic deafness for which there is no known cure. The Doctor would have dismissed them without any medical attention, but they insisted that the Ribnitzer Rebbe had sent them to him for a treatment and a cure. So to only to appease their persistence he prescribed a regimen of vitamins and sent them on their way.

Within a short period of time, the parents received a surprising phone call from one of the teachers at the special-school for the deaf the girl had been attending. It seems she started to exhibit signs of being able to hear. When it was verified that she could in fact hear, everyone was amazed, and Dr. Goldstein was crowned with the credit for his healing prowess.

Word spread that Dr. Goldstein could, indeed, cure deafness. He was then faced with a steep legal challenge. Since he had honestly deflected all credit, he was charged with withholding treatment, which is a crime. He had to prove in a court of law that he had offered the girl no more than a placebo. Ultimately the real cause of the cure, by default, was legally credited to the miraculous powers of the Ribnitzer Rebbe, and so it was duly recorded.

Years later, Dr. Goldstein received a call from the Gabai – attendant – of the Ribnitzer Rebbe requesting a home visit for Rebbe to assist him with a problem that he was having with his hearing. After administering whatever needed to be done,

the Dr. asked the Ribnitzer the obvious question. "Why didn't the Rebbe, who was able to make miracles happen, heal himself from his own ear ailment?"

The Rebbe quoted the Talmud)Brochos 5B(where it says, "*A prisoner cannot remove himself from prison!*" There it tells about Reb Yochanon, who had relieved others of their pain and yet required the help of someone else to alleviate his. What we do for others, often we cannot even do for ourselves. Sometimes a doctor needs a doctor, a lawyer may need a lawyer, and a psychiatrist needs a psychiatrist.

There are multiple versions of the same bad joke about the fellow who was looking frantically for a parking place in New York so he could be on time for a million dollar business deal. So desperate he became that he called to HASHEM and promised, "*I'll give half the profits to charity if I just get a parking place to be on time!*" Just at that moment, magically, a car pulls out from a prime parking place and after quickly maneuvering into the spot, he exits the car in a hurry and addresses G-d once again stating boldly, "*It's OK G-d! I didn't need Your help! I worked it out myself!*"

So great is the tendency for a person to gobble up credit and cut G-d out of the deal, whenever anything goes well, an entire history lesson is in order to remind us repeatedly of what we know already, though it's hard to admit. We couldn't have gotten out of Egypt or High School on our own. To reach this place n' time we needed and **we need lots of help!**

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5770-kisavo/>

Ki Tavo: Mixed Blessings?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2014

In the middle of the extended section on the calamities and curses that will befall the Israelites if they fail to observe the mitzvot, we find a curious set of verses:

Because you served not the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore shall you serve your enemies which the Lord shall send against you, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things (Devarim, 28:47-48).

Not only have we sinned, the Torah seems to be telling us, but we sinned when we had every opportunity to serve God to the best of our ability, when we were prosperous and happy. And so, as a measure-for-measure punishment, we will be stripped of this goodness and left in a state of dependency and want.

Read this way, the message seems to be that it is easier to serve God when all is going well. But is this actually the case? Often, it is exactly the opposite that is true. When we are dependent and in need, we call out to God. It is when we are successful that we tend to forget God. Sometimes this is because we are drawn after hedonistic, or at least materialistic, pleasures. At other times it is because we grow arrogant, thinking, as the verse states, that "*it is my power and the might of my hand that has gotten me this wealth*" (8:17).

Most of the time, however, it is not so much that we rebel against or reject God but something subtler and, for that reason, all the more pervasive. It is a variation of Pierre-Simon Laplace's reported response to Napoleon's question ("*But where is God in all this?*") after he had discussed the orbits of Saturn and Jupiter: "*Sire, I had no need for that hypothesis.*" When we have it good, we have "*no need for that hypothesis.*" God stops being a present force in our life, stops serving an obvious purpose. It is less about rejecting than it is about ignoring and forgetting.

This is of course a problem that we face today. Overall, we have it quite good. What makes us remember God?

One possibility is the drastic answer presented in our parasha: hardship and privation. If the people are taken as slaves, made naked and starving, they will by necessity turn to God to save them. Even less severe circumstances could lead to

a profound sense of dependency. Consider the verse at the end of the section of curses: *"And your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall fear day and night, and shall have none assurance of your life"* (28:66).

The simple sense of this verse is that every moment you will fear the next tragedy that may befall you. But the Talmud (Menachot, 103b), quoted by Rashi, offers another explanation: *"you will not have any stored food, but will have to rely on the baker daily for your bread."*

When Boris Yeltsin visited the United States in 1989, seeing an American supermarket impressed him more than anything else. As is known, in the U.S.S.R., people had to wait in long lines in hopes of receive basic food items, and here all was available for the taking. The AP reports that on returning to Russia he said to his followers, *"Their supermarkets have 30,000 food items... You can't imagine it. It makes the people feel secure."*

It is because of this basic sense of security we all take for granted that it is so hard to see God in our lives. As someone once said regarding why tefillah is such a challenge in Modern Orthodox schools: *"We are asking the children to pray in a language they don't understand, to a God they might not believe in, for things they don't need."* If we are free from basic need, what will make us turn to God?

Undoubtedly, were we reduced to privation and a precarious existence, were our lives **"hanging in doubt before us,"** we would turn to God on a regular basis. But this is certainly not something we would wish on anyone. There is a reason that this is a curse in the Torah. It is an answer of last resort.

So what then is the ideal solution? An answer can be found in the opening of our parasha. There the people are told that they are to bring their first fruits to the Temple and express their gratitude for what God has given them. But it is not just a simple "thank you." For it is easy to say thank you without any real meaning. The Torah, rather, is teaching us how to say thank you.

Before any thank you is uttered, the person first recites what has brought him to this place – the descent to Egypt, the slavery, the calling out to God, God's redeeming of the people, and God's giving the land of Israel to the people. We must pause to remember how and when things were different. If our national history is vivid in our memory, if the hardships faced, wars fought, and challenges overcome are in the forefront of our consciousness, then we will know what God has given us and what God is continuing to give to us.

What is the antidote for the concern that we will not serve God *bi'simcha u'bi'tuv levav meirov kol* - in joy and gladness of the heart, from an abundance of good? To learn how to appreciate that what we have is from God. Then, the Torah tells us, using almost identical phrasing, *vi'samachta bi'kol hatov* – you will rejoice in all the good. And it will be a rejoicing that serves God, because you will know that it is *kol ha'tov asher natan likha Hashem E-lokhekha*, *"the good that you have been given by God"* (26:11).

Of course, this is easier said than done. The point of giving thanks to God is to cultivate this sense of gratitude and blessedness, but it doesn't happen automatically. We have many blessings in our liturgy which can help us do this – the blessings before food, the blessings after food, blessings on good tidings, on wonders of nature – but if these are said mechanically, they will fail to shape our religious sensibilities. The lesson from the recital of the first fruits is that we must not pay attention to what we are saying (already a major accomplishment) but also take the time to truly consider how things were different in the past and how things could be different, were we not so fortunate, in the present.

In a way, this is a variation of the line, *"Remember that there are children starving in Africa."* As a means of getting a child to eat her food, this statement is probably useless today. But a thoughtful consideration of the privation of others can help a person cultivate a sense of appreciation for the opportunities and advantages that she has been given and a sense of gratitude to God for the blessings that she has received.

This suggests another, related, approach. For in full, the final verse of the first fruits reads thusly: *"And you shall rejoice in all the good that God has given you and your household – you, and the Levi, and the stranger in your midst."* The

command to share our bounty with those less fortunate is not just an outgrowth of our recognition that our prosperity comes from God. It can actually be the source of this recognition.

If we go out and contribute to the betterment of those who are less fortunate than ourselves, if we approach them not just with sympathy but with empathy, if we put ourselves in their place and understand their realities, then it will not be possible for us to take what we have for granted. If we spend more time in homeless shelters, in soup kitchens, and in depressed neighborhoods, we will more deeply appreciate what it is that God has given us.

This does not mean that we are to use these individuals instrumentally so that we can feel more blessed. Far from it! Rather, by truly caring and connecting, we will naturally appreciate our blessings, and then, just as naturally, we will be led to share these blessings with them since we will know that, ultimately, all these blessings come from God. And then this virtuous cycle will repeat. The more we feel blessed, the more we will give. And the more we give, the more we will feel blessed.

As Rosh HaShannah approaches let us pray that next year will be one of only blessings and prosperity. And let us do what we need to do to be deserving of these blessings. Let us live our lives with the knowledge that what we have is a blessing from God, so that we may truly rejoice in all the good that God has given us – us and the Levi and the stranger in our midst.

Shabbat shalom.

From my archives

Working and Walking Together: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

A few years ago, I read an article about Brandy Young, a second-grade teacher at the Godley Elementary School in Texas. She passed out a letter to every parent at a “Meet the Teacher Night” ahead of the start of the school year to explain her new homework policy – or should we say, no-homework policy.

“There will be no formally assigned homework this year. Rather, I ask you to spend your evenings doing things that are proven to correlate with student success. Eat dinner as a family, read together, play outside, and get your child to bed early. [Students] work hard all day. When they go home they have other things they need to learn there.”

Instead of having her students do busywork after a long day in school, Brandy Young wants the students to spend time with their parents, to have time for hobbies or reading for pleasure. School is only part of a child’s education; the whole child, though, needs educational nourishment from parents, family and a wholesome home environment.

As I was thinking (and agreeing with!) this article, I came across another piece in the New York Times. The article cited the work of Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University. He was asked to explore ritual and myth in American families. He found that children who know a lot about their families and their histories tend to do better when they face challenges. *“The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.”*

Duke and his colleagues used the “Do You Know” measure that they developed themselves to test children’s knowledge about their histories. Some of the questions were as simple as:

“Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?”

The more answers the child knew correlated greatly with the child's emotional health and resilience.

These articles provide a profoundly important lesson. If we want to raise a healthy and happy generation of children, we need to invest time and effort. We cannot leave things to schools. We cannot expect children to absorb our values and ideals if they are constantly plugged into iPods or computer games. We need to spend time with them, to share our experiences, to learn of their concerns. If they do not know who we are or what we value, how can we expect them to draw on their family traditions when they grow older and face critical life challenges? If we do not know who they are, how can we offer intelligent guidance to them in the manner that is most appropriate to their specific needs and talents?

This week's Parasha begins with the obligation of farmers to bring the first fruits of their land as an offering to the Lord. When they delivered the basket of produce to the priest, the farmers would recite a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty. But instead of simply saying thank you, the farmer needed to make a long declaration, recounting the history of Israel since the time of our forefathers, through the servitude in Egypt and the ensuing exodus, and through the arrival into the Promised Land.

The Torah is teaching an important lesson. A person is part of a larger historical context and must understand that context and tradition. We are not disconnected fragments of humanity, but are part of an extended family. We gain strength and resilience when we know who we are, where we belong. [emphasis added]

Praise belongs to teachers who understand the need for children to spend quality time with their families. Praise belongs to parents and grandparents who genuinely relate to their children and grandchildren in a loving manner, giving generously of their time, listening patiently to the children and grandchildren. Praise belongs to those who value genuine communication, who understand how precious it is to spend quality time with the young generations. Praise belongs to those who understand their history and family traditions, and who find meaningful and happy ways of transmitting these things to their family members. Praise belongs to the nation that understands where it has come from, what it has undergone, where it is headed.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/working-and-walking-together-thoughts-parashat-ki-tavo>

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.

Parashat Ki Tavo and Rosh HaShana: A Chance to Renew

By Jake Nussbaum *

Rav Mordechai Machlis, a Rabbi at Yeshivat Lev Hatorah, spoke about the value of renewal in Judaism, particularly within the context of Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of a new month. The word "hodesh" has the root of "hadash," meaning new. He also spoke of renewal everyday, every week and every year. Each Kabbalat Shabbat, we chant the words (Psalms 96:1 and 98:1) "*Sing to the Lord a new song.*" The question is: what is the new song we sing on Shabbat? We are singing the same songs to the Lord as on every Shabbat of our lives! Rav Machlis explains that we don't sing a new song of different words, rather we sing the same words with a different fervor, a different concentration. The Baal Shem Tov said that if your prayer today is the exact same as your prayer yesterday, then you didn't really pray today. Although the prayers one says are going to have just about all the same words every day, the important thing is to build upon the prayers of the past, or to focus on one aspect that has been lacking.

This week's Parasha, Parashat Ki Tavo, opens with the Mitzvah of Bikkurim, the obligation to take the first fruits from the seven species of the Land of Israel and bring them to offer on the altar to Hashem. The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzvah 606) writes that the reason for this mitzvah is that it is important for a farmer to be reminded that the success of his crops comes from Hashem, not himself. Every year, when it comes time to bring the bikkurim, the farmer will think of how blessed he was in the past year. The purpose of the mitzvah is to entrench a constant renewal of appreciation for Hashem.

Rabbi Daniel Hartstein, a Rabbi at Lev HaTorah, quoted Rav Avraham Pam Z'l, who pointed out the contemporary relevance of this Mitzvah even if we are not farmers and even if there is no Beit Hamikdash. The Torah presents the statement the farmer was to make when offering the Bikkurim. This statement reviewed the history of Israel and how God redeemed us from years of servitude in Egypt. The lesson: review Jewish history and be grateful that we now have a renewed Jewish State of Israel.

Nowadays, we have a tremendous blessing to be able to visit Israel in mere hours, while for generations the journey was long and treacherous. The obvious upside is that so many more Jews have a chance to visit our homeland with little inconvenience. However, the easier something is to achieve, the harder it is to appreciate. The Mitzvah of Bikkurim reminds us of the challenges the Israelites went through to reach the promised land even after being driven out of Egypt. All the more so should we appreciate our return to the land sworn to our forefathers after centuries of exile! What the Mitzvah of Bikkurim offers us each and every year is to renew our inspiration and thankfulness to Hashem for the blessings and opportunities we have been given.

It is no coincidence that this Mitzvah is read in the Torah two weeks before Rosh HaShanah, the special time of renewal. Every year, we are faced with the challenge of finding a new way to bring in the year. This could be picking a Mitzvah to focus on deeply during the coming year; it could be setting out to learn something new. Whether big or small, accepting upon oneself something before Rosh Hashanah can make saying the same selihot and prayers "*a new song to the Lord.*" With the Mitzvah of Bikkurim on our mind, may we be blessed to renew our inspiration for serving Hashem in the coming year and to make sure to constantly try to "*Sing to the Lord a new song.*"

* Jake Nussbaum, a grandson of Rabbi Marc D. Angel, wrote this Dvar Torah a few years ago when he was a student at Yeshiva College and a summer intern at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Originally posted in 1981.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/dangers-groupthink-thoughts-parashat-shofetim>

Ki Savo – Talk of the Town by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Lizecher Nishmas my beloved father Shlomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l. whose Yartzeit is this Shabbos

The final sections of Torah reflect on the wondrous relationship of Hashem and the Jewish people. It is a remarkable journey starting when Hashem created the world and when Avraham and Sara chose to share Hashem's message with mankind. It is a journey that meandered its way through the promised land, to Mitzrayim, and then back again. And it is a journey that continues to play itself out in our time.

In this week's parsha the Torah describes a remarkable aspect of that relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. Each of us — Hashem and the Jewish people — have caused the other to have a certain reputation in the world. Moshe describes this aspect of the relationship by saying, "*You have caused it to be said about Hashem*" that it is good to

trust Him, to believe in Him as your G-d, to listen to Him and to observe his commandments. In a reciprocal way, Moshe continues, *"Hashem has caused it to be said about you"* that you are His treasured nation and that you do observe the mitzvos loyally as a holy nation.

In this section, one of the shortest Aliyos in the Torah, Moshe reflects on how the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people is perceived by the thinking people of the world. We have something special. The way we have trusted Hashem and the way Hashem admires us have created a noble impression, a reputation, for us to treasure and be inspired by.

This devotional and reciprocal relationship is something that gets especially strong each year as we approach Rosh Hashana.

This week I had the opportunity to be in a local Judaica store buying some items. As I was there, I had the opportunity to observe the pre-holiday buzz of shopping that was going on. A man came into the store saying that he was looking for a pocket sized Machzor because his regular sized machzor was getting too heavy to hold during the Amidah. A few minutes later another man came in saying that he needed a regular sized machzor because he was having trouble reading from his pocket sized machzor. (In case you are wondering: Yes, I thought briefly of trying to be a shadchan for a machzor exchange but decided to keep my suggestions to myself and allow business to run its course.) The talk of the town is that Rosh Hashana is coming, and everyone is striving to get ready for this special day.

I have heard that there is a recently developed product called a hotel day-pass which can be purchased by people who would like to spend a few hours in some of the most expensive hotels worldwide. Perhaps Rosh Hashana will be more meaningful if we think of it in that way. We might not be worthy of or be able to afford a true residence in such an expensive and special place. But we are invited on a day-pass for a few hours to experience the most luxurious place imaginable. As our spirits soar during the Rosh Hashanah davening, we are invited for a few hours to take our place in Hashem's chambers in heaven for an audience in which our prayers have special impact.

Just as on earth the upcoming holiday is the talk of the town with people getting ready, so in heaven Hashem is getting ready for His guests. To describe things in human terms we might say that Hashem is readying the heavens to be ready for this special day. He is directing His angels to pave the roads well so that it should be easy for the visitors, as the Novi (Yeshaya 57) describes it, *"Pave a road, clear a path! Remove the obstacles from the path of My nation."* For in heaven, they are also eagerly anticipating the day of Rosh Hashana.

When I was in grade school, one of my Rabbeim told us a story which was meant to be a contemporary version of how our relationship with Hashem works. He told a story of a king who built a new tower and then announced a contest. He said, *"Whoever climbs to the top of the tower shall receive great reward."* Rumor had it that the tower had fifty flights of stairs. Many contestants came to try to climb to the top of the tower. But once they began, they decided that it was impossible. Each flight had many stairs, and the stairs were steep and difficult to climb. Most contestants dropped out after ten or twenty flights. Yet, one man persevered. What kept him going was the belief that the king was a benevolent monarch; getting to the contest's goal must be possible. When this man reached the midpoint, he was exhausted with no hope of climbing even one more flight. But as he turned the corner to just look at the next flight of stairs, he saw that the king had installed escalators for the remaining flights of stairs. His faith had paid off. The king was indeed the benevolent monarch he had trusted.

As busy as we are in Judaica stores and elsewhere preparing for Rosh Hashana, in heaven it is even busier. Hashem is paving the roads and installing escalators for those who just try and do their best. Our relationship has a reputation. Hashem has given us a reputation that we can do it. We have given Him a reputation that He can be trusted. Together we have something very special. As Rosh Hashana approaches, we each get ready to live up to our reputations.

The world needs Hashem's blessing.

Individually and collectively, we yearn for a renewal of kindness and benevolence. Rosh Hashana is the day that Hashem created the world, and it is the day that Hashem renews it as He sees fit.

May Hashem guide us to do our best. May this new year be one of blessing beyond all expectation.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Ki Savo – Concretized By Confession

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2022

One of the three critical elements of repentance is verbal confession. In addition to regretting ones mistakes and committing to make real change, one must verbally confess that they have sinned. If one changes their behavior but never says the words, “*I have sinned*,” they have not yet completed the process of repentance.

In fact, the Orchos Tzadikim, the *Ways of the Righteous*, says that confession is the core of repentance. In the Gate of Repentance, when discussing the different stages of repentance, he writes that it is of particular importance that one commits to change when they are confessing. Confession is comparable to a mikvah, a ritual bath. When one is ritually impure one must go to a mikvah to cleanse themselves of that impurity. However, the mikvah will only cleanse them if they are not currently in contact with anything that creates ritual impurity. So too, he says, confession cleanses one from their sin. However, it can only work if they are no longer emotionally in contact with that sin. Therefore, one must make special effort to commit to change in the future at the moment when they are confessing the sin.

Why is verbal confession so important? We might be tempted to think that confession is akin to an apology. It is as though one is saying sorry to G-d. However, when we look closely at the laws of confession, this is clearly not the case. The Rem”a Siman 607 Se’if 3 tells us that the essence of confession is the statement, “*I have sinned*.” It is not the request for forgiveness, nor the expression of remorse and commitment to change. Rather, it is simply the verbal acknowledgment that one has sinned. Why is the act of verbally acknowledging the sin compared to a ritual bath cleansing one of their sin?

The Hebrew word for confession is viduy. We find this same word, viduy, used regarding a seemingly very different mitzvah found in this week’s parsha. There are several tithes which one is required to give from produce grown in the land of Israel. Every few years, a farmer must be sure that all tithes have been taken out of storage and properly distributed or consumed. Once this is completed, the farmer must declare that he has taken all of the tithes, handled them properly, and distributed them according to their laws. This declaration is called *viduy Ma’aser*, Acknowledgement of the Tithes.

The Sefer Hachinuch in mitzvah 607 discusses a function for this viduy. He explains that the mitzvah of tithing ones produce and recognizing that our success and wealth is coming from G-d is a singularly important mitzvah. Furthermore, some of these tithes were given to the Kohanim and Levi’im who served in the Temple and this was one of the ways in which they were supported so that they could continue to serve in the Temple. G-d therefore sought a special means by which to help us ensure that we would fulfill the obligations of tithing. This special means is speech. There are many people who are willing to sin, cheat and steal, but would never lie explicitly. Our speech is what separates us from animals and defines us as individuals. It is a gift that G-d has given solely to mankind. Even those who would sin in other ways are often wary of corrupting their power of speech by lying or going back on their word. We are therefore commanded to

verbally acknowledge that we have taken the tithes. Our aversion to lying would further ensure that we take the tithes properly.

Perhaps this same idea can explain the significance of viduy in repenting. When we use our power of speech to verbally acknowledge that we have sinned, we are forcing ourselves to fully accept that action is a sin. If we want to be true to our word, then we must now fully accept that the action is wrong and should not be done. Verbal confession is a powerful tool to concretize our commitment to change, and concrete commitment is what truly cleanses us from the impurity of sin. As we seek to grow and change, we must not underestimate the value of verbalizing our commitments. May we merit to use this gift properly and see real change this year.

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

Ki Tavo: The Importance of Being Earnest

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

In Parashat Ki Tavo, we read of a momentous event which the Israelites are told to stage after crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The whole nation must gather at the plain near the twin peaks of Gerizim and Eval, overlooking the ancient city of Shekhem, and conduct a ceremony in which a special curse will be put upon people who commit certain crimes.

The nation was to ascend the two mountains, two huge human swarms filling every nook and cranny, standing on precipices and in the crevices of the rock, neck to neck, shoulder to shoulder. The tribes of Shimeon, Levy, Yehudah, Yisakhar, Yosef, and Binyamin, were to stand on Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, while the tribes of Reuven, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan, and Naftali would have been standing on Mount Eval, the mountain of the curse.

As those multitudes were standing there, feeling more than ever the unity of the nation and simultaneously the enormous divide which can separate brothers, lovers, and friends, the Levites were to raise their voice from upon the blessed mountain, and chant in unison a series of threats to potential sinners, following a formula of: "cursed is he who does so and so." After each declaration by the Levites the whole nation, on both mountains, had to shout back a resounding Amen.

Such an event had to be orchestrated meticulously. Ascending the mountains, paving roads and providing food and drink for the multitudes, and even training the Levites to chant their verses in unison, were daunting tasks, so they must have been conducted for a very noble cause.

I challenge the readers to stop here and think: what crimes justify such an extravagant undertaking? If you are reading this bulletin at the Shabbat table with your children or friends, stop and ask them this question.

The answer is a surprisingly mixed bag. Some of the transgressions such as idolatry, bestiality, incest, or murder, are so serious that we wonder why the event of the Giving of the law on Mount Sinai is not sufficient to inculcate them in the Nation's unified heart. Others, such as moving the fence an inch into your neighbor's property, giving wrong directions to a blind person, or talking back to one's parents, seem completely trivial.

This leads us to the next question: what is the common thread to all these warnings?

The answer this time is that it is all about pretense and transparency. The Torah warns us against hypocrites who pretend to be righteous but are engaged in illicit and illegal activities. **The key word of the Parasha is נִתְּחַבֵּא – in hiding.**
[emphasis added]

The Torah commands us to organize this mass-attended event in order to remind us that no matter how hard we try to hide our actions, they will have long lasting and visible results on the whole community, nation, and world.

In other words, the Torah reminds us to be responsible for our actions and be fully honest and transparent with each other.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Welcome to Rabbi Natanel & Avital Kaszovitz

Rabbi Natanel & Avital Kaszovitz have arrived in Auckland, New Zealand this past week as Rabbi Kaszovitz becomes the new Rabbi for the Auckland Hebrew Congregation in Remuera)Auckland(. Rabbi Kaszovitz until recently was Rabbi of the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation in Kenya. He did his Rabbinic training at Ohr Torah Stone, one of the leading Hesder Yeshivot. At the Hesder yeshivot, the students combine service in the Israel Defense Force along with their rabbinic training. Rabbi Kaszovitz trained in a special Ohr Torah Stone program to prepare Rabbinic leaders to serve in the Diaspora. His choice of Kenya and New Zealand shows his dedication to serving small Jewish communities in communities that often have very limited Jewish resources.

Rabbi Natanel could only serve in isolated communities with the approval and assistance of his very special wife, Avital, a nurse by training. When the Kaszovitz community left Nairobi, the Embassy wrote)in part(: *Ms. Avital Kaszovitz, whose dedication and passion has left a lasting mark on our Embassy. . . .Avital has been at the forefront of our healthcare partnerships, leading impactful initiatives that connected Israeli experts with many Kenyan institutions. Through her tireless efforts, she championed vital workshops, training programs, and research collaborations in many different fields, most notably in malaria research collaborations.*

I intend to dedicate this space to Devrei Torah from Rabbi Kaszovity and Rabbi Moshe Rube, who is in the process of moving to a new congregation in Australia. It is useful to remember and thank the dedicated rabbis who go all over the world to serve the Jewish people. While the best known of these dedicated Jewish leaders come from Chabad, it is useful to add insights from other Orthodox rabbis who serve small and otherwise isolated Jewish communities.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rav Kook Torah Ki Tavo: How to Serve God in Joy

Rav Kook was once asked: How can we awaken feelings of excitement and enthusiasm in our avodat Hashem? How do we cultivate a sense of joy in our service of God, when we observe mitzvot and study Torah?

The Answer of the Kabbalists

In his response, Rav Kook wrote:

It is difficult to properly explain this fundamental element of serving God in a letter. However, the primary way to kindle joy and enthusiasm is by dedicating time to rigorous study of the spiritual, non-halakhic areas of the Torah. Do not relegate it to haphazard reading. It is through this study that the soul's inner light begins to shine, and a spirit of joy and vitality infuses those who earnestly seek truth.

Nonetheless, I will share with you one central principle, though this too cannot be fully grasped without serious study and reflection. This principle can serve as a gateway to deepening your love for God and experiencing the radiant light of the holy Torah.

Clearly, if someone was granted the chance to benefit the entire world, even the most self-centered individual would eagerly seize the opportunity, devoting his heart and soul to the task.

Fatigue and weariness arise when we fail to recognize the extent of the good that we bring to the entire world through our Torah study, performance of mitzvot, Divine service, and cultivation of character traits.

For this reason, God enlightened us with the teachings of the lofty tzaddikim, the masters of Kabbalah. They deepened our understanding of the true significance of our service, clarifying how it uplifts all of creation. Nonetheless, we need to bring this abstract idea closer to our intellect. Then our motivation will be strong and our enthusiasm well-grounded.

Uplifting the Universe

We attain this profound awareness by contemplating the spiritual unity that binds the entire universe. We need to recognize that each individual soul is connected to the collective soul of all existence. Every created being draws its light and perfection from this collective soul. We have the power to increase the light in our souls through Torah study, mitzvot, prayer, and character refinement. We need to be aware that whenever we enlighten our own souls, we are benefiting not just ourselves, but the entire universe. We are bestowing perfection and life upon all creation.

Through our efforts, the righteous are strengthened in their holy service. The evil of the wicked is mitigated to some extent, and they experience stirrings of remorse and penitence. Even the animals are ennobled, according to their station. The noble holiness provided by a single soul that truly cares about all of existence helps refine and purify even those creatures inclined toward destruction. And it certainly adds dazzling light to the lofty splendor of the souls, and throughout the spiritual worlds, in their infinite beauty and sanctity.

All of this is relevant for every member of the holy nation of Israel. But it resonates with even greater significance for those who are privileged to dwell in the Holy Land.

)Adapted from *Iggerot HaRe'iyah* vol. I, letter 301 5670/1910.(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/KITAVO61.htm>

Ki Tavo: The Pursuit of Joy (5775, 5782)

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

Happiness, said Aristotle, is the ultimate good at which all humans aim.]¹ But in Judaism it is not necessarily so. Happiness is a high value. Ashrei, the closest Hebrew word to happiness, is the first word of the book of Psalms. We say the prayer known as Ashrei three times each day. We can surely endorse the phrase in the American Declaration of

Independence that among the inalienable rights of humankind are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But Ashrei is not the central value of the Hebrew Bible. Occurring almost ten times as frequently is the word *simcha*, joy. It is one of the fundamental themes of Deuteronomy as a book. The root s-m-ch appears only once in each of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but no fewer than twelve times in Deuteronomy. It lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in the Land of Israel. That is where we serve God with joy.

Joy plays a key role in two contexts in this week's parsha. One has to do with the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. After describing the ceremony that took place, the Torah concludes as follows:

"Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your God has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst." Deut. 26:11

The other context is quite different and astonishing. It occurs in the context of the curses. There are two passages of curses in the Torah, one in Leviticus 26, the other here in Deuteronomy 28. The differences are notable. The curses in Leviticus end on a note of hope. Those in Deuteronomy end in bleak despair. The Leviticus curses speak of a total abandonment of Judaism by the people. The people walk bekeri with God, variously translated as *"with hostility," "rebelliously,"* or *"contemptuously."* But the curses in Deuteronomy are provoked simply *"because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things."*)Deut. 28:47(

Now, joylessness may not be the best way to live, but it is surely not even a sin, let alone one that warrants a litany of curses. What does the Torah mean when it attributes national disaster to a lack of joy? Why does joy seem to matter in Judaism more than happiness? To answer these questions we must first understand the difference between happiness and joy. This is how the first Psalm describes the happy life:

Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat where scoffers sit. But his desire is in the Torah of the Lord; on his Torah he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in all that he does he prospers. Ps. 1:1-3

This is a serene and blessed life, granted to one who lives in accordance with the Torah. Like a tree, such a life has roots. It is not blown this way and that by every passing wind or whim. Such people bear fruit, stay firm, survive, and thrive. Yet for all that, happiness is the state of mind of an individual.

Simcha, joy, in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share. A newly married man does not serve in the army for a year, says the Torah, so that he can stay at home *"and bring joy to the wife he has married."*)Deut. 24:5(You shall bring all your offerings to the central sanctuary, says Moses, so that *"there, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you."*)Deut. 12:7(The festivals as described in Deuteronomy are days of joy, precisely because they are occasions of collective celebration: *"you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you."*)Deut. 16:11(**Simcha is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.**]emphasis added[

Happiness is an attitude to life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. As J. D. Salinger once said: *"Happiness is a solid, joy is a liquid."* Happiness is something you pursue. But joy is not. It discovers you. It has to do with a sense of connection to other people or to God. It comes from a different realm than happiness. It is a social emotion. It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.

Paradoxically, the biblical book most focused on joy is precisely the one often thought of as the unhappiest of all, Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. Kohelet is notoriously the man who had everything, yet describes it all as hevel, a word he uses almost forty times in the space of the book, and variously translated as *"meaningless," "pointless," "futile," "empty,"* or as the King

James Bible famously rendered it, “**vanity**.” In fact, though, Kohelet uses the word *simcha* seventeen times, that is, more than the whole of the Mosaic books together. After every one of his meditations on the pointlessness of life, Kohelet ends with an exhortation to joy:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice and do good while they live. Kohelet 3:12

So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in his work, because that is his lot.

So I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and rejoice. Kohelet 8:15

However many years anyone may live, let him rejoice in them all. Kohelet 11:8

I posit in the Koren Succot Machzor that Kohelet can only be understood if we realise that *hevel* does not mean “pointless,” “empty,” or “futile.” It means “a shallow breath.” Kohelet is a meditation on mortality. However long we live, we know we will one day die. Our lives are a mere microsecond in the history of the universe. The cosmos lasts forever while we living, breathing mortals are a mere fleeting breath.

Kohelet is obsessed by this because it threatens to rob life of any certainty. We will never live to see the long-term results of our endeavours. Moses did not lead the people into the Promised Land. His sons did not follow him to greatness. Even he, the greatest of Prophets, could not foresee that he would be remembered for all time as the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had. Lehavdil, Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime. He could not have known that he would eventually be hailed as one of the greatest painters of modern times. We do not know what our heirs will do with what we leave them. We cannot know how, or if, we will be remembered. How then are we to find meaning in life?

Kohelet eventually finds it not in happiness but in joy – because joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in God’s land, enjoying His blessings, eating the produce of His earth, watered by His rain, brought to fruition under His sun, breathing the air He breathed into us, living the life He renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing, and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city’s choir, then there is joy.

Kierkegaard once wrote: “*It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice.*”² It is one of the most poignant facts about Judaism and the Jewish people that our history has been shot through with tragedy, yet Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, to sing the Lord’s song even in a strange land.

There are Eastern faiths that promise peace of mind if we can train ourselves into habits of acceptance. Epicurus taught his disciples to avoid risks like marriage or a career in public life. Neither of these approaches is to be negated, yet Judaism is not a religion of acceptance, nor have Jews tended to seek the risk-free life. We can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy. Every Succot we leave the security and comfort of our houses and live in a shack exposed to the wind, the cold, and the rain. Yet we call it *zeman simchatenu*, our season of joy. That is no small part of what it is to be a Jew.

Hence **Moses’ insistence that the capacity for joy is what gives the Jewish people the strength to endure.** Without

it, we become vulnerable to the multiple disasters set out in the curses in our parsha. Celebrating together binds us as a people: that and the gratitude and humility that come from seeing our achievements not as self-made but as the blessings of God. The pursuit of happiness can lead, ultimately, to self-regard and indifference to the sufferings of others. It can lead to risk-averse behaviour and a failure to “*dare greatly*.” Not so joy. **Joy connects us to others and to God.** Joy is the ability to celebrate life as such, knowing that whatever tomorrow may bring, we are here today, under God’s Heaven, in the universe He made, to which He has invited us as His guests.]emphasis added[

Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West’s first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller’s “Ode to Joy.” I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship, and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed. As individuals we may aspire to the goodness that leads to happiness, but as part of a moral and spiritual community, even in hard times we find ourselves lifted on the wings of joy.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1.

[2] *Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967, p. 493.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

[1] Do you agree with Kierkegaard that “*it takes religious courage to rejoice*”?

[2] How does the festival of Succot connect to joy?

[3] In the essay for Eikev, Rabbi Sacks noted that gratitude was a dominant theme in Devarim. Here he teaches us that another key theme is joy. Which links can you find between these two themes?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/the-pursuit-of-joy/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Devar.

Why Do Bikkurim Require a Basket?

By Mordechai Rubin

Parsaht Ki Tavo begins with the mitzvah of bikkurim — the offering of the first fruits:

*And it will be, when you come into the land ... that you shall take from the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from your land, which the L-rd, your G d, is giving you. And you shall put]them[into a basket and go to the place which the L-rd, your G d, will choose to have His Name dwell there.*¹

Based on this verse, the Sifrei teaches that there is a requirement for the bikkurim to be placed into a vessel before being brought to Jerusalem.² Indeed, this requirement is codified in halachah, with Maimonides stating:

*The first fruits must be brought in a vessel, as the verse states: ‘And you shall place them in a basket.’ The most preferable way of performing the mitzvah is to bring each type of fruit in a separate container. If one brings them all in one container, he has fulfilled his obligation.*³

This raises the question: Why must the fruits be placed specifically in a basket)teneh(?

To Beautify the Mitzvah

On the most basic level, Chizkuni comments that this requirement is meant to add honor to the mitzvah, ensuring it is performed with dignity. Thus, one should not bring them *“in one’s lap or in the corner of the garment,”* but rather in a manner that demonstrates respect and esteem.⁴

A Hint at How Much You Should Bring

The Baal HaTurim notes that the word כַּסִּי (basket) has the numeric value of 60. This hints to the rabbinic tradition that bikkurim are ideally taken as one-sixtieth of the harvest. For this reason, he adds, the letter samech — whose value is also 60 — does not appear anywhere in the entire passage of bikkurim, to allude to this measure in a hidden way.⁵

Children as First Fruits

The Chatam Sofer explains that the verse, *“And you shall take from the first of all the fruit of the ground and place it in a basket,”* alludes not only to produce but also to children — the *“fruit of the womb”* — who should be dedicated to G d by raising them according to Torah. The numeric value of כַּסִּי (basket) with its vowel-points totals 120. This is because the vowel segol is three dots, and each dot is equal to ten; thus one segol = 30. The two segols in *“teneh,”* together with the numeric value of the letters themselves, equals 120. This symbolizes the blessing for a long life, *“until 120,”* that is associated with raising children in the spirit of Torah.⁶

Lights in Vessels

The Baal Shem Tov explained that on a deeper level, the phrase, *“And you shall put it in a basket,”* teaches that spiritual light must always be drawn into vessels. *“And it shall be when you come into the land,”* refers not only to physical entry into the Holy Land, but to an inner process.

The Hebrew word for *“land”*)eret(also means *ratzon* — desire. Entering the land thus means attaining a state of deep will and longing for G d. The verse continues, *“and you shall dwell there”* — i.e., make that desire stable and settled, not a passing feeling. Then comes, *“and you shall place it in a basket”* — i.e., channel those lofty lights into concrete vessels. Finally, *“you shall go to the place that the L-rd your G d will choose,”* — teaching that wherever a Jew goes, it is with Divine choice and purpose.⁷

The Rebbe explains that this interpretation aligns with the nature of bikkurim themselves. They must be the choicest fruits, brought from the choicest parts of the land — not because of natural conditions but because the Holy Land is constantly watched by G d. Thus, bikkurim represent unlimited Divine light. Yet, the Torah insists, *“And you shall put it in a basket.”* The Sifrei comments: Bikkurim require a vessel. The Baal Shem Tov, as recorded in Degel Machaneh Ephraim, explained that the word כַּסִּי (teneh, basket) is an acronym for *ta’amim, nekudot, otivot* — cantillation, vowels, and letters. Just as ideas must be clothed in letters, vowels, and melody to be communicated, so must Divine light be drawn into vessels. Even the most transcendent inspiration needs form and structure to be lived and transmitted.

There are two kinds of *“vessels.”* One is the vessel of speech, as in prayer, where feelings are expressed through words, letters, and tones. The other is the vessel of action — deed itself. When Israel is on a high spiritual level, doing the will of G d, speech and prayer alone can draw down blessing. But in times when the people are not fully aligned with G d’s will, the work must descend further, into tangible action, into the toil of mitzvot in the physical world. This descent into action may seem a greater concealment, but in truth it achieves a higher elevation: through concrete deeds, Divine light penetrates the lowest realms and sanctifies the most material aspects of life. Thus, *“You shall place it in a basket,”* teaches that the unlimited light of bikkurim must always be grounded in vessels — whether of speech or of deed — so that holiness takes root in the world itself.⁸

FOOTNOTES:

1. Deuteronomy 26:1-2.
2. Sifrei, Deuteronomy 26:2
3. *Mishneh Torah*, Bikkurim, 3:7.
4. Chizkuni, Deuteronomy 26:2.
5. Baal HaTurim, Deuteronomy 26:2.
6. Chatam Sofer *Al Hatorah*, Deuteronomy 26:2.
7. See Hayom Yom 18 Elul.
8. Torat Menachem, Shabbat Parshat Tavo, 18th of Elul, 5720, Section 11.

* Content editor and staff writer at Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/7017308/jewish/Why-Do-Bikkurim-Require-a-Basket.htm

Ki Tavo: First Fruits Every Day

by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky

This day, G-d, your G-d, is commanding you to fulfill these rules and ordinances. You must safeguard and do them with all your heart and all your soul.)Deut. 26:16(

G-d tells us to study His Torah and to fulfill all His commandments with all the excitement and novelty we would feel had He given them to us this very day. Here, however, He is telling us that even when we are not bringing Him our first fruits, we should still feel as excited about this commandment as if G-d had given it to us today.

This unique attitude toward the commandment to bring first fruits stems from the fact that allegorically, our souls are G-d's "*first fruit*" – our souls are essentially part of G-d Himself and thus existed prior to the creation of the world. By keeping our intrinsic connection to G-d constantly in mind, we can keep our study of the Torah and our performance of G-d's commandments fresh and exciting each and every day.

– From *Daily Wisdom* #3

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Ki Tavo from our *Daily Wisdom* #3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

May G-d grant continued wisdom, strength, victory and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

To receive the complete D'Vrai Torah package weekly by E-mail, send your request to AfisherADS@Yahoo.com. The printed copies contain only a small portion of the D'Vrai Torah. Dedication opportunities available. Authors retain all copyright privileges for their sections.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

Sponsored by Fred and Adina Friedman
on the occasions of the yahrzeits of their mothers:
Helen Friedman, a"h (Henna bas R' Avraham Baruch) on the 24th of Elul and
Tova Klahr, a"h (Pesha Toiba bas Harav Yehuda Dov) on the 21st of Elul

Volume 31, Issue 46

Shabbat Parashat KiTavo

5785 - B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Freedom Means Telling the Story

Here's an experiment. Walk around the great monuments of Washington D.C. There, at the far end, is the figure of Abraham Lincoln, four times life-size. Around him on the walls of the memorial are the texts of two of the greatest speeches of history, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's second Inaugural: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right. . ."

A little way away is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial with its quotations from each period of the President's life as leader, most famously: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Keep walking along the Potomac and you come to the Jefferson Memorial, modelled on the Pantheon at Rome. There too you will find, around the dome and on the interior walls, quotations from the great man, most famously from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."

Now visit London. You will find many memorials and statues of great people. But you will find no quotations. The base of the statue will tell you who it represents, when they lived, and the position they occupied or the work they did, but no narrative, no quotation, no memorable phrases or defining words.

Take the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Churchill was one of the greatest orators of all time. His wartime speeches and broadcasts are part of British history. But no words of his are inscribed on the monument, and the same applies to almost everyone else publicly memorialised.

It's a striking difference. One society – the United States of America – tells a story on its monuments, a story woven out of the speeches of its greatest leaders. The other, England, does not. It builds memorials but it doesn't tell a story. This is one of the deep differences between a covenant society and a tradition-based society.

Dedicated by the Gertel family in memory of the entire Ptasznik Family, Lodz, Poland, on the 80th anniversary of their murder, in Auschwitz, Al Kiddush Hashem and in memory of Mrs. Franka Ptasznik Gertel, z"l, (Freyda bas Shmuel) on her yahrzeit, 20 Elul

In a tradition-based society like England, things are as they are because that is how they were. England, writes Roger Scruton, "was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there."

Covenant societies are different. They don't worship tradition for tradition's sake. They do not value the past because it's old. They remember the past because it was events in the past that led to the collective determination that moved people to create the society in the first place. The Pilgrim Fathers of America were fleeing religious persecution in search of religious freedom. Their society was born in an act of moral commitment, handed on to successive generations.

Covenant societies exist not because they have been there a long time, nor because of some act of conquest, nor for the sake of some economic or military advantage. They exist to honour a pledge, a moral bond, an ethical undertaking. That is why telling the story is essential to a covenant society. It reminds all citizens of why they are there.

The classic example of telling the story occurs in this week's parsha, in the context of bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem:

The Priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous . . . So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me." Deut. 26:4-10

We all know the passage. Instead of saying it on Shavuot when bringing first-fruits, we now say it on Pesach as the central part of the Haggadah. What remains remarkable is that, even in biblical times, every member of the nation was expected to know the story of the nation, and recite it annually, and make it part of his or her personal memory and identity – "My father... so the Lord brought us out."

A covenant is more than a myth of origin – like the Roman story of Romulus and Remus, or the English story of King Arthur and his knights. Unlike a myth, which merely claims to say what happened, a covenant always contains a specific set of undertakings that bind its citizens in the present and into the future.

Here for example is Lyndon Baines Johnson talking about the American covenant: "They came here - the exile and the stranger... They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish."

Covenant societies – of which the USA is the supreme contemporary example – are moral societies, meaning not that their members are more righteous than others but that they see themselves as publicly accountable to certain moral standards that are part of the text and texture of their national identity. They are honouring the obligations imposed upon them by the founders.

Indeed, as the Johnson quotation makes clear, covenant societies see their very fate as tied up with the way they meet or fail to meet those obligations. "If we keep its terms, we shall flourish" – implying that if we don't, we won't. This is a way of thinking the West owes entirely to the book of Devarim, most famously in the second paragraph of the Shema: If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today . . . then I will send rain on your land in its season . . . I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

Be careful, lest you are enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. Deut. 11:13-17

This week's Torah learning is dedicated l'ilui nishmas Yisrael Ben Raphael Zev Rivkin, z"l, on his first yartzheit, the 20th of Elul by the Rivkin, Kestenbaum, Kwestel and Markowitz families

Covenant societies are not ethnic nations bound by common racial origin. They make room for outsiders – immigrants, asylum seekers, resident aliens – who become part of the society by taking its story and making it their own, as Ruth did in the biblical book that bears her name (“Your people will be my people, and your God, my God”) or as successive waves of immigrants did when they came to the United States. Indeed conversion in Judaism is best understood not on the model of conversion to another religion – such as Christianity or Islam – but as the acquisition of citizenship in a nation like the USA.

It is utterly astonishing that the mere act of telling the story, regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood – land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination – and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign; in which God alone is King.

One of the most profound truths about the politics of covenant – the message of the first-fruits’ declaration in this week’s parsha – is: If you want to sustain freedom, never stop telling the story.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

To Be Ensouled Within the Abrahamic Seed

“For I have come to the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us.” (Deuteronomy 26:3)

We have already seen how and why the short expression of thanksgiving at the time of the bringing of the first fruits must be said in the first person (“My father, afflicted us, we called out, the Lord took us out”). Each Jew must see himself as the embodiment of his history, must completely identify with the generations which preceded him and feel responsible for the succeeding generations to come.

But then the Mishna places a striking limitation upon the personalized identity of the spokesman: “These are the individuals who are responsible to bring [the first fruits], but do not declaim [the narrative]: the convert brings but does not declaim, since he cannot refer to ‘the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us.’ If, however, his mother was an Israelite, he does bring and declaim [since the religious status of the child follows the religious status of the mother].”

And then the Mishna continues to make a similar point regarding the convert and the language of his prayers: “And when [the

convert] prays [the Amida] by himself, he says, ‘Blessed art thou O Lord, our God and the God of the forefathers of Israel’ [rather than ‘and the God of our forefathers’]; when [the convert] is praying in the synagogue as the cantor [representative of the congregation], he says, ‘and the God of your forefathers.’ And if his mother was an Israelite, he says [with everyone else], ‘and the God of our fathers!’” (Bikkurim 1:4)

Fascinatingly, however, and crucially importantly, normative Jewish law does not follow this Mishna; the convert has the same legal status as the biologically born Jew both with regard to the words of his speech accompanying his bringing of the first fruits, as well as with regards to his specific language in the Amida prayer. The Jerusalem Talmud (ad loc.) disagrees with the Mishna in the Babylonian Talmud (which only cites the view of R. Meir), citing an alternate baraita which brings the view of R. Yehuda: “The convert himself must bring and declaim! What is the reason? Because God made Abraham the father of a multitude of nations, so that Abraham [metaphysically] becomes the father of everyone in the world who enters under the wings of the Divine Presence.” Every convert is ensouled into the family of Abraham!

In the Jerusalem Talmud, R. Yehoshua b. Levi declares that the normative law is to be in accordance with R. Yehuda, and R. Abahu actually ruled in the case of a convert that he bring and declaim in the manner of every biologically born Israelite. Maimonides decides similarly (Mishneh Torah, Laws of First Fruits), and even penned a most poignant responsum to Ovadia the Proselyte (McKitzei Nirdamim, 293), which includes the ruling that a convert pray to “the God of our forefathers” as well! This is clearly why every convert becomes the son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah, with the ritual immersion at the time of the conversion, signaling their “rebirth” into the Jewish family-nation. (This does not take anything away from the biological parents, who nurtured them and so deserve heartfelt gratitude and sensitive consideration.) Hence, the convert too has Jewish history and even Abrahamic “blood” pulsating through his/her veins – and Judaism has nothing to do with race!

I would conclude this commentary with one additional point from an opposite direction: the Jew begins his declamation with the words, “My father was a wandering Aramean.” Yes, we have seen from the Mishna in Bikkurim (as well as Kiddushin 3:12) that the religious status of the child is determined by the mother, most probably because the fetus is inextricably intertwined with the mother as long as it is in the mother’s womb. Nevertheless, there is an important DNA contribution of the father

Likutei Divrei Torah

which cannot be denied. This gives rise to a special halakhic category for a child who is born to a gentile mother and a Jewish father, known as “zera Yisrael,” Israelite seed.

Such a child is not considered to be a Jew and does require a process of conversion. However, most decisors throughout the generations have felt it to be incumbent upon the Jewish community to encourage conversion for such individuals and to be as lenient as possible in order to effectuate these conversions. An important and even monumental work called *zera Yisrael* was recently published by Rabbi Chayyim Amsalem, in which he documents the relevant responsa, which suggest that “the religious court is duty-bound to convert” the individual with *zera Yisrael* status (Piskei Uziel, 64:4).

Indeed, in our daily prayer, after the Shema and before the Amida, we praise the Lord whose “words are alive and extant, devolving upon our fathers and upon us, upon our children and upon our future generations, and upon all the generations of the seed of Israel, Your servants...”

What is this reference to “seed of Israel”? Our children and our future generations have already been mentioned? During an unforgettable trip to India for meetings with the Bnei Menashe it was pointed out to me that this must be referring to those who have Jewish DNA from their paternal – but not maternal – side, *zera Yisrael*! It is especially incumbent upon us to reclaim these exiled seeds of Abraham and restore them to their land and their family!

The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Didn't You See Them?

It is a question that I learned never to ask. I first learned this lesson in my training as a psychotherapist, long ago. I was seeing a gentleman for a number of problems, including his marital difficulties.

Despite the passage of the years, I still vividly remember the evening in which he came to my office extremely distraught. He couldn't

What Does Judaism Say About ... Podcast

with Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel. The week's topic is: **Siruv Pikuda -- Following an Immoral or Non-Jewish order in the Army or not?**

- Next week: Underlying Values and Concepts of Rosh Hashana

Search for “Nachum Amsel” on your podcast app or go to:

Apple: tinyurl.com/applejudaismsays

Spotify: tinyurl.com/spotifyjudaismsays

contain his torment, even for a moment. Before he sat down opposite me, he blurted out, "She is cheating on me!"

He had discovered incontrovertible evidence of his wife's infidelity. He continued to disclose the fact that bits and pieces of the evidence were available to him for more than a year. Letters, phone messages, unexplained absences, and unusual expenditures from their joint checking account had accumulated and he had been aware of all of them. Yet it was not until that morning that he actually saw what was in front of his eyes all the time.

Strangely, and I only later learned this, he typically shared none of these hints and clues with me during the course of our numerous counseling sessions prior to the day of the big "discovery."

I was a fledgling psychotherapist back then, and I could not suppress exclaiming the question, "Didn't you see it coming? Didn't you notice what was in front of your eyes?" I was not prepared for his tearful but angry response.

"Of course I saw it coming, you dummy!" He was furious with me for my total lack of empathy. He clearly saw it coming, but he did not want to see it. One does not see what one does not want to see, no matter how blatant and obvious the facts are.

The lesson I learned from this interchange was not limited to the field of marital counseling. It is a lesson that I have tried to remember throughout my personal, professional and religious life from that time forward.

I learned that all the evidence in the world will not convince someone who prefers to be blind to that evidence. All the arguments in the world, however rational and forceful they may be, cannot persuade a person who is clinging to his preferred beliefs and who is not open to logic and reason.

In truth, I should have learned this lesson long before I embarked upon a career in psychology. I should have learned it when I first studied this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8). I should have given more serious thought to the following passage:

"Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, 'You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt... The wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.'" (Deuteronomy 29:1-3)

To paraphrase: "You saw, but you did not see. You heard, but you did not hear. All that you needed to know was before you, but did not have the mind to understand."

At about the same time that I sat face to face with the betrayed husband who struggled so hard not to see what should have been apparent to him, I became introduced to the writings of a great Rabbi in Israel, who died tragically very young, more than fifty years ago. His name was Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul, and a posthumously published collection of his writings on the Torah portions of the week was issued shortly after his death.

The name of this collection is Min HaBe'er (From the Well), which is a very apt title for a book full of insights drawn from the deepest sources of our faith. Rabbi Bar-Shaul reflects upon these verses and upon the phenomenon of blindness and deafness to the sights and sounds which are prominent in our surroundings. Let me translate some of his reflections for you.

"There is a magnificent teaching here in these verses for all generations and all situations. A person can see wondrous things, true revelations, and yet, paradoxically, not see them... The Almighty, blessed be he, gives the person eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to understand, but it is the person who must choose to see and hear and understand. It is the person who must open his eyes well to see, and even then he cannot see unless he also opens his heart to understand. For if a person just sees with his eyes alone, he may react emotionally. But as long he does not direct his mind to what he has seen, his emotional reactions will fall short of understanding, of knowing...

"It is not for us to have critical thoughts about our ancestors who failed to see. But the Torah here is giving us both a guideline and a warning signal. When Moses tells the people of Israel, 'You have seen... But you were not given a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear,' he is calling upon us, today, to think deeply and well about these words and to apply them to our own circumstances."

So many times in our history, we have failed to see facts that were apparent to those who possessed understanding hearts. Most tragically, all of us who read about the events leading up to the Holocaust find ourselves asking the questions, "Did they not see what was coming? Did our enemies not warn us very clearly about their intentions to destroy us? Were the signals not sufficiently obvious? Why did so few take advantage of opportunities to escape years before escape became impossible?"

Likutei Divrei Torah

These questions haunt us today and will continue to do so forever. Perhaps, these questions are beyond our capacity. They are over our heads.

But what we can learn, in less terrible and less tragic circumstances, is to do our utmost to understand what the Almighty has allowed us to see.

He has allowed us to see, for example, a thriving Jewish state. We must understand its significance.

He has allowed us to hear the voices of children studying His Torah, and the sounds of yeshivot greater in size than ever before in history. Our hearts must celebrate these achievements.

We will soon see throngs of Jews all over the world participating in services in our synagogues, and we will hear the sounds of the shofar calling upon us to become better Jews and better human beings.

The Almighty will let us see these sights and hear these sounds. We must open our hearts and minds not just to see and hear them but to understand them, appreciate them, and grow from them.

Let us not permit these blessed sights and sounds to be ignored. Let others not be able to ask of us, "How could you not see them? How could you not hear them?"

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Bigger the Mensch, the Bigger the Hakaras Hatov

Parshas Ki Savo begins with the mitzvah of bringing the first fruits to the Kohen in Yerushalayim and reciting Mikra Bikurim. The farmer presents his first produce of the season to the Kohen, and then thanks the Ribono shel Olam that he had a successful crop.

However, the farmer does not merely thank Hashem for giving him a successful crop, but rather his thank you begins even before Yetzias Mitzrayim: "V'anisa v'amarta Arami oved avi...". He literally recites the entire first several hundred years of Jewish history from patriarchal times to the moment he now stands in the presence of the Beis HaMikdash. All of this is included in what is known as the parsha of Mikra Bikurim.

Now, in truth, this is a very familiar parsha to us, not necessarily because of Parshas Ki Savo and not particularly because it was read by every Jew upon bringing their first fruits to Yerushalayim, but primarily because it occupies a very large part of the Pesach Haggadah. A significant amount of Maggid during the Seder is devoted to analysis of all

the nuances of each expression in these pesukim.

The general rule is that when we thank the Ribono shel Olam, we not only thank Him for what is before us now, but we also thank him for what brought us to this place. The question becomes, however, why did the author of the Hagaddah choose Parsha Ki Savo to provide for us a Biblical narration of Yetzias Mitzrayim? There are four parshiyos in Sefer Shemos that very elaborately describe the Egyptian experience and the exodus therefrom. These are Shemos, Vaera, Bo, and Beshalach. Admittedly, there are some extraneous matters discussed at the beginning of Sefer Shemos, but clearly, appropriate excerpts could provide a complete and succinct summary of the galus and geulah experience of Mitzrayim. However, the Baal Haggadah picks, for lack of a better word, somewhat of an obscure parsha to tell us this story. Why pick Ki Savo? Why not go to the 'source'?

Rav Elya Baruch Finkel asks this question in his sefer and gives a very interesting answer: He says that Parshiyos Shemos, Va'era, Bo, and Beshalach are the history of Yetzias Mitzrayim. That is what happened. Mikra Bikkurim is not about what happened. It is an expression of Hakaras Hatov. It is an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Yes, the Haggadah author is very aware of the beginning of Sefer Shemos. In fact, individual pesukim from those parshiyos are cited numerous times in the Haggadah, introduced by the words "k'mo she'ne'amar" (as it is written). But the overreaching theme of Maggid is about Thanksgiving, not about History, and that is what the parsha of Mikra Bikkurim is about. When we sit down at the Seder, we are motivated to say "thank-you" and that is best expressed by this parsha from Parshas Ki Savo.

This leads Rav Elya Baruch Finkel to an interesting question. On the pasuk "V'amarta eilav..." (Devorim 26:3) Rashi comments and says three words: "she'eincha kafui tova" (that you are not an ingrate). Why does Rashi say this in the negative – that you say this parsha so that you should not be an ingrate? Why not say this parsha for positive reasons: because I am a makir tova (one who recognizes his debt of gratitude)?

Rav Elya Baruch suggests something which is very true: A person can never be adequately makir tova to the Ribono shel Olam! There is just too much to thank Him for. It is every day. It is every minute. It is every second. Therefore, if someone thinks he can go ahead and recite these pesukim and fulfill his obligation to be a makir tova, he is way off base. That does not constitute sufficient

gratitude! Granted, someone who recites this parsha is not a kafui tova (an ingrate); but he is still not a makir tova because he can never adequately reach the level of a makir tova.

This is an idea we say every Shabbos in the Nishmas prayer, starting with the words "Ilu finu maleh shirah k'yam...":

Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as its multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, and our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon, and our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as hinds – we still could not thank You sufficiently, Hashem our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, and to bless Your name for even one of the thousand thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of favors that You performed for our ancestors and for us...

If we would talk from now to eternity, we would not be able to adequately express our full hakaras hatov. That is what this parsha of Mikra Bikkurim is about. Rashi is telling it like it is. Let no one fool himself into thinking that he has adequately expressed hakaras hatov to the Almighty. All this does (which is not something to belittle) is to avoid the label of being a kafui tova.

The truth of the matter is that there are certain individuals in the course of our lifetimes to whom the same thing applies (albeit, of course, not on the same level as to the Ribono shel Olam). People can never thank their parents sufficiently. It is just impossible. For many of us, this mussar observation arrives far too late in our lives to do anything about it. It is an observation that is more appropriate to share with my talmidim in the yeshiva.

But this is the reality of life. We all go to Bar Mitzvahs where the Bar Mitzvah boy says his p'shetel and then at the end he says, "I would like to thank bla, bla, bla, and I would like to thank my parents for making this wonderful Bar Mitzvah." That's it? How about the nine months that your mother carried you? How about the 2 AM feedings? How about all that it takes to raise a child and to support a child and to keep on supporting a child?

Just as "Ilu finu maleh shirah k'yam..." in Nishmas applies to the Ribono shel Olam, it applies to parents as well. The truth is that sometimes there are also other people whom we meet during our lifetimes who also change the trajectory of our lives such that proper hakaras hatov is not possible. But we all need to at least try to avoid the label of being kafui tova. Therefore, as much as we can, it is important to express those expressions of gratitude and hakaras hatov, in order to at least

Likutei Divrei Torah

remove us from the category of being ungrateful.

The character flaw of being ungrateful is one of the worst possible middos a person can possess. The Brisker Rav once made an interesting observation on a pasuk in Parshas Ha'azinu. On the pasuk "Is it to Hashem that you repay this, O people who are vile and unwise (Am naval, v'lo chacham)? Is He not your father, your acquirer? He made you and established you" (Devarim 32:6). Moshe Rabbeinu chastises Klal Yisrael: This is how you pay back the Ribono shel Olam? Oh, you foolish nation (am naval) who is unwise! What does the term am naval connote? The Brisker Rav notes that when an animal dies without shechitah (ritual slaughter) it is called a neveilah. Such a creature ceases to be an animal.

The Brisker Rav says that a person who is not makir tov is a naval because he ceases to be a human being. This is a powerful vorte. There is a whole list of bad middos – haughtiness, jealousy, selfishness, temper, etc. But, says the Brisker Rav, a person with any or all of these bad middos has character deficiencies but he remains a human being, albeit a flawed human being. However, a person who is not a makir tova – is an am naval – ceases to be a human being. This is how profound and fundamental it is to show gratitude.

If that is the case, it stands to reason, that the greater a person is, the greater a makir tova he is. There are myriad examples of Gedolei Yisrael from throughout the ethnic and hashkafic spectrum who went to amazing lengths to be makir tov. They were big people and the bigger you are, the bigger makir tov you are.

I once read a story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. There was a bochur in Torah Vodaas who did not come to minyan. The dormitory counselors tried everything under the sun to get him to come, but nothing helped. He would always sleep through minyan. They came to Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky and said that they want to throw him out of the dormitory. "Does the Rosh Yeshiva agree to this?" Rav Yaakov said, "Yes, if he is causing a laxness to prevail throughout the entire dormitory, we must not let him stay in the dormitory. But first send him to me. I want to speak to him before you kick him out."

The dorm counselor came to this boy and told him that he was being thrown out of the dorm because he didn't come to minyan, but that the Rosh Yeshiva wanted to see him first. The bochur was shaking in his boots that the Rosh Yeshiva wanted to see him for not coming to minyan. He walked into Rav Yaakov's office, and the Rosh Yeshiva asked him, "So where

are you going to sleep now?" The fellow said, "I really don't know."

Rav Yaakov said, "In that case, I want you to stay by me." The boy got an upgrade! He went from the dorm to Rav Yaakov's house! The boy said, "But, the Rosh Yeshiva threw me out of the dorm!" Rav Yaakov responded: "Your grandfather supported the Kovna Kollel where I learned when I was in Lita. Therefore, I owe your family hakaras hatov and therefore, you can sleep by me."

But the most moving story I ever heard about an adam gadol who was makir tova was a story with Rav Elazar Shach, zt"l. It was a rainy winter day and Rav Shach called his grandson and told him "I want you to hire a cab to take me to a funeral in Haifa." They got in the cab together and the grandson was thinking to himself "there must be some adam gadol in Haifa that my grandfather knew." They came to the funeral parlor, and it turns out that it was the levaya of an old woman. There was barely a minyan, and the grandson couldn't figure out why on earth his grandfather would go to this woman's levaya.

Following the levaya in the funeral parlor, Rav Shach went to the cemetery in the pouring rain. He waited until the body was buried and he then recited Kaddish for this woman. He then stood there in the rain over the grave. The grandson was amazed at what he was witnessing. He could not figure it out. When they went back into the car, Rav Shach did not say anything. Finally, the grandson asked his grandfather: "Who was this woman?"

Rav Shach explained: When I was in Yeshiva in Europe, it was not like today that Yeshivas had dormitories. The boys learned in a shul. They spoke in learning with the Rav of the shul. That was the Yeshiva. The "dormitory" was the benches of the shul and there was a seniority system. The older bochurim and the ones who were in the "yeshiva" for longer were more likely to have a bench to sleep on. Rav Shach was the youngest bochur there, so he did not get a bench. He slept on the floor. In Europe, in the cold Lithuanian winter nights, it was freezing cold.

Rav Shach decided at one point "I can't take this anymore!" Lo and behold, he received a letter from an uncle of his – a man who had no children. The uncle said in his letter "Listen, I am getting older. I don't have any children. I have a business. I want you to come learn the business, and after I die, you will take over my business." Rav Shach had decided in his mind that he was going to take this job! He just could not take the freezing cold any longer.

That night, a woman, whose husband had just died, got up from shiva. Her husband had

owned a blanket factory. She came into the shul and asked, "Does anyone here need blankets?" Rav Shach said "Yes. I need blankets." With the blankets on the floor and the blankets on top of him, his sleeping accommodations became "bearable." He decided to stay—and became Rav Shach.

He told his grandson: This woman from Haifa was the woman who gave me the blankets in Lithuania so many years ago. Without this woman, there would be no Rav Shach, no Avi Ezri, no Ponevezh Rosh Yeshiva, no 'Gadol Hador', no nothing! I kept track of this woman, even though this was decades later! So, when I heard she died, I felt I had to go to her funeral.

The grandson said, "Fine. I understand you went to the levaya, I understand you stayed for the kevrura and you said Kaddish. But why did you remain out there standing over the grave in the rain after the burial was all over?" Rav Shach answered, "It is because I wanted to remember what it felt like to be cold. I wanted to fully appreciate what she did for me so many years earlier. That is why I stayed out there."

A mensch who is not makir tova is not a mensch; but the bigger the mensch, the bigger the makir tova.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

We must be happy; we've got no choice. That's the message that emerges from Parshat Ki Tavo, where the Torah gives us the Tochecha, a long list of horrific curses which God forbid might befall our people. The reason for these curses, the Torah explains, is "Tachat asher lo avadta et Hashem elokeicha b'simchah". It's on account of the fact that you have not worshipped the Lord, your God, with joy.

Here we are not speaking about people who are not worshipping God, but rather those who do worship, but without joy! Many of our commentators highlight from here the importance of harmonious communities. When a community is split down the middle, when there is a poisonous atmosphere, the very presence of God is driven from our midst. But if that's the case, is that a reason why such horrific curses could transpire?

The Kotzker Rebbe offers a different interpretation of this verse: Tachat asher lo avadata. It's because your non-observance has been carried out B'simcha – with happiness. In the event that one is not observing but does so with embarrassment, and without flaunting it, there remains hope for the eventual return to doing what is right. You're certainly not encouraging others to be disobedient.

However, when you are Lo avadata, your non-

Likutei Divrei Torah

observance is carried out B'simcha, with pride and flaunted openly, it sends a troubling message to future generations. What hope can there be for them? That is why such an atmosphere within our people could be serious and dangerous.

Therefore, from this important statement in the Torah, as we emerge into the High Holy Day period, perhaps instead of doing what is wrong and being embarrassed about it, let's just do what is right.

And let us never forget to worship Hashem with joy!

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Bikkurim – The Declaration of the First Fruits – Avital Wilner-Shalev

Parshat Ki Tavo begins with the verses that introduce the ritual of bringing the first fruits. As the entry into the Land draws near, the Torah commands that after the Israelites enter the Land, they must take the first fruits of the earth and bring them to the Temple in Jerusalem. During the presentation of the first fruits, the following words must be recited:

"Then you shall declare before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt and resided there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty, and populous nation. The Egyptians mistreated us, afflicted us, and imposed hard labor upon us. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice, saw our affliction, our labor, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, with great awe, signs, and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Now I bring the first fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me. 'And you shall place them before the Lord your God and bow down before Him.'" (Devarim 26:5-10)

It is notable that, contrary to what one might expect, these words do not focus on praising the fruits in the basket, how they were grown, or even on expressing great gratitude to God for providing them. Instead, they tell the history of Israel, the identity-defining story of the exodus from slavery to freedom. On this seeming discrepancy between the reader's expectation and what the Torah commands the one bearing the fruits to say, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

"It is one thing to believe in God when you need His help. It is another when you have already received it. Affluence, no less than slavery, can make us forget who we are and why." (Rabbi Sacks, Haggadah of Pesach, on the Haggadah's words "Go [to the verse] and

learn what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to our father Yaakov” in the Maggid section)

Abundance can be confusing. We take pride in our achievements, and this can widen the distance between us and God. We become engrossed in the present, and our historical memory begins to fade. Therefore, during the offering of the first fruits—a ceremony symbolizing abundance and blessing—we are commanded to declare, “A wandering Aramean was my father...” Similarly, right before entering the land and enjoying an era that can bring prosperity and settlement, and during which they will witness the fruits of their labor, they are instructed to remember their historical narrative and the roots of their Jewish identity. Thus, before the transition from the barren desert to the fruitful land, the Torah commands us to recite the Declaration of the First Fruits and the necessity of remembering our identity in a world of plenty.

Similarly, the Malbim underscores the significance of this historical connection particularly when the fruits of the Bikkurim are brought forth:

“And you shall declare [ve'anita] and say – ' We find that the beginning of speech is often represented by the word aniya [a term denoting a response or answer] as in the verse 'And Miriam answered them' (Shemot 15:21), meaning she began by telling them to sing to God. Similarly, the Levites are described as 'answering' when they begin their proclamations. This may be because the start of any statement is, in a sense, a response to an implied question or thought...”

In the portion of the Bikkurim, the Declaration of the First Fruits, we find embedded responses to unspoken questions, such as: ‘A wandering Aramean’—the answer to which is ‘...was my father’; ‘And he went down to Egypt and resided there And he sojourned there’—the response to this is: ‘...few in number’; ‘And there he became a great nation’—the answer: ‘...mighty and populous’; ‘The Egyptians mistreated us’—the response to this is ‘...and imposed hard labor upon us’; ‘We cried out to the Lord’—and the response: ‘...and the Lord heard our voice’; ‘And He brought us out of Egypt’—the response: ‘...with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders’; ‘And He brought us to this place’—the answer to this: ‘...a land flowing with milk and honey’; ‘And now I have brought the first fruits of the land, – ‘and the answer: ‘...which You, O Lord, have given me.”

The Malbim draws attention to the phrase “and you shall declare and say” at the beginning of the Declaration of the First Fruits (verse 5), which seems redundant, as “declare” and “say”

are synonymous. However, he goes on to clarify that this phrase often follows a question or statement that requires a response. In the Declaration of the First Fruits, the words spoken contain responses to the various acts of Divine intervention that God performed for the Jewish people throughout history. Even the final verse (verse 10) contains a statement in the first half—“And now I have brought the first fruits of the land”—and a corresponding response in the second half—“Which You, O Lord, have given me.” The offering of the first fruits is thus linked directly to the chain of Divine responses that God has provided to the people of Israel.

The Declaration of the First Fruits in the Passover Haggadah

On the night of the Passover Seder, a night of vibrant and living memory, we recite the verses from the Declaration of the First Fruits as part of the Haggadah. In most traditional Haggadot, verses 9 and 10 [“He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Now I bring the first fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me. 'And you shall place them before the Lord your God and bow down before Him”] are omitted, while the verses concerning the Exodus from Egypt are retained. However, the Mishnah establishes: “And one must expound from ‘A wandering Aramean was my father’ until the entire passage is completed.” (Mishnah Pesachim 10:4)

Rabbi Soloveitchik (in Haggadah for Passover with commentary based on the Shiurim of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik pp. 66-77) offers several explanations for this omission. He suggests that the mention of Israel’s entry into the Land is inappropriate on Pesach night, as the purpose of the Exodus was not the settlement of the Land but rather the formation of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, independent of any specific location. He adds that during the Second Temple period, these verses were likely recited with great joy. However, after the destruction of the Temple, the Sages may have deemed them irrelevant. Thus, the omission reflects a response to a time of destruction.

In contrast, some modern Haggadot, especially those published by the Kibbutz movement, chose not to omit these verses. For example, the Haggadah of Moshav Hemed includes the omitted verses along with a commentary emphasizing that “Israel can only truly be blessed in a land like this one.” Not only were the verses preserved, but the special nature of the Land was highlighted. This choice reflects a deep ideological commitment to the idea that the return of the Jewish people to their Land is a direct continuation of the historical narrative that begins with “A wandering Aramean was my father.”

Likutei Divrei Torah

This past year has been challenging and complex for us, both individually and as a society. Many people have shared with me that one of the things that gives them strength and hope during this period is the broader historical perspective. Looking back to our distant past enables them to look forward with renewed strength and even to imagine a better future. This sentiment is echoed in the words of Elchanan Kalmanson z”l [killed on October 8th while battling Hamas] in a letter he left for his wife, Shlomit:

“I believed in the path, I believed in the return of our People to our Land, and I believed in the small actions that make a great impact—a small effort that saves lives. If I die in the war for this Land, let it be remembered and mentioned that this is not just another war, nor another intifada, or some other triviality. It is a part of the long war for our Land and the identity of our People, a struggle that has been going on for nearly 150 years. I wanted and tried to be a human being, to be a Jew.” (Elchanan Kalmanson)

Like the simple Jew who brings the first fruits of his harvest, with the understanding that this act is part of a broader picture, and that these fruits cannot be taken for granted but are part of a historical chain that began with slavery in Egypt – so, too, Elchanan, writing to his wife, felt that he was part of a grand, far-reaching story, a long struggle for our Jewish identity and for the identity of our Land.

Today, we may no longer have a Temple or the mitzvah of Bikkurim, but we have our Land and our State. After such a challenging year, perhaps we can no longer omit these verses. On the contrary, they should be read with great joy and gratitude. We, too, are part of this ongoing Jewish story, and we remember that this land is inseparable from the larger narrative. The Declaration of the First Fruits reminds us, even today when there is no Temple, of our beginnings, offering us a perspective through which to view both the present and the future.

In prayer for better days and besorot tovot.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

Insight from Jewish Folklore

The Pnei Yehoshua (Kiddushin 30a) quotes the Zohar saying that there are six hundred thousand letters in the Chumash. He then explains, quoting from the Shaloh Hakadosh, that the idea the Zohar is trying to convey is that each Jew has a share in the Torah. At the conclusion of the Shmone Esrei we always offer a prayer that Hashem should give us our share in the Torah. In the sefer Ma'alos Ha'Torah (authored by R' Avrohom, the

brother of the Gr"a) the Gr"a is quoted as having explained that tefillah to mean that in heaven it is determined what original ideas in Torah each Jewish person should come up with and we pray to Hashem that we should succeed in developing those ideas that were intended for us to develop.

The Torah prohibits moving over the fence separating one's field from a neighbor's field and thereby stealing part of the neighbor's property. The Torah restricts this special prohibition to Eretz Yisroel. If one steal an automobile, whether in Eretz Yisroel or in any other part of the world, the Sifrei says that he violates lo tizol. If one moves over the fence in chutz la'aretz, he also only violates lo tizol but if one moves over the fence in Eretz Yisroel, in addition to the violation of lo tizol one also violates this prohibition of ha'sogas ge'vul. This prohibition applies only in this very narrow case.

The Sifrei, however, adds a striking comment: this limited prohibition also applies to one who incorrectly presents the views of Rabbi Eliezer in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua or the views of Rabbi Yehoshua in the views of Rabbi Eliezer. When one knowingly misrepresents the author of a halacha this somehow is similar to one who moves over the fence in Eretz Yisroel. What in the world do these two situations have in common?

The Rambam (Hilchos Terumos, chapter 1) quotes an expression from the Sifroth that almost all the agricultural mitzvos only began to be observed after Yehoshua bin Nun conquered Eretz Yisroel and divided it first amongst the shevotim then amongst the mishpachos and then amongst the yechidim. Tanach tells us that the conquest of Eretz Yisroel took a full seven years, and we have an oral historical tradition that the chalukah, the dividing up of the land, took another seven years. The fifteenth year was the first time that the Jewish people fulfilled the mitzvah of teruma, etc. The first shmitah was the twenty-first year after they crossed over the Yarden and the first yovel was the sixty-fourth year. The striking expression quoted by the Rambam from the Sifroth is that for the complete kedusha of Eretz Yisroel to take effect it was required that each and every individual person recognize what was his share of the land. Perhaps the Sifrei's idea that one who misidentifies the author of a specific halacha is also in violation of ha'sogas ge'vul is to be understood as follows: just as the complete kedusha of Eretz Yisroel only sets in when each and every individual recognizes which is his share, and therefore if someone moves over the fence this takes away partially from the kedusha of Eretz Yisroel, similarly each individual person has his share in the Torah, and the complete kedusha of the Torah is

realized when each halacha is properly attributed to the tanach who authored it. Therefore, if one will misidentify a din of R'; Yehoshua and attribute it to R'; Eliezer, this too takes away from the complete kedusha of the Torah because we are lacking kol echod v'echod makir es chelko.

In Yiddish folklore, it is well known that the following question was raised: when B'nei Yisroel left Mitzrayim and took a census of the nation, there were 600,000 people who were born Jewish. But in addition to those who were Jewish from birth, there were many non-Jews who came along to convert. If we have 600,000 letters in the chumash to represent that every single Jew has a share in the Torah, shouldn't there be something to represent the idea that all of those who convert are given a new Jewish neshama and each of them also has a share in the Torah? So in Yiddish folklore they refer to a possuk that appears in the to'chachos in this week's parsha: "ha'ger asher b'kirbicha ya'aleh olecho ma'al'ah moloh, v'atoh teireid matoh motoh". The simple meaning of the possuk is that the non-Jews will be very successful in their careers and the Jews will be failures. According to the simple meaning of the possuk, the word "ger" refers to the non-Jewish strangers who happen to live in Eretz Yisroel. But the Gemara tells us that the famous Rabbi Akiva was a descendent of geirim, and he was of the opinion that we can derive halachos not only from the words of the Chumash but even from the tagim which appear on the top of the letters. So in accordance with Yiddish folklore, the possuk is understood to refer to the geirim who are converts; their share in the Torah is not in the letters, because there are only six hundred thousand letters, but rather is in the tagim.

Every Jew has a share in the Torah whether he was a Jew from birth or he converted later on in life, and every day when we say, "v'sein chelkeinu b'Torasecha" we are praying that Hashem should please give us the ability to develop those insights of the Torah that were intended for us.

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez

The Shofar and the Call to Vulnerability

We are in the midst of the month of Elul, an entire month that we prepare for Rosh Hashanah, the time when we reestablish our relationship and connection with Hashem.

What is the vehicle to reestablish that connection? It is the blowing of the shofar – the mitzvah of the day on Rosh Hashanah and the custom we do every day the entire month of Elul – embraced by all: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Yemenite. It is based on the ancient custom mentioned in Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer which states that this time of the year is

Likutei Divrei Torah

such a powerful, historic time of reconstitution and reconciliation: Moshe Rabbeinu went up on Rosh Chodesh Elul, having broken the tablets and after the terrible sin of the golden calf, davened for the Jewish people and aimed to reestablish our relationship with G-d. From Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur is when we received the second set of tablets, when our relationship was reestablished. So, this entire time period is the time of reestablishing relationships, therefore we blow the shofar every day to inspire us to reconnect.

Why is the shofar the vehicle for preparing to reestablish our relationships? In the Torah, Rosh Hashanah is called "yom teruah," a day of blowing of the shofar, and all the commentators agree that the 'teruah' is the broken sound. Why is the idea of the blowing of the shofar about a broken sound?

Brokenness, incompleteness, vulnerability, is the essence of relationships. If you feel no vulnerability in a relationship, if you feel you need them for nothing, if you feel you are complete – then what do you need another person for? Do we need G-d if we don't need G-d for anything? The key in relationships, as famously said by Brené Brown, is a sense of vulnerability. That is the key of Rosh Hashanah, and the month of Elul. In competitions, vulnerability is a weakness. But it is the opposite in realms of connectedness – you have to have vulnerability. You have to feel that you need them: not co-dependence, but interdependence.

Famously the Kotzker Rebbe said: "There is nothing more complete than an incomplete heart."

May we all come with a sense of incompleteness and vulnerability in all our relationships, especially with G-d, because ultimately the most complete part of any relationship is a broken, incomplete heart.

The Blessing: Sivan Rahav-Meir

One of the most famous greetings when two Jews meet is a verse from this week's parasha (Devarim 28:6): "Blessed are you when you come, and blessed are you when you depart." In its simplest meaning, we wish that someone be blessed when they leave home in the morning and return in the evening.

Our Sages give two additional explanations: On the personal level, the verse wishes a blessing upon one who comes to learn Torah in the beit midrash and one who leaves to go to work; on the national level we should be blessed when we enter the Land of Israel, and also when we leave it and go into exile. This is a blessing to the Jewish nation to help it survive all the exiles and diasporas throughout its history.

Rashi gives a different explanation and says that this verse refers to a person's entry into and exit from life. We should try to remain complete throughout the entire journey: "Your exit from the world should be the same as your entry, without sin." Just as an infant is pure and has not sinned, so we should try to keep the slate as clean as possible throughout our lives. We are blessed when we come into the world; let us try to leave in the same manner.

We also read in this week's parasha (Devarim 27:9), "This day you have become a nation." What "day" was Moshe referring to? He wasn't speaking about the day of the Exodus, nor about the day that the Torah was given.

Rashi explains that Moshe was saying his farewells to the people just before his death. He handed over his sefer Torah to the tribe of Levi, which caused major discontentment among the Jewish people. They all went to Moshe to say that they had also received the Torah at Mount Sinai and that it belonged to them just as much as to the tribe of Levi, and asked Moshe why he had only charged the Levites with keeping the Torah after his death.

Thrilled with this complaint, Moshe responded, "This day you have become a nation." Rashi explains, "Today I have understood that you really wish to cling to G-d."

Remember, Moshe had heard many complaints from the Jewish people throughout their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness – about food, water, and the route to the Land of Israel. Now they came with a completely different kind of complaint; they too want to be a link in the chain of passing on the Torah to the next generation. They also want to keep its commandments and be actively involved in the Torah. Moshe was so moved by their concern and sense of responsibility to the Torah that he was essentially saying, "Now I know, this entire journey has been worthwhile, and we have succeeded. You are now a nation."



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io
From: Chaim Shulman
<cshulman@gmail.com>

INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON KI SAVO - 5785

parsha@groups.io / www.parsha.net - in our 30th year! To receive this parsha sheet, go to <http://www.parsha.net> and click Subscribe or send a blank e-mail to parsha+subscribe@groups.io. Please also copy me at cshulman@gmail.com. A complete archive of previous issues is now available at <http://www.parsha.net>. It is also fully searchable.

Sponsored in memory of **Chaim Yissachar z"l** ben Yechiel Zaydel Dov.

To sponsor a parsha sheet contact cshulman@gmail.com
(proceeds to tzedaka)

from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <ryfrand@torah.org>

to: ravfrand@torah.org

date: Sep 11, 2025, 1:58 PM

subject: Rav Frand - **Three Interpretations of "V'heeseegucha" From Three Chassidic Masters**

Parshas Ki Savo

Three Interpretations of "V'heeseegucha" From Three Chassidic Masters

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion:

#1436 But If We Punish Him, He May Not Remain Frum. Good Shabbos!

One of the classic ideas the meforshim (commentaries) focus on in Parshas Ki Savo are the words of the pasuk "And all these blessings will come upon you, v'heeseegucha (and will reach you) when you listen to the voice of Hashem your G-d." (Devorim 28:2). The meforshim all want to know the meaning of the word "v'heeseegucha." What does this word add to the earlier statement of the pasuk, that the bracha (blessing) will come upon you?

There are a variety of interpretations. I will not share all of them but merely go through a smattering of different meforshim:

The sefer Degel Machane Ephraim (Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov (1748-1800), grandson of the Baal Shem Tov) explains it based on a very famous pasuk (Tehillim 23:6) from Dovid Hamelech, which we say in Mizmor l'Dovid Hashem ro'ee lo echsor: "Ach tov v'chessed yirdefooni kol yemei chayai..." (Only good and kindness will chase after me all the days of my life). The question is that kindness and goodness do not necessarily need to "chase after" someone. A person readily accepts kindness and goodness. He doesn't flee from them, such that they need to pursue him.

The explanation that is given is that many times, a person runs away from something that he does not think is good for him – but ultimately it is very good for him. We often don't know what is good for us and what is not good for us. There are certain situations in life – whether it is shiduchim, whether it is partnerships, whether it is business deals, whatever it may be – when we don't think something is good for us. As a result, we run away. This is what Dovid Hamelech is asking: If I am not wise enough to understand that something is good for me, let it chase after me.

A famous story is told about Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. He once saw a person running down the street and asked him "Where are you running?" The person answered "I am running to make parnassa (a livelihood)." Reb Levi Yitzchak then asked, "How do you know that your parnassa is in this direction, maybe your parnassa is in the opposite direction and you should be running there!" The point is that we don't necessarily know when something is good and when it is not good.

That could, in fact, be the meaning of this pasuk: All the bracha will come upon you and reach you. Even when you run away from something that is a bracha, the bracha will chase after you and catch up with you! This is why we say in Rosh Chodesh benching: May Hashem fulfill the desires of our heart for the good. So often, we don't know what "tova" is. The Ribono shel Olam knows what "tova" is. We pray that Hashem gives us the "tova," regardless of whether or not that is what we have been hoping for.

I saw a second interpretation of this pasuk in the name of Rav Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin (1823-1900), who in turn quotes it in the name of Reb Simcha Bunim of P'shischa (1765-1827). "V'heeseegucha" means that the brachos (blessings) should reach you in the place where you are right now. So many times, wild financial or political success changes a person. He becomes a different person and moves away from the place where he was and the person who he was. The nisayon (test) of wealth, power, prestige and fame sometimes has a deleterious effect on a person. The bracha of "V'heeseegucha" is that the brachos should reach you in the place where you are and that you should remain in that place.

By Yitzchak Avinu the pasuk says, "Vayigdal ha'ish" (and the man grew (wealthy)). I once saw it explained that the pasuk does not say "Vayigdal Yitzchak" (and Yitzchak grew (wealthy)). Why not? This hints at the idea that Yitzchak remained the same person. He didn't change because he now became wealthy.

The third interpretation of this pasuk is an observation from Rav Yisrael (Taub) of Moditz (1849-1920, the first Moditzer Rebbe) that is brought in the sefer Imrei Baruch. The Moditzer Rebbe understands the word "v'heeseegucha" to mean that you should have the ha'sagos (understanding) of what to do with your successes. Many times, people achieve great financial or other types of success and they don't know how to handle it. They don't know what to do with their newly acquired power. They don't know what to do with all that money. This is common by athletes and movie stars. They have all this money and they don't know what to do with it. They buy a car, they buy a boat, they buy jewelry, they buy furs. They don't know what to do with all of it. They get to be 35 years old and they are bankrupt. A person needs to have the right ha'sagos, the right concepts and the right outlook on what to do with their brachos. The bracha of v'heeseegucha is that you have the perspective and hasagos it takes to handle the tremendous brachos that you are given.

Transcribed by David Twersky; [Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com](mailto:JerusalemDavidATwersky@gmail.com)
Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Ki Savo is provided below ... A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/>

RAV SCHACHTER ON THE PARSHA

Insights and Commentary Based on the Shiurim of Rav Hershel Schachter

Adapted by **Dr. Allan Weissman**

<https://a.co/d/2aj0sJs>

Reprinted with permission from Dr. Weissman

PARSHAS KI SAVO

THE SECOND BRIS

HE SIFREI in Parshas Re'eh distinguishes between the two parshiyos describing sefiras ha'omer. שבעה שבועות תספר לך. “Seven weeks you shall count for yourself” (Devarim 16:9) describes a mitzvah on the Beis Din HaGadol. A different passuk, Usfarthem lachem ... sheva shabason ... tispiru chamishim yom Leviticus 23:15: וספרתם לכם ... ושבוע שבתות ... תמילת תהיינה ... תספרו חמשים יום ... “You shall count for yourselves ... seven weeks ... you shall count fifty days” (Vayikra 23:15-16), describes a count performed by each individual (Menachos 65b).

The basis of the distinction made by the Sifrei is the rule quoted in the name of the Vilna Gaon (Divrei Eliyahu, p. 94): Whenever a mitzvah is repeated in the Torah, once in the singular and once in the plural, the singular form is addressed to Klal Yisrael as a whole while the plural form devolves upon the individual.

The Beis Din HaGadol, which represents Klal Yisrael in totality, discharges the obligation upon Klal Yisrael as a whole when they count the seven weeks from Pesach until Shavuot. The reason this mitzvah falls within the purview of the Sanhedrin is that this count establishes the correct day of the Yom Tov of Shavuot, which is part of the more general mitzvah of kevias haluach (establishment of the calendar). The second aspect of the mitzvah, reflected in its repetition in Parshas Re'eh in the plural form, is directed to each and every individual, who should also engage in such a count. [See Eretz HaTzvi, pp. 9-11.]

The Vilna Gaon generalizes this rule, and it can thus be applied to the two parshiyos of tochechah found in the Torah as well. The tochechah in Bechukosai was proclaimed on the occasion of the bris of Ma'amad Har Sinai, after the Aseres HaDibros: וברן בני ישראל בהר סיני ביד משה אלה החקים והמשפטים והתורה אשר נתן יהוה בינו “These are the decrees, the ordinances, and the teachings that Hashem gave, between Himself and Bnei Yisrael, at Har Sinai” (Vayikra 26:46).

The tochechah in Ki Savo represents a second bris: Eleh Divrei Habris Asher Tziva Hashem Es Moshe Lichros Es Bnai Yisrael Bieretz Moav MILVAD HABRIS Asher Karas Itam Bihorev. אלה דברי הברית אשר צוה ה' את משה לכתר. These are the words of the covenant that Hashem commanded Moshe to seal with Bnei Yisrael in the Land of Mo'av, beside the covenant that He sealed with them at Chorev [Har Sinai]. (Devarim 28:69)

There is a noteworthy difference between the two tochechos. In Parshas Bechukosai, the entire tochechah is expressed in the plural form, Im Bichukosai Teileichu “If you follow my decrees” (Vayikra 26:3), whereas in Ki Savo, the blessings and curses appear in the singular, as in, Vihaya Im Shamoah Tishma Bikol Hashem Elokecha האלוקים תשמע בקול ה' “It shall be that if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d” (Devarim 28:1). We therefore understand that the tochechah in Bechukosai is speaking to the yachid (individual), as opposed to that in Ki Savo, which addresses the tzibbur (congregation).

The passuk at the beginning of Parshas Netzavim explains why another kerisas bris (sealing of the covenant) at Arvos Mo'av was required to obligate Bnei Yisrael in mitzvos: ולא אתכם לבדכם אנכי כרת את הברית הזאת ואת כל אשר יאמר לך יהוה אלהיך לא תעשה כי אתה יחיד אתה עומד לפניו וכל ישראל עומדים לפניו ואת כל אשר יאמר לך יהוה אלהיך לא תעשה כי אתה יחיד אתה עומד לפניו וכל ישראל עומדים לפניו (29:13-14)

The Gemara in Shavuot (39a) explains that the original bris at Har Sinai was made only with those people alive at that time, not with the future generations. All the neshamos of Bnei Yisrael were present at Har Sinai so that they would be affected by the gilui Shechinah (Divine Revelation), as the passuk teaches, ובעבור תהיה יראתו על פנים “so that awe of Him shall be upon your faces, so that you shall not sin” (Shemos 20:17). An impression was made on the neshamos of the members of the Jewish Nation at Har Sinai. They could be identified as חסדים וגומלי חסדים “those who are merciful, bashful, and who perform acts of kindness” (Yevamos 79a), to the extent that if one is lacking these middos, we must check his ancestry, for he must not have been present at Har Sinai (Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha'ezer 2:2).

Nevertheless, while it is true that all of the neshamos were present, the bris of Har Sinai is not legally binding on a neshamah, only on a person. We, today, would not be obligated to observe the mitzvos were it not for the second bris at Arvos Mo'av. It was this bris which obligated the future generations.

Why is there such a difference in terms of the binding power of the two different brisos? Future generations of Jews can only be bound by an earlier bris if there first exists the concept of Klal Yisrael as a unit. Until Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael, they were only yechidim, and the original bris at Har Sinai was therefore a bris with yechidim. This is why the first tochechah is in the plural, lechol echad v'echad. The entity of “Klal Yisrael” was born only once the Jewish Nation entered its land, because only after Bnei Yisrael had a National Homeland could they attain the status of a Nation. Because this second bris, proclaimed in the singular, was a bris with the Jewish Nation as a whole, it remained binding on all the future generations who are part of the tzibbur. When any country makes a treaty, it is understood that the agreement is binding even after a new president is elected and even on citizens born after the treaty was signed, because these people are a continuation of the original nation. The same is true of the bris of Arvos Mo'av.

Rav Soloveitchik understood the process of the second kerisas bris as follows. Hashem wanted the bris to be made by Moshe, as he was the adon hanevi'im. On the other hand, He wanted it to be sealed in Eretz Yisrael, which is the metzoref (coalescer) of Klal Yisrael. Moshe, of course, was not able to enter Eretz Yisrael. Thus, the second bris was begun by Moshe and completed by Yehoshua inside Eretz Yisrael, on the occasion of the berachos and kelalos at Har Gerizim and Har Eival. That way, the bris was made with Bnei Yisrael as a tzibbur, in connection with entry into the land; the bris at Arvos Mo'av and the bris at Har Gerizim and Har Eival are one and the same.

The principle that כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה “All Jews are guarantors for one another,” the shared responsibility regarding another Jew's mitzvah observance, began only with entry of Bnei Yisrael into the land. This principle is derived from the passuk in Parshas Netzavim, which is really an addendum to the parsha of the bris of Arvos Mo'av: הנסתר לה אלקינו והנגלת לנו ולבנינו עד עולם לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת “The hidden [sins] are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed [sins] are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah” (Devarim 29:28). The word לעשות has the connotation of “forcing others to observe the mitzvos.” There exists communal responsibility for the aveiros of each individual. Furthermore, the eleven dots above the words לנו ולבנינו עד עולם qualify this teaching; the community became liable for such aveiros only once the nation crossed into Eretz Yisrael and accepted the berachos and kelalos at Har Gerizim and Har Eival (Sanhedrin 43b). Before that point, each Jew was an individual Jew. It was with entry into our National Homeland that we became a tzibbur, in which every Jew is responsible for the actions of his fellow Jew (Avnei Nezer, Orach Chayim 314:4).

Interestingly, Rav Saadyah Gaon counts the episode of Har Gerizim and Har Eival as one of the taryag mitzvos. At first glance, this seems to be very difficult. This was an event that occurred once in the history of the world, similar to Ma'amad Har Sinai. The halachos associated with Ma'amad Har Sinai would be classified as hora'os sha'ah (temporary rulings), not as “mitzvos,” which, by definition, are binding on all future generations; the berachos and kelalos at Har Gerizim and Har Eival should be no different. Rav Yerucham Perlow (Sefer HaMitzvos LeRav Saadyah Gaon, chelek 3, parsha 57) suggests that Rav Saadyah Gaon considers the episode of Har Gerizim and Har Eival to be classified as a mitzvah specifically because of the enduring principle of arvus, which was instituted and established at that time.

In the tochechah of Parshas Bechukosai, we find an exposition on the passuk, וכשלו איש באחיו – “Man will stumble over his brother” (Vayikra 26:37), that seems to also convey the concept of arvus: איש בעון אחיו – “Man [will stumble] because of the sins of his brother; this teaches that all [Jews] are

guarantors for one another" (Sanhedrin 27b). How can this concept appear at this point in time, if the rule of arvus did not begin until later?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that this passuk is a reference to the future destruction of the First Beis HaMikdash, and by that time, Bnei Yisrael would already have entered Eretz Yisrael, and the rule of arvus would be operative. In the aftermath of the rebellion of Korach, Moshe put forth the argument, *הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִקָּח וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְצָרָה* (Bamidbar 16:22). This was a valid argument in its time, for arvus did not begin at the time of the tochechah of Bechukosai. Once arvus began with the conclusion of the bris of Arvos Mo'av at Har Gerizim and Har Eival, however, it would not be a valid excuse, for one would be liable for the aveirah of his neighbor.[See essays for Parshas Lech Lecha and Parshas Bo; Divrei HaRav, pp. 314-315.] How does the concept of arvus apply to a Jew in Chutz La'Aretz? The Avnei Nezer (Yoreh De'ah 126:4) explains that the Jews in Chutz La'Aretz who look toward Eretz Yisrael as their National Homeland and subscribe to that ideal, are also, in a certain sense, part of Klal Yisrael. The Reform Jews of Germany, who deleted any mention of Eretz Yisrael from the siddur and who severed their ties to our National Homeland, removed themselves from the entity of Klal Yisrael. However, those who consider themselves to be out of place in galus, outside of Eretz Yisrael, do maintain a share in the institution of Klal Yisrael, even though the full tziruf (combination) of Klal Yisrael refers only to those who actually live in Eretz Yisrael.

from: **TorahWeb** <torahweb@torahweb.org> date: Sep 11, 2025, 9:37 PM
subject: Rabbi Benjamin Yudin - Happiness

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

Happiness

In Parshas Ki Savo we encounter the phenomenon of happiness three times. I'd like to share with you some of the treasures contained within these verses. The parsha opens with the two Biblical mitzvos of bikkurim – first fruits. First, the farmer was to take of the seven species for which the Land of Israel is praised (Devarim 8:8) and "bring the first of the fruits to the Beis HaMikdash." The second mitzvah is the recitation of a paragraph of thanksgiving, in which the farmer thanks Hashem not only for a bountiful harvest but also for guiding Jewish history and bringing us to Eretz Yisrael. It is striking that the first time the Torah mentions simcha – happiness – is at the conclusion of bikkurim: "V'samachta b'chol hatov - you shall rejoice with all the goodness that Hashem, your G-d, has given you" (26:11). We begin with a handful of grapes, a pomegranate, or a fig, and from there expand our gratitude to Hashem for all that He provides. The phrase "you shall rejoice" functions both as a prophecy and as a charge to the Jewish people. The farmer, realizing that success comes not from his toil alone but from Hashem's blessing, extends that recognition to every dimension of his life. This, I believe, is the essence of tefillas Hallel. The chapters of Hallel (Tehillim 113-118) traverse past, present, and future: beginning with the Exodus, moving through our spiritual growth, praying for the nations to know Hashem, thanking Him for ongoing providence, and culminating in the universal recognition of Hashem with the coming of Moshiach. Rav Soloveitchik zt"l explained: once we begin praising Hashem, "we cannot stop." Hence, v'samachta b'chol hatov – beginning with one bunch of grapes, we are drawn into endless gratitude.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh adds a breathtaking insight on this verse, one made famous in a song by Rabbi Hillel Paley in Eretz Yisrael: if people truly felt the sweetness of Torah, they would "go mad" with joy, realizing that nothing in the world compares to its beauty and worth. They would literally "devour" it. Though the Torah often teaches through extremes, we can all appreciate the depth of the Ohr HaChaim's passion for Torah. All of this is contained in the command: "You shall rejoice with all the good." The second mention of happiness appears in 27:7, on "Opening Day," when the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. Large stones inscribed with the Torah greeted them, serving as a national mission statement: to live by Torah in the Land. The Torah continues, "You shall offer peace offerings, eat there, and rejoice before Hashem your G-d." Was the joy merely from a celebratory barbecue? Once again, Rav Soloveitchik explained: true rejoicing stems from

the awareness that one is standing in the presence of Hashem. That realization itself is the wellspring of simcha.

The final reference to happiness comes in the middle of the terrifying tochacha: "Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with joy and a good heart, when everything was abundant" (28:47). Rashi reads this as a failure to learn the lesson of bikkurim: beginning with small gifts but extending gratitude to Hashem for everything. Even when all our needs were met, we failed to respond with appreciation.

But perhaps the verse is saying something sharper: it is not merely that we forgot to smile, but that our mitzvos themselves became hollow, performed without passion or joy. Two women can light Shabbos candles. One stands in tears, praying deeply, sensing an intimate encounter with the Creator. Her neighbor lights hurriedly, says the berachah, and moves on. Both fulfilled the mitzvah – but what a difference joy makes. Two men put on tefillin. One kisses the batim automatically, out of rote. The other, as one kisses a child or grandchild, does so with heartfelt awareness of their preciousness. Both wore tefillin – but only one did so b'simcha.

The Tur, in his introduction to the halachos of Rosh Hashanah (Orach Chaim 581), records the astonishment of Chazal. When a person stands trial for his life, he dresses in black, unkempt, and terrified. Yet the Jewish people, facing judgment on Rosh Hashanah, dress in white, bathe, and cut their hair, confident that Hashem will bring salvation. Happiness here is not naïveté but optimism, rooted in faith that "Hashem, the Torah, and the Jewish people are bound together as one" (Zohar). Copyright © 2025 TorahWeb.org. All rights reserved. TorahWeb.org 94 Baker Ave Bergenfield, NJ 07621-3321

<https://jewishlink.news/the-work-of-everyday-decency/>

The Work of Everyday Decency

By Rabbi Moshe Taragin

September 11, 2025

This Motzaei Shabbat, Ashkenazi communities will begin saying Selichot, joining Sephardim who have already been immersed in these prayers since Elul began. With Selichot starting, the lead-up to the Yamim Noraim feels more immediate—you can almost sense the approach of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Selichot revolve around repeatedly calling out Hashem's 13 attributes of mercy, the 13 Middot. Over the next month, we will return to these words nearly 100 times—they become the heartbeat of our tefillot.

A Divine Mirror

We're not just meant to recite the 13 Middot and move on. Each time we say them, we turn the spotlight back on ourselves. Hashem is merciful—are we showing mercy? He doesn't repay evil with evil—do we hold back and try to give kindness even when it isn't deserved? He is slow to anger—are we working on patience? He is truthful—do we live with honesty? The list isn't only about Him; it is a mirror held up to us.

Repeating these words nearly 100 times is meant to do more than echo—they invite us to grow, gradually shaping our character in the image of Hashem's moral traits. We cannot fully grasp God or define Him in human terms, but we can strive to walk in His ways—showing mercy, patience, kindness and truth.

Human beings possess a native moral spirit, even without religious foundations. Conscience is etched into the heart: a sensitivity to suffering, an urge to relieve it, a basic instinct for fairness. These impulses stir within us even without the cadence of halacha; Hashem Himself engraved them into the human soul.

Yet Jewish morality aspires to more. It is not simply an echo of human instinct but a deliberate effort to model our lives on Hashem's image. For this reason, it cannot be shaped by shifting social norms or fleeting trends. Morality is not a marketplace but a divine charge—unyielding, timeless and demanding.

Through a Moral Maze

Over the next month, as we recite the 13 Middot, we reflect on the place of conscience and moral behavior in our lives. Yet the larger moral landscape

around us is anything but simple—it is tangled, contested and often deeply divisive.

Our current war is just, fought in defense of a higher moral ideal. The IDF holds itself to a strict code of ethics, and the data show a remarkably low ratio of civilian to soldier casualties. Still, the conflict has raised painful and complicated moral questions. There is ongoing debate about how—or even if—these dilemmas should guide policy.

We find ourselves in a profoundly tangled moral maze, one that no single person or policy can fully chart. It is difficult to know what the “right” path might be—or even whether this moment of survival allows space for moral values to guide our choices.

There is also a deeply human moral conversation about Charedi conscription. Many defend the morality of the Charedi position, reasoning that if the sources allow Torah study as an exemption from service, then that path is morally sound. If this is what the mesorah indicates, they argue, it reflects Hashem’s will and therefore carries moral weight.

Others question this reasoning. Even if the sources were clear, shouldn’t our own moral instincts also guide us? The 13 Middot were revealed after Torah and Halacha, highlighting that moral sensitivity and human decency exist alongside the sources. At a moment that feels decisive for Am Yisrael, these instincts call on each of us to take up our share of the responsibility.

The moral questions surrounding the wider situation—the war and our social divisions—are deeply contested, shaped by many layers of beliefs, assumptions and religious perspectives.

Small, Gentle Acts

Rather than trying to untangle these enormous moral questions, perhaps our focus should be more grounded, quiet and personal. Too often, big moral debates become a substitute for the everyday work of living ethically. There is often a disconnect between loudly asserted moral positions and the quiet practice of decency in daily life. Moral effort is revealed not in the large-scale positions people announce and argue about, but in the small, often unnoticed ways we treat others every day.

Since the wider moral landscape cannot be fully charted, our attention turns to the quiet brushstrokes of daily life, where small acts of decency quietly shape who we are.

Especially in this tense moment of our history, when sharp ideological divides have fostered antagonism and bitterness, there are smaller, quieter moral choices that can help us fortify our own ethical life—even when we cannot influence the broader debates. Here are three pathways through which we become more like Hashem:

Forgiveness

Hashem’s mercy is most evident when He forgives our mistakes and failures. From birth, we are shaped by Divine kindness and care, a presence that guides and sustains us throughout life. Yet His mercy becomes most acute when He forgives the ways we fall short. In our own lives, we encounter Jews whose choices offend us or trouble us deeply. Can we nurture the same generosity of spirit, forgiving them as we hope Hashem will forgive us?

Forgiveness does not mean excusing their missteps; it means finding a way to release the hurt they cause. Just as our own failings bring Hashem sorrow, can we find the patience to forgive those who wound us? If we cannot fully forgive people for the choices or mistakes they have made, perhaps we can at least acknowledge their positive traits.

Spotting the Light

One of Hashem’s merciful qualities is that He sees the good in us (“rav chesed”), rather than focusing only on our flaws. Each of us is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. We tend to measure ourselves by our potential and virtues, yet judge others harshly for their shortcomings. Can we at least soften our criticism by recognizing how every part of Israeli society and Am Yisrael contributes—spiritually, morally and materially—to our shared life? In this, we can strive to imitate Hashem’s way of seeing the good in others.

Holding the Hurt

Finally, if we cannot yet find the space in our hearts to forgive, and if it feels too difficult to recognize the good because the hurt is too deep, can we at least carry the pain without letting it erupt? One of the final qualities in the

13 Middot describes Hashem as bearing our sins (“nosei avon va’fasha v’chata’ah”). Sometimes that may be all we can ask for—we may not yet merit forgiveness or our own good traits may feel too few to balance our flaws—but we ask Hashem not to express anger, and to be strong enough to carry what we have done. Can we cultivate shoulders strong enough to bear our own pain, or do we too often offload it onto others?

Over the next few weeks, we will spend hours in the Beit HaKnesset, praying and reflecting on Hashem’s attributes, striving to bring them to life in our own actions. Don’t get lost in sweeping moral questions—they can be confusing and overwhelming. Instead, focus on the small, everyday acts of decency, the simple moral choices we are called to make, especially when we feel weighed down by conflict and heated disputes.

The writer is a rabbi at the hesder pre-military Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, with YU ordination and an MA in English literature. His books include *To Be Holy but Human: Reflections Upon My Rebbe*, HaRav Yehuda Amital, available at www.mtaraginbooks.com

From: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabiyy@theyeshiva.net>

When G-d Wants You to Compliment Yourself

Before I Confess My Sins, I Must Confess My Greatness

Rabbi YY Jacobson

רפואת מינדל נחמיה בת מלכה

When G-d Wants You to Compliment Yourself

Before I Confess My Sins, I Must Confess My Greatness

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

Do I Have to Tell Him?

An old German man was feeling guilty about something he had done, so he decided to go to Confession.

He said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I feel terrible because during World War II, I hid a Jew in my attic."

The priest said, "But that's not a sin! I wouldn't feel bad about that if I were you."

"But I made him agree to pay me 50 Marks for every week he stayed."

The priest said, "Well, I admit that it wasn't the noblest thing to do, charging the man to save his life, but you did save his life, after all, and that is a good thing. Don't worry about it too much; G-d forgives."

The man said, "Oh thank you, Father, that eases my mind. I have only one more question to ask you: Do I have to tell him the war is over?"

Make a Confession!

I want to achieve an ambitious goal with this essay: I want to bring back confession to Judaism. People attribute confession to Catholicism; they think it is the job of the priests. I believe it is time to bring it back to our people. I am going to ask of each of my readers that during the following day you should make at least one confession.

Now before you dismiss my plea, allow me to explain myself.

Tithing Cycle

This week's Torah portion, Ki Savo, discusses an interesting law known as "Vidui Maaser," "the Tithing Confession."

In the Holy Land, tithes must be taken from one's crops, according to a set three-year cycle. During each of the three years, a portion of the produce (around 2 percent) is given to the Kohanim, the priests, who had no income of their own (due to their Temple service). This is known as terumah.

Another portion of the produce (around 10 percent) was given to the Levites, who also had no income of their own, as they also served in the Temple and served as teachers. This was known as maaser reshon, the first tithing. There were other tithes that differed from year to year. Here is a quick glance:

Year 1—in addition to terumah and maser reshon, you separate a portion of the crop, known as maaser sheni. This is taken by the owner to Jerusalem and eaten there. It gave Jews an opportunity to spend time in the Holy City, contribute to its economy, and learn from its masters.

Year 2 – same as year one.

Year 3—in addition to terumah and maser reshon, a portion of the crop was separated and given to the poor, known as maaser ani (this was in addition to many other contributions made to the poor from each farm.)

Year 4 – same as years 1-2.

Year 5 – same as years 1-2, 4.

Year 6 – same as year 3.

Year 7 – This was a sabbatical year, shemittah, in which no plowing or planting was permitted, and no tithes were given. That year the field was open to everybody to enjoy.

Now, on the day before Passover of year four and year seven, every owner must make sure that he has delivered all the tithes of the past three years to their proper destination—to the Priests, the Levites, and the poor. Then, on the last day of Passover of the 4th and 7th years, the farmer recites a special declaration found in this week's portion.

Let us review the text in the Torah:

כי תבכה לעשר את-כל-מעשר תבואתך, בשנה השלישית—שנת המעשר: ונתתה ללוי, לגר ליתום ולאלמנה, ואכלו בשעריך, ושבועו. ואמרת לפני ה' אלקיך בערתי מקדש מן-הבית, וגם נתתי ללוי ולגר ליתום ולאלמנה, ככל-מצותך, אשר צויתני: לא-עברתי ממצותך, ולא שקחתי לא-אכלתי באני ממנו, ולא-בערתי ממנו בטמא, ולא-נתתי ממנו, למת: שמעתי, בקול ה' אלקי--עשיתי, ככל אשר צויתני. השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן-השמים, וברך את-עמך את-ישראל, ואת ארצך. [1] "You shall say before G-d your Lord: I have removed all the sacred portions from my house. I have given the appropriate portions to the Levite, to the convert, to the orphan and to the widow, following all the commandments You prescribed to us. I have not violated your commandments, and have not forgotten anything... I have listened to the voice of the Lord my G-d; I have done everything You commanded me..."

Basically, G-d wants us to verbally declare that we have done everything right. We distributed all the produce we were required to. We tell G-d bluntly that we perfectly implemented all of His commandments on this matter.

This is, no doubt, an interesting mitzvah. G-d wants us to compliment ourselves. He wants us to declare emphatically: G-d! I did it, and I did it well!

But why? He knows we did it. We know we did it. What is the point of making this official verbal declaration?

We have no other precedent for this in Judaism—to literally compliment ourselves before the Almighty!

This Is a Confession?

What is stranger is that this recitation has a name in all of Talmudic literature: Vidui Maaser, "the Tithing Confession." Yet virtually, this recitation is the furthest thing from a confession. A "vidui," a confession, in its classic sense, means that we admit our guilt and ask for forgiveness. We have in Judaism a number of confessional prayers (most of them will be recited on Yom Kippur, the day of confession and atonement), and they all share the same message: Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, debarnu dofi... "We are guilty; we have dealt treacherously; we have stolen; we spoke falsely, etc." We confess for the sins and errors that we committed in one form or another, we express remorse and we resolve to change in the future.

Yet in this case, we encounter a "confession" of a diametrically opposite nature. Imagine you approach your wife and say: My dear, I want to make a confession to you. Your wife's ears perk up to hear what you did this time. You continue:

"I want to confess to you today, that I am a wonderful, accomplished, flawless, magnificent, incredible, sensitive, kind, caring, handsome, and passionate husband and father. I have fulfilled all of my duties; I have been loyal to you with every fiber of my being; I have dutifully always fulfilled all my responsibilities; I forgot nothing, I did not transgress; I have been faithful and dutiful, committed and moral. Alas, I am the perfect man."

Well, call this guy any name you'd like, but for G-d's sake, it is not a confession!...

Yet, astoundingly, this is exactly what we do with the "tithing confession."

Listen to the words: "You shall say before G-d your Lord: I have removed all the sacred portions from my house. I have given the appropriate portions to the Levite, to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow, following all the commandments You prescribed to us. I have not violated your

commandments, and have not forgotten anything... I have listened to the voice of the Lord my G-d; I have done everything You commanded me." [2] And Judaism calls this a confession, a "vidui"! [3]

Perhaps if more Jews would know that this is "confession," we would not leave this art to the Catholics; the synagogue would have long lines every day of Jews coming to confess, telling us that they are absolutely perfect, impeccable, flawless, and faultless.

A Catholic boy and a Jewish boy were talking and the Catholic boy said, "My priest knows more than your rabbi." The Jewish boy said, "Of course he does, you tell him everything."

Poor Christians! They think confession is sharing all the negative stuff.

Nonsense! Confession is saying how perfect you are. "I have fulfilled all of your commandments."

I'm Awesome

Yet it is in this very mitzvah of "tithing confession" that we encounter an incredible truth: It is important for people to verbalize, from time to time, how good they are, how beautiful they are, how powerful they are. Not in a generic, meaningless, and foolish way, and certainly not in a haughty way, but rather in a very specific, directed, and focused manner. There is always one area, one aspect of your life in which you are a success story. And you need to be able to see it and verbalize it. In this above law, the Jew specifies that as far as tithing is concerned, he has done a magnificent job.

And this is called "confession." Do you know why? See how the Sages, 1800 years before the development of many psychological schools of healing and therapy, taught us this potent truth: Only when I believe that I am good, I'm capable of regretting my mistakes. If I believe that I am just a dirty old rat, I can't really regret my wrongdoings, because I see them as inevitable. When I appreciate my potential for greatness, I can hold myself accountable for my errors.

Genuine confession requires not only acknowledging and confronting a mistake; it also requires a belief that you are essentially good, that you are capable of being good, and that in some areas you are exceptionally good. If my garment is raddled with stains, and you pour some orange juice on it, it won't bother me. I may not even notice it. But if I am wearing a fresh, clean, and beautiful suit and you spill the chocolate mousse with vanilla on it, I will take note. If I consider my soul dirty and filthy, I can't even take note of my inappropriate and immoral behaviors, of my hurtful words, of my toxic thoughts; they fit right in with my distorted self. Only when I appreciate my innate dignity, majesty, and purity, can I begin to notice and feel bad about all that which tarnishes and eclipses such a beautiful life.

Have you ever heard a couple argue in the following manner? She: Darling, you are making a mistake again.

He: Of course! I am always wrong; you are always right. I am the dumb, stupid, bad, husband, who is always dead wrong. You are the perfect wife. You are never ever wrong.

Well, we all know that no woman is pleased with this acknowledgment. Because it is meaningless and cynical. Whenever anybody says, "I am always wrong," it means "I am never wrong; you are just impossible to please." Whenever anybody says, "you are always right," it means "you are never right."

Sincere confession means that I am sometimes right. But now I am wrong. I am not always wrong; it is now that I am wrong.

There is a verse in the Song of Songs: "I am dark and beautiful." [4] These are the two interconnected sides necessary for all personal growth: I am dark, I may have succumbed to darkness, but I am inherently beautiful. Hence, 1) I regret what I did. I know that it did not benefit me; I am so much better. I want to fix it, because this behavior compromises my inherent beauty. [5] 2) I acknowledge that I had the power not to do it; it was not inevitable. I was capable of choosing otherwise and I regret my wrongdoing. 3) I know that I possess the power to fix it for the future. I am not a victim. [6]

To truly confess a mistake or a sin requires that I can sometimes tell G-d: I am good! I am great! I have done exactly what You wanted. I have not transgressed. And because I am capable of doing things correctly I can sincerely regret my actions when I fail to do so. The tithing declaration is

called confession because it enables and gives meaning to all other confessions of repentance.

My Boy, You're Great

This truth is vital for education—in the home and in the classroom.

Your child comes home with a report card; in some subjects, he or she did great, in others—he performed poorly. We instinctively tend to focus on the negative, on what is missing, and try to fix it.

There is a more effective approach. Focus on your child's success and strengths. When you receive the report card and see what he is lacking in, don't say: "My dear angel, I see that you need help with this subject. How can I help you? What is bothering you? You are such a good boy, why are you failing in this area?"

Instead say this: "My dear, I see you are excelling in your reading skills, in science and math. I see you got an A-plus for cleanliness and organization. I see you scored really high on your skill for co-operation with friends and sportsmanship. It is obvious that when you put your mind to something, you are immensely successful at it. Now how can we apply these lessons to other areas of your education?"

Your child might be lacking in a certain behavior at home. Point out to him all the things he is doing right at home. "I notice how well-mannered you are when you eat; I noticed earlier how considerate you were when your brother asked you for the juice; I noticed how sensitive you were to your baby sister. This shows how much kindness you have in your heart."

What did you accomplish? You made your child feel like a success story.

You accentuated what is right with him or her, not what is wrong with them. And you did it not in a patronizing way (you are such an angel; you are a tzaddik; you are the best kid in the world—all this is a lie. Your child is not an angel, he is not a tzaddik, and he is not the best child in the world. And your child knows it is untrue!), but in a specific, genuine and real way.

You showed him what is great about his life. How good and special and capable he or she is. Now, he has a standard for himself that will 1) allow him to appreciate why his past behavior was unbefitting and inspire him to do better. 2) You will make him believe that he is truly capable of doing better.[7]

Singing My Sins?

Here is a story:

The Baal Shem Tov once visited a town in which the people complained that their cantor behaved strangely. It seems that on Yom Kippur, he would chant the Al Chet, confession of sins, in a merry melody, rather than in a more appropriately somber tune. When questioned by the Baal Shem Tov, the cantor explained:

"Rebbe, a king has many servants who serve him. Some of them prepare the royal meals, others serve the food, while others place the royal crown on the king's head, and yet others are in charge of running the affairs of the country, etc. Each of them rejoices in his work and the privilege he has to serve and to be so close to the king.

"Now the palace also has a janitor, charged with the duty of removing the rubbish and filth from the palace. The janitor looks and deals with filth all day. He approaches it, gathers it, and removes it. Do you think that he should be depressed because he is looking at dirt all day? No! He is happy because he is also serving the king. He is removing the dirt from the king's palace, ensuring that the palace is beautiful! It is not the dirt he is focused on, it is on the King's palace and its beauty that he is occupied with."

"When a Jew sins, he amasses some dirt on his soul. When he is confessing his sins, it is not the sins, the guilt, the darkness, and the negativity, that he is focused on; it is the holiness and beauty of his soul that he is focused on. He is removing the layers of dirt that are eclipsing the soul; he is allowing his inner light to shine in its full glory. Is that not a reason to sing and rejoice?" The Baal Shem Tov was deeply moved by this response because it captures one of his essential ideas. While other approaches in Jewish ethics focused often on the negativity of sin and its dire consequences in this world and even more in the next world, the Baal Shem Tov and the teachings of Chassidus focus primarily on the infinite holiness of every soul and heart.

"Just as when you look at the earth you can never estimate how many treasures are hidden beneath its crust, so when you look at a Jew you can never estimate how many treasures lie beneath his or her crust," the Baal Shem Tov once said.

This was one of the most important ideas of the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760)—whose birthday we celebrate on the 18th of Elul: (18 Elul is the birthday of the two luminaries—the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chasidic movement, and Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad (1745-1812). It is also the yartzeit of the great Jewish thinker, the Maharal of Prague (in 1609), a great-great-great-grandfather of the Alter Rebbe.)

When you encounter a fellow Jew—and that includes yourself—who may have many a blemish, and committed many a sin and mistake, don't tell him how bad he is; tell him how good he is and how good he can be; how much G-d loves him and needs him, and then he automatically he will want to remove the clouds blacking his inner sunlight.

It is interesting, that till today in most Jewish communities the confession is done with a melody: "Ashamanu, Bagadnu..." "Veal kulam Eloka Selechosh..." Our confession of sins is inspired by our tithe confession.

An Exercise

So I return to my original plea: I want each of you to make a confession today. Tell someone—your rabbi, your friend, your spouse—something very positive about yourself. One positive thing about your soul and your life. Something you are proud of. Not in an arrogant way, but as a "confession." Because when you realize how good and capable you are, you might ask yourself the question, why am I not living up to my potential? [8]

[1] Deuteronomy 26:12-15

[2] Deuteronomy 26:13-14

[3] The Sforno (the Italian Rabbi, physician, and philosopher Rabbi Ovadya Sforno, 1470-1550) in his commentary on this verse explains, that the ceremony is called "vidui" because there is an implicit tragedy that hovers over the entire ritual. We testify to the fact that "I have removed the sacred portions from my house." Why is this entire house cleaning necessary? Who should really be receiving these portions? Before the Jews made the Golden Calf, the Divine service was the duty of the firstborn in each family. As a result of the sin of the Golden Calf, the privilege went to the tribe of Levi. If we would have not sinned, then, the tithe could remain in our own home, given to the oldest of the family. Now, however, our homes cannot accept the holiness. We have to remove it from our home. This fits well with what the Sforno writes elsewhere, that if not for the Golden Calf, there would be no Holy Temple; for every home would be a Temple, an abode for the Divine presence. Now, there is a need for a spiritual epicenter in lieu of our homes. For this, we confess.

The Sforno uses this concept to explain why the word used here in the subsequent prayer is "Hashkifa" [look down] which denotes a negative gaze (as in Genesis 19:28 and Exodus 14:24). Why are we invoking this term in our prayer? It is because we are confessing the sin of the Golden Calf.

[4] Song of Songs 1:5. Cf. Likkutei Torah Shir Hashirim on this verse

[5] For an elaboration of this point, see Sichas 18 Elul 5712 (1952).

[6] For an elaboration of these last two points, see Likkutei Sichos vol. 30 Miketz.

[7] Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twersky in his book of Chassidic tales relates a story about his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, "The Rusty Penny," which expresses this same idea.

[8] The idea about "vidui maaser" is based on a sermon presented by Rabbi Josef B. Soloveitchik ("Bris Avos," published in his book "Chamash Derashos.") The second half of the sermon on an address I heard from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Shabbos Parshas Acharei 5748 (1988).

<https://jewishlink.news/freedom-means-telling-the-story/>

Freedom Means Telling the Story

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ZT"l

September 11, 2025

Here's an experiment: Walk around the great monuments of Washington, D.C. There, at the far end, is the figure of Abraham Lincoln, four times life-size. Around him on the walls of the memorial are the texts of two of the greatest speeches of history, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right ..."

A little way away is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial with its quotations from each period of the President's life as leader, most famously: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Keep walking along the Potomac and you come to the Jefferson Memorial, modelled on the Pantheon at Rome. There too, you will find—around the dome and on the interior walls—quotations from the great man, most famously from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident ..."

Now visit London. You will find many memorials and statues of great people. But you will find no quotations. The base of the statue will tell you who it represents, when they lived and the position they occupied or the work they did, but no narrative, no quotation, no memorable phrases or defining words.

Take the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Churchill was one of the greatest orators of all time. His wartime speeches and broadcasts are part of British history. But no words of his are inscribed on the monument, and the same applies to almost everyone else publicly memorialised.

It's a striking difference. One society—the United States of America—tells a story on its monuments, a story woven out of the speeches of its greatest leaders. The other, England, does not. It builds memorials but it doesn't tell a story. This is one of the deep differences between a covenant society and a tradition-based society.

In a tradition-based society like England, things are as they are because that is how they were. "England," writes Roger Scruton, "was not a nation or a creed or a language or a state but a home. Things at home don't need an explanation. They are there because they are there."

Covenant societies are different. They don't worship tradition for tradition's sake. They do not value the past because it's old. They remember the past because it was events in the past that led to the collective determination that moved people to create the society in the first place. The Pilgrim Fathers of America were fleeing religious persecution in search of religious freedom. Their society was born in an act of moral commitment, handed on to successive generations.

Covenant societies exist not because they have been there a long time, nor because of some act of conquest, nor for the sake of some economic or military advantage. They exist to honour a pledge, a moral bond, an ethical undertaking. That is why telling the story is essential to a covenant society. It reminds all citizens of why they are there.

The classic example of telling the story occurs in this week's parsha, in the context of bringing first-fruits to Jerusalem: "The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord, your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord, your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous ... So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that You, Lord, have given me," (Deuteronomy 26:4-10).

We all know the passage. Instead of saying it on Shavuot when bringing first-fruits, we now say it on Pesach as the central part of the Haggadah. What remains remarkable is that—even in biblical times—every member of the nation was expected to know the story of the nation, and recite it annually and make it part of his or her personal memory and identity—"My father ... so the Lord brought us out."

A covenant is more than a myth of origin—like the Roman story of Romulus and Remus or the English story of King Arthur and his knights. Unlike a

myth, which merely claims to say what happened, a covenant always contains a specific set of undertakings that bind its citizens in the present and into the future.

Here for example is Lyndon Baines Johnson talking about the American covenant: "They came here—the exile and the stranger ... They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish."

Covenant societies—of which the United States of America is the supreme contemporary example—are moral societies, meaning not that their members are more righteous than others but that they see themselves as publicly accountable to certain moral standards that are part of the text and texture of their national identity. They are honouring the obligations imposed upon them by the founders.

Indeed, as the Johnson quotation makes clear, covenant societies see their very fate as tied up with the way they meet or fail to meet those obligations.

"If we keep its terms, we shall flourish,"—implying that if we don't, we won't. This is a way of thinking the West owes entirely to the book of Devarim, most famously in the second paragraph of the Shema:

"If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today ... then I will send rain on your land in its season ... I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied."

"Be careful, lest you are enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you," (Deuteronomy 11:13-17).

Covenant societies are not ethnic nations bound by common racial origin. They make room for outsiders—immigrants, asylum seekers, resident aliens—who become part of the society by taking its story and making it their own, as Ruth did in the biblical book that bears her name ("Your people will be my people, and your God, my God,") or as successive waves of immigrants did when they came to the United States. Indeed, conversion in Judaism is best understood not on the model of conversion to another religion—such as Christianity or Islam—but as the acquisition of citizenship in a nation like the United States of America.

It is utterly astonishing that the mere act of telling the story regularly, as a religious duty, sustained Jewish identity across the centuries, even in the absence of all the normal accompaniments of nationhood—land, geographical proximity, independence, self-determination—and never allowed the people to forget its ideals, its aspirations, its collective project of building a society that would be the opposite of Egypt, a place of freedom and justice and human dignity, in which no human being is sovereign; in which God alone is King.

One of the most profound truths about the politics of covenant—the message of the first-fruits' declaration in this week's parsha—is: "If you want to sustain freedom, never stop telling the story."

RIETS Kollel Elyon from RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon
Substack <riets@substack.com> Mon, Sep 8, 2025 at 9:56 AM

Confessions of a Tzaddik

RIETS Kollel Elyon

Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

I have to confess, I'm great.

Certainly an unusual sentence, but no more jarring than the phrase the Rabbis use to describe the ceremony near the beginning of this week's Torah reading. When offering ma'aser, a special formula is to be recited; this recitation is referred to in the Talmud with the term 'vidui ma'aser' (see Sotah 32b; Megilah 20b), literally, the "confession of tithes". This phrase seems out of place. Vidui is conventionally translated as confession, which in turn is commonly defined as "acknowledging sin or negative information". However, from a reading of the verses, the sense that emerges is anything but: "I have removed the holy things from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, to the proselyte, to the orphan, and to the widow,

according to whatever commandment You commanded me; I have not transgressed any of your commandments, and I have not forgotten; I have not eaten of it in my intense mourning, I did not consume it in a state of contamination, and I did not give of it for the needs of the dead; I have hearkened to the voice of Hashem, my God; I have acted according to everything You commanded me” (Deut. 26:13-14). Is the word vidui, then, meant to be ironic, sarcasm from the Rabbis?

Some interpret viduy here not as a confession of wrongdoing but as an acknowledgment or expression of gratitude (hoda'ah). The Sforno suggests that it contains a hidden confession of the sin of the golden calf, which led to the first-borns ceding their status to the tribe of Levi; while the Minchat Chinukh (#607) believes the confession is for not having given the tithes earlier.

An additional explanation, cited by the Pardes Yosef HaChadash in the name of the Ziditchover Rebbe and the Sefat Emet, is that the viduy is a confession for pride itself. The very act of declaring one's perfection and boasting about one's good deeds can lead to ga'avah (arrogance), which is a serious sin. The paradoxical Viduy Ma'aser forces a person to confront this hubris, making the declaration a vehicle for repentance.

The Netziv adds a layer to this, explaining that while a person may strive for perfection, they cannot avoid minor transgressions like "the dust of lashon hara" (indirect negative speech), of which the Talmud says everyone is guilty. The viduy serves as an acknowledgment of this subtle, almost inescapable flaw.

A further interpretation is offered by R. Natan Gestetner in his writings, who suggests that the Viduy Ma'aser is essentially a checklist. By going over the list of positive deeds one has done, it forces one to be honest with himself about his accomplishments. If he claims to have done something he hasn't, this self-misrepresentation will force him to correct his behavior, thus becoming a process of teshuvah. This is similar to a point made by the Ozneyim LaTorah, who notes that exaggerating one's accomplishments creates a greater sense of responsibility to ensure that one's "resume" is accurate, as it would be dangerous to claim things that are not true.

To further address this issue, it is worth reexamining the idea of vidui. Maimonides, in beginning his codification of the laws of teshuvah, writes that if one violates any principle of the Torah, when he is ready to repent, it is a mitzvah for him to do “vidui”. This formulation troubled many commentators, in that it appears as if Maimonides, who devotes ten chapters of his Mishneh Torah to the laws of teshuvah, does not even recognize teshuvah as a mitzvah. Some indeed assumed this to be the case, that Maimonides understands only vidui to be a mitzvah, but not teshuvah itself (see Minchat Chinukh, 364, and Avodat Melekh). Rav Soloveitchik considered this to be an impossible position; the assumption that teshuvah is an obligation is central to Torah as a whole see Deut. 30:1-2) and especially to the Yamim Noraim period. Maimonides' wording, then, reflects not that teshuvah is not obligatory, but that it is expressed through vidui. This is because teshuvah, in reality, is not an action that one can perform or not perform, but an internal mindset (see the beginning of R. Kook's Orot HaTeshuvah). A mitzvah must be directed at a performable action, not at a personality trait, emotion, or mindset. Vidui, then, as a defined action, is the stand-in for teshuvah, an action that can be commanded; and when it is performed, when one forces himself to confront his own sins and inadequacies, it is hoped that he will then be moved toward the internal change that is in itself teshuvah. With this perspective, it may be possible to revisit the concept of vidui ma'aser. True, the vehicle to teshuvah is very frequently acknowledgment of misdeeds, the antidote to the arrogance, self-satisfaction or self-delusion that often stands in the way of change. However, there is another impediment to growth that can be equally pernicious. Often, we are held back from changing because we believe, quite simply, that we are not capable of any better. Yes, we readily acknowledge our shortcomings; in fact, we are slow to see anything else and recognize no possibility of greater heights. In that circumstance, traditional “confession” does little to move us toward spiritual growth. However, the Rabbis teach us that there is another form of the vehicle known as vidui: one that forces us to

admit that there are times when we do fulfill commandments completely, when we are capable of accomplishing everything set before us; when we can declare “I have hearkened to the voice of Hashem, my God; I have acted according to everything You commanded me”. If we are capable then, we are capable other times as well. The excuse that no better can be asked of us loses its strength. We are forced to recognize that the bar can be set higher.

At times, it is this awareness that can be the greatest impetus toward growth; it is this function that vidui ma'aser provides. As we approach Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we confess our sins and we hope the awareness of wrongdoing will prevent repeat offenses. But at the same time, we focus on our untapped potential as well, and we use that awareness to push us farther. It is our mission, at this time, to remove the influence of the Satan not only from “behind us”, but from “in front of us” as well.

RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack is free today. But if you enjoyed this post, you can tell RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack that their writing is valuable by pledging a future subscription. You won't be charged unless they enable payments.<https://jewishlink.news/the-work-of-everyday-decency/> Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, with YU ordination and an MA in English literature. His books include To Be Holy but Human: Reflections Upon My Rebbe, HaRav Yehuda Amital, available at www.mtaraginbooks.com

Potomac Torah Study Center Divrei Torah for Shabbat Ki Tavo 5785

Alan Fisher

BS”D September 12, 2025

Potomac Torah Study Center Vol. 12 #47, September 12-13, 2025; 6 Elul, 5785; Ki Tavo 5785

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

Because of travel, the Yom Tovim all coming during the middle of the week (none on Shabbat and Sunday), and numerous commitments, I believe that I shall not have time to prepare Devrei Torah again until after Simchat Torah. I am uncertain about Bereishit; I expect at least to be able to return to print by Noach.

One of the first requirements for our ancestors upon entering the land of Israel is to bring a portion of the first fruits of the seven special crops associated with Israel, put them in a basket, and bring them to a Kohen at the place that God designates (the Mishkan and later the Temple) (26:1-10). Bikurim redeems a vow that Yaakov made when he was leaving Canaan to escape from the anger of Esav. If Hashem favored Yaakov with blessings, then when he returned safe and in peace to Canaan, he would give a tenth of all he had to God. Yaakov did eventually return to Canaan, but he never had peace in his family. His wives were never at peace with each other, and his sons battled continuously. Only at the end of Sefer Devarim do B'Nai Yisrael return to Canaan (Israel) in peace, so it is finally time to redeem Yaakov's vow.

Our ancestors have a second requirement, Vidui Ma'aser, to bring various tithes of the seven species of Israel (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives (olive oil), and dates (date honey) on the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of each seven-year Shemitta cycle. On years three and six, the tithe becomes Ma'aser Ani, tithe for the poor. Each land owner in Israel is to bring the tithes to Hashem's designated place to consume his portion – and share it with others – in Jerusalem. A landowner unable to bring his tithe to the designated place could convert the produce to cash, add a fifth, and send the funds to the designated place to be used to purchase food to be shared in Jerusalem. Ma'aser Sheni ended after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), with exile of most Jews from Israel, and when it became impossible to go to and consume the tithes in Jerusalem.

Once entering the land, B'Nai Yisrael were to assemble with six tribes each on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. Levi would stand in the valley between the mountains and proclaim twelve curses, to which all the people had to respond, "Amen." The curses, which will come when our people sin (do not obey God's mitzvot), include familiar themes: a man's fiancée will be unfaithful. He will build a home but not live there. He will plant a vineyard but not enjoy its fruit. He will fall in love but his fiancée will be taken away.

His oxen will be slaughtered, and he will not even be able to eat any of the meat. His children will be sent into exile. These curses should sound familiar, because the Shotrim (enforcers) send away any potential soldiers who have not lived in their new homes, have not tasted the fruit of their vineyard, become engaged and not yet married his fiancée (20:5-7).

Why does Moshe warn of terrible curses? Moshe reminds us that God wants us to enjoy the good that He has given to us, especially through the great gift of a wonderful land that He watches over constantly. Hashem wants us to obey His mitzvot in joy – to be happy in all the good that He has given to B'Nai Yisrael. What is good, and what is evil? Our Creator defines what is good and what is evil – these decisions are for Hashem to determine. Humans are to accept God's definitions of good and evil – we are not to try to be in the place of creators and make those decisions for ourselves. If we obey Hashem's mitzvot, in joy, God will bring the best of blessings to us (28:1-14). Moshe reminds the people as they are to enter the land that Hashem gives them a choice of good or evil, wonderful blessings or horrible curses.

The tochacha in Vayikra ends with a promise that when B'Nai Yisrael perform teshuvah, Hashem will remember and redeem them (26:44-45). The tochacha in Devarim, however, does not contain a similar promise of redemption. The reason for the absence of a positive ending to Ki Tavo is that the redemption comes in Nitzavim. The primary theme of Nitzavim is that God will not forget His love for B'Nai Yisrael and His promises to our Avot. When the descendants of our exiled Jews return to Hashem and perform true teshuvah, God will accept those who love Hashem with all our hearts and souls. With true teshuvah, Moshe promises that B'Nai Yisrael will return to Israel, that the land will become fertile again, and Israel will flourish for our people. We have seen much of this transformation in the eighty years since Jews have returned to Israel. The country that no other people were able to make flourish for two thousand years is now a leader in agriculture, medicine, technology, and defense. One side effect of October 7 is that various segments of Israeli society have come together for the good of the country – not completely, but more than before. Jews in other countries also seem to be cooperating more than in the recent past. May these trends continue so Israel and Jews elsewhere can all have better lives.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, lived through World War II and served as a chaplain for the U.S. Navy for many years. He saw much evil and anti-Semitism during his life – although the experiences of the past two years have been worse than anything since the Nazi period (when he was a child). Ki Tavo brings a message that he would have endorsed – we Jews must work together, especially in Israel and with respect to what we can do for fellow Jews throughout the world. May our children and grandchildren keep to these goals throughout their lives.

Shabbat Shalom. Kativah v'chatima tovah,
Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Shabbat Shalom and Hodesh Tov,
Hannah & Alan Fisher

Nefesh Shimshon Ki Savo
nefeshshimshon@gmail.com

Divrei Torah on the weekly parsha and holidays from the teachings of **Rabbeinu Shimshon Dovid Pincus zt"l**

כי תבא כח מז תחת אשר לא עבדתך בשמחה ובטוב לבב The Rambam greatly emphasized the importance of simchah, and wrote:

"The joy that a person has in doing a mitzvah and in loving G-d Who commanded the mitzvos is a great avodah. Anyone who holds himself back from this joy is deserving of punishment, as it says, 'Since you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and a good heart'" (Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Sukkah v'Lulav 8:15)

On the other hand, Koheles speaks negatively of joy and deems it empty and worthless (2:2). And this is the truth. Joy is meaningless and empty. So why does the Rambam praise it? There are things that revolutionize a person's life. For instance, teshuvah. It transforms a person from a rasha to a tzaddik. It builds him as an individual this brings him back to Hashem. It works a revolution.

Simchah does not build a person and does not reflect his true state. Simchah is a tool that we need to know how to utilize properly.

Just being happy doesn't change a person at all. It doesn't make him who and what he is. Let's say a person has a lot of money. It is his, whether or not he is happy about it. Being joyous about his wealth does not make him any wealthier.

By contrast, a person might be tremendously rich yet not be happy about it. Maybe he doesn't know he became rich, or maybe he doesn't appreciate its value. In any case, he is rich just the same – but he can't take proper advantage of it. If we see that a person is happy, this is a sign that he recognizes the value of what he has.

People often ask me, "What do I have to be happy about? I know myself, and I am not worth much." Once in the middle of a Simchas Beis Hashoevah, someone came over to me and said into my ear that he doesn't feel like being b'simchah; only true tzaddikim rejoice at Simchas Beis Hashoevah, and since he isn't a tzaddik, what does he have to celebrate about?

This is an example of someone who has tremendous treasures in his possession, since the Torah itself says that he has plenty to be happy about, but he doesn't take advantage of his treasures. This person is like a dark room that the owner didn't bother open the windows and let the sunshine in. Each one of us carries tremendous treasures that we don't recognize and don't even know about at all. We need to get to know them and be truly happy about them.

Harav Hezkyahu Avrom Broide – Rabbi of "Ganei Ayalon" (Achisomoch, Lod) Dayan and Rosh Kollel Zichron Kelem
FROM CURSE TO BLESSING

(Megillah 31:) Ezra instructed *Am Yisrael* to recite the curses in the *Mishnah Torah* before Rosh Hashanah. What is the point of this? Abaye and Reish Lakish: So that the year and its curses may end ... How does the recitation end the curses? Based on the words of Chazal, the poet founded the wonderful and moving *piyut* recited at the beginning of the New Year, "אחות קטנה תפילותיה" ... May the previous year and its curses end and may a new year with its blessings begin!!!

אלה דברי הברית אשר צוה ה' את משה לכרת את בני ישראל בארץ מואב These are the terms of the covenant which the L-rd commanded Moses to conclude with the Israelites in the land of Moab ... This verse seals the 98 curses written in this *parshah*. What is the covenant? It is an undertaking between two parties. What is the mutual commitment created here?

"ויהי אם שמוע תשמע ... לשמר לעשות את כל מצותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום ... ובאו עליך כל הברכות ויהי האלה ... ברוך אתה בעיר וברוך אתה בשדה: ... ברוך אתה בבאך וברוך אתה בצאתך ... to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoin upon you this day ... All these blessings shall come upon you ... Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field ... Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings." A list of blessings that encompasses the whole gamut of spiritual life and fulfills all existential needs perfectly. When the condition and commitment is "If you obey ... if you will keep G-d's commandments ... and go in his ways." Meeting the goals and doing the will of G-d is in a constant internal struggle between the natural tendency of "the heart of man is evil from his youth." (Genesis 8) and the desire to ascend and become closer to G-d on the other hand. The human ability to overcome the natural tendency is rooted in and empowered by the recognition that the source of blessings is contained in going in the Torah's ways and that brings curse when unfulfilled. Existence depends and is affected by man's deeds,

which will bring upon him blessing or curse.

תהלים פ"א, - אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך בעצת רשעים ובדרך חטאים לא עמד ובמושב לצים לא ישב: כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה וילילה: והיה כעץ שתול על פלגי מים אשר פריו יתן בעתו ועלוהו לא יבול וכל אשר יעשה יצליח: לא כן הרשעים כי אם כמץ אשר תדפנו רוח: על כן לא יקמו רשעים במשפט וחסטתו תעדת צדיקים: כי יודע ה' דרך צדיקים ודרך רשעים תאבד:

"Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners or joined the company of the insolent; rather, the teaching of the L-rd is his delight, and he studies that teaching day and night. He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades and whatever it produces thrives. Not so the wicked; rather, they are like chaff that wind blows away. Therefore, the wicked will not survive judgment, nor will sinners, in the assembly of the righteous. For the L-rd cherishes the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed."

Creation presents us with unlimited good and abundance. (*Midrash Koheles*) When *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created the first human, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, I created for you. Take great care that you do not corrupt and destroy My world. Man's obligation and life task is to take care not to corrupt. With the knowledge that "it all depends on me." (ע"ז י"ד)

(Berochos 35.) [Rabbi Levi](#) expressed this concept differently. [Rabbi Levi](#) raised a contradiction: It is written: "The earth and all it contains is the L-rd's," and it is written elsewhere: "The heavens are the L-rd's and the earth He has given over to mankind" ([Psalms 115:16](#)). There is clearly a contradiction regarding whom the earth belongs to. He himself resolves the contradiction: This is not difficult. Here, the verse that says that the earth is the L-rd's refers to the situation before making a blessing, here after a blessing was said. Without a blessing, a person has no right or permission to use the world of the Creator. Only after the blessing is permission given. The world is not ours. "ל-ה' הארץ ומלואה תבל ויושבי בה." The earth is the L-rd's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants." Rashi says in *Bereishis*, the whole world belongs to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. He created it and gives it to those who he feels are deserving, at His will he gives and at His will He takes it away.

(Rambam 3: 4) Throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips the balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself. [On the other hand,] if he performs one mitzvah, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. This is implied by ([Proverbs 10:25](#)) 'A righteous person is the foundation of the world,' i.e., one who acted righteously, tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it. The consciousness and recognition give a person the inner strength and courage to awaken from his slumber and correct his actions and deeds.

The purpose of reading about the curses in the *parashah* is to focus the mind on the duty incumbent on every person not to spoil and destroy. Only the weight of the fear can prevent deterioration and loss of way and control. Studying this *parashah* and its lessons raises us from death to life and from curses to blessing. "העדתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובהרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וורעך: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—so that you and your offspring should live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)

I have set life and death before you – choose life. Before every individual of *Am Yisrael* lies the responsibility for the entire world. (Sanhedrin 37) Therefore, every single person must say, the world was created for me. On my shoulders and responsibility lies the ability to determine to the side of merit!

תכלה שנה וקללותיה תחל שנה וברכותיה.

"May the previous year and its curses end and may a new year with its blessings begin."

Parsha Jewels

Issue 268 9/13/25 20 Elul Parshas Ki-Savo

by **Rabbi Moshe Oelbaum**

Elul – The Power and Present of Elul

"Dirshu Hashem behematzto" – Seek Hashem when He can be found! "Kera'uhu behiyoso karov" – Call out to Him when He is close! Says the gemara, "Seek Hashem when He can be found" – when is that? During aseres yimei teshuva, the ten days of repentance. Says the Panim Yafos, what about the second half of the pasuk, "Call out to Him when He is close"? Says the Panim Yafos, "Seek Hashem when He can be found" is during Aseres Yimei teshuva, but don't wait until then! "Call out to Him when He is close" – that is the month of Elul! We have that opportunity right now – don't let these golden days slip by. It's now chodesh Elul and Hashem is right here. We must use the opportunity to call out, to come close.

It says in Parshas Nitzovim, "Umal Hashem Elokecha es levavcha v'es l'av zarcha" – Hashem will purify your hearts and the hearts of your children. The Baal Haturim

teaches that the words "Es Levavcha V'es L'av Zarcha" are roshei teivos Elul, which teaches us that Elul is a time when Hashem purifies the heart of a yid. That's the avoda of Elul, to remove the "arlas halev" – the impurities of the heart.

The Chidushei Harim says that teshuva overrides Shabbos, even though teshuva has some sadness within it. One of the steps of teshuva is charata, regret, and when one regrets his sins he feels pain and sadness. So why is it permitted to do teshuva on Shabbos?

The answer is that teshuva is an inyan of mila, just like we saw in the pasuk we mentioned previously. And just as mila overrides Shabbos, so too teshuva overrides Shabbos.

The Sfas Emes brings another remez with the roshei teivos of Elul. By Pharaoh, Hashem told Moshe Rabeinu, "Bo el Pharaoh ki ani hichbaditi es libo v'es lev avadav" – come to Pharaoh, since I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants. The words "Es Libo V'es Lev" are roshei teivos Elul. This pasuk is referring to hardening a heart, so that a person will not repent.

So here we have two pesukim with hints to Elul. We easily understand how the first pasuk connects to Elul, as the essence of Elul is repentance and removing the impurities of our heart. However, the second pasuk is just the opposite! It's talking about being stubborn, hardening the heart to the point where the person refuses to repent. So how can this pasuk be hinting to the month of Elul?

There is no question that the month of Elul is the opportune time to do teshuva. As the Baal Haturim says, a yid has a lot of siyata di'shmaya then to leave his bad ways and come close to Hashem. And so, the Satan is very afraid of Chodesh Elul. He sees the tremendous power, the incredible potential of this month of Elul. He is aware of the special siyata di'shmaya that we are given to do teshuva. He is afraid, so what does he do? He does what he does best! He works overtime to block our hearts from inspiration, to harden our hearts so that we should not tap into the wondrous power of this month. As Hashem is opening our hearts to make it easier for us to do teshuva, the Satan is working hard to close our hearts so we should not do teshuva! That's why there are two opposing pesukim alluding to Elul, because there are indeed two opposing forces tugging at our hearts during this awesome month. And that's why, sadly enough, so many of us remain uninspired and unafraid during Elul. It's because we are not fighting strongly enough to drive away the force of the Satan who is hardening our hearts.

Rav Yaakov Galinsky once went into Rav Chaim Kanievsky and asked him, "What message should I deliver to the people of Eretz Yisroel about chodesh Elul? Rav Chaim answered, "Tell them that all the tzaros of the world is their fault". Rav Yaakov thought, "How can I say this?" But then he realized there's a gemara in Kiddushin 40 that says that every person has to imagine that the world is hanging on a scale which is exactly balanced; half guilty and half innocent. Your next action is the deciding factor - if you do one mitzva, you tip the scale and save the world, and if you do one aveira, then you tip the scale in the opposite direction.

He says that the Chasam Sofer says this very concept on the pasuk, "Re'eh anochi nosen lifneichem". The question is why does the pasuk begin with lashon yachid, as "re'eh" is singular language, and then continues with lashon rabim, as "lifneichem" is plural? The Chasam Sofer answers based on what the gemara says, that by doing one mitzva a person can tip the scale for the entire world. The world is hanging in the balance, and one individual yid has the power to push it in either direction. So, the pasuk begins with the word "re'eh", see, Hashem is speaking to the individual yid. You, as an individual, "anochi nosen lifneichem", Hashem is giving you the power to tip the entire world through your free choice. You – singular you – give the entire plural of the world either brocha or klala. It's up to you.

The Chofetz Chaim says in Sefer Shmiras Haloshon: who knows how many people became poor because of you, and how many people died because of you. Yes, one person can determine the fate of the entire world. It's a tremendous responsibility that every individual has, a responsibility that we must remember especially during this month.

The Panim Yafos says in Parshas Achrei Mos that there's a tremendous chesed in chodesh Elul – that one hour of chodesh Elul corresponds to one day of a year. If a day has twelve hours, that represents twelve days. A month has thirty days, so 30 x 12 = over 600. That means the hours of Elul can be mesaken the entire year. That's the power and present of Elul.

In the time of Mishna, the eirusin and nissuin of marriage were not done together like today. A besula was given twelve months between the eirusin and nissuin in order to give her time to acquire her needs. Says the Panim Yafos, the mazel of chodesh Elul is besula, a maiden. Hashem gave a gift to chodesh Elul, which is the mazel of besula, a gift of twelve months. This means that in the month of Elul you can fix up an entire year. Just as a kallah needs ornaments and jewelry to adorn herself, we are given the opportunity to adorn ourselves before Hashem. How do we do that? Only through teshuva. Let us use this gift wisely and chose life for ourselves as individuals and for the entire world

Parshas Ki Savo: Declaration and Confession: The Convert and the Land

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom © 2014

I. MIKRA BIKKURIM

The first section in this week's Parashah involves two Mitzvot - the bringing of Bikkurim (first fruits) and the "Mikra Bikkurim" (Bikkurim declaration) which sometimes accompanies the gift of those fruit:

When you have come into the land that Hashem your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that Hashem your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem your God will choose as a dwelling for His name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him,

"Today I declare to Hashem your God that I have come into the land that Hashem swore to our ancestors to give us."

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of Hashem your God, you shall make this response before Hashem your God:

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to Hashem, the God of our ancestors; Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and He brought us into this place and gave us this land, *Eretz Zavat Halav uD'vash* (a land flowing with milk and honey). So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that You, Hashem, have given me."

You shall set it down before Hashem your God and bow down before Hashem your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that Hashem your God has given to you and to your house. (D'varim 26:1-11)

There are two independent Mitzvot which seem to be mutually interdependent:

A) "you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place" - i.e. the Mitzvah of *Hava'at Bikkurim* (bringing the Bikkurim to the Beit haMikdash)

B) "You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare...to give us.'... you shall make this response before Hashem your God: 'A wandering Aramean...So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that You, Hashem, have given me.' " - i.e. the Mitzvah of *Mikra Bikkurim* (reciting the Bikkurim declaration)

Even though the presentation of the text implies a concomitant obligation, the Oral tradition maintains that it is possible to be obligated to bring Bikkurim, yet not be obligated (or even allowed) to recite Mikra Bikkurim. (The opposite option is, of course, out of the question - it is unthinkable that someone would make the declaration without having brought Bikkurim). The details of those obligated to "bring and recite," those who "bring but do not recite" and "those who do not bring at all" are delineated in the first chapter of Massechet Bikkurim.

The long and short of "those who bring but do not recite" is that any Jew who owns land in Eretz Yisra'el who has grown fruit (of the seven species) that was exclusively grown on his own land - obtained legally - is obligated to bring Bikkurim to the Beit haMikdash. Yet, if that person cannot honestly make the declaration - i.e. if any of the phrases or words of the declaration do not ring true for the declarant - he cannot recite the Mikra Bikkurim. In the third section, we will analyze an example of this "split" obligation.

II. VIDUI MA'AS'ROT

The second section of this week's Parashah, immediately following parashat Bikkurim, is commonly known as Vidui Ma'as'rot - "the confession of the tithes."

[A word of introduction: Produce grown in the Land is liable for certain Halakhic taxation. In order:

- a) T'rumah (approx. 1/50) must be separated - that belongs to the Kohen and must be given to a member of that family.
- b) Ma'aser (lit. "a tenth" - 1/10 of what's left after T'rumah is taken) is then separated and designated as a gift for the Levi.
- b') T'rumat Ma'aser (1/10 of the Ma'aser) is taken by the Levi and given to the Kohen.
- c) Ma'aser Sheni (lit. "second tenth" - 1/10 of what's left after T'rumah and Ma'aser are taken). This is taken to Yerushalayim and is used for celebration with family and friends. In case it cannot be taken there, it's "holy status" is transferred to coins of that value (plus 1/5) and those coins are taken to Yerushalayim, where they are spent on food and drink with which to celebrate.
- c') Ma'aser 'Ani (lit. "poor-man's tenth" - 1/10th of what's left after T'rumah and Ma'aser are taken). This is given to the poor wherever they are.

Note that c) and c') seem to overlap. Keep in mind that the Land works on a seven-year cycle known as the "Sh'mittah cycle." For years 1,2,4 and 5 of the cycle, Ma'aser Sheni is taken. For years 3 and 6, Ma'aser 'Ani is taken in its stead.

The Torah obligates us, in this Parashah, to "clean out our house" on Erev Pesach of the third year and to make sure that all tithes we owe are paid up, after which we make a declaration/confession relating to those tithes.]

The Torah tells us: When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, then you shall say before Hashem your God:

"I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with Your entire commandment that You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of Your commandments: I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed Hashem my God, doing just as You commanded me. Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the ground that You have given us, as You swore to our ancestors *Eretz Zavat Halav uD'vash*." (D'varim 26:12-15)

Note that here, just like in Parashat Bikkurim, there is a Mitzvah to give the fruit to its appropriate recipient (the poor, the Levi etc.) and a separate Mitzvah to make a declaration regarding that fruit.

III. QUESTIONS OF STYLE AND LOCATION

I would like to pose two questions about these selections - followed by a third.

1) Why is Mikra Bikkurim exclusively praise and thanks - with no mention of Halakhic restrictions and obligations - whereas the exact opposite is the tone of Vidui Ma'as'rot?

2) As we have noted several times in our earlier shiurim in Sefer D'varim, the Sefer is divided into three sections:

- a) Historic Recounting (Chapters 1-11)
- b) Law Compendium (Chapters 12-26)
- c) Re-Covenanting (Chapters 27-33).

Why were these two selections placed at the very end of the Law Compendium?

THE THIRD QUESTION

As noted above, there are some people who are in the class of "bringing Bikkurim but not making the declaration" (*M'vi'in v'lo Korin*) - and, as noted, this would be because the wording of the declaration does not apply in their case.

An example of this set is the convert, as the Mishnah states: There are some who bring [Bikkurim] and recite [Mikra Bikkurim], some who bring and do not recite and some who do not bring at all... These bring but do not recite: The convert, because he cannot say: "the land which Hashem swore to our fathers to give to us." (Bikkurim 1:1,4).

As the Mishnah understands, the words which actually form the preface to Mikra Bikkurim, "Today I declare to Hashem your God that I have come into the land that Hashem swore to our ancestors to give us.", exclude the convert due to genealogical considerations. The patriarchs to whom God promised the Land are not, technically speaking, his ancestors; for that reason, although he may own land in Eretz Yisra'el and be obligated to bring Bikkurim, he cannot honestly state the declaration.

This Mishnah is followed by a Halakhah in the same spirit, to wit: When a convert prays, he says: "our God and God of the fathers of Israel" and, if he is leading the service, he says: "our God and God of your fathers" (instead of the familiar "God of our fathers").

The Talmud Yerushalmi, in a rare "intrusion," overrules the author of that Mishnah, as follows:

"It was taught in the name of R. Yehuda: The convert himself brings and recites. What is his reason? '...for the father of a multitude of nations have I made you' (said to Avraham in explaining his name change - B'resheet 17:5) [meaning:] Until now, you were the father of Aram, from now on, you are the father of all nations (for an explanation, see the quote from Rambam's Mishneh Torah below). R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: The Halakha follows R. Yehuda." (JT Bikkurim 1:4)

This is indeed how Rambam rules. Here is the relevant ruling from the Mishneh Torah: "The convert brings and recites, since it was said to Avraham: '...the father of a multitude of nations have I made you,' Avraham is the father of the entire world that comes under the wings of the Shekhinah. And Avraham was the first to receive [God's] oath that his children will inherit the Land." (MT Bikkurim 4:3)

So far, so good. Although the wording of the verse seems to exclude the convert, the retroactive inclusion of the convert in the family of Avraham serves to allow him to refer to the Patriarchs as " our fathers", both in prayer and in the Mikra Bikkurim.

The problem begins when we examine the parallel Halakhah regarding Vidui Ma'as'rot. Here is the statement of the Mishnah:

" '...as You swore to our ancestors - a land flowing with milk and honey.' Based on this source, the Rabbis said: Yisra'el...recite the confession, but not converts...because they do not have a portion in the Land." (Ma'aser Sheni 5:14)

Until this point, we would not be surprised, considering the ruling of the Mishnah in Bikkurim. Our surprise begins, however, when we look at the relevant Halakhah in Rambam's code:

"Yisra'el and mamzerim recite the confession, but not converts or freed slaves, because they do not have a portion in the Land, as the verse says: '...and the Land which You gave to us...' " (MT Ma'aser Sheni vNeta' R'vai 11:17)

Our third question is, therefore:

3) Why is the convert included in Mikra Bikkurim - but excluded from Vidui Ma'as'rot?

(R. Moshe Soloveitchik zt"l addressed this question in an article included in "Kovetz Hiddushei Torah" compiled by his son, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l. This shiur uses his question as a starting point but takes a different approach - grounded in P'shuto Shel Mikra - to solve the problem. The interested reader is strongly encouraged to read R. Moshe's resolution.)

IV. *ERETZ ZAVAT HALAV UD'VASH*

Before addressing these questions, I would like to point out an anomaly in the last line of Vidui Ma'as'rot:

"Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the ground that You have given us, as You swore to our ancestors *Eretz Zavata Halav uD'vash*."

We generally assume, in any reference to God's promise to our ancestors (especially as regards the gift/inheritance of the Land) that those ancestors to whom the text refers as our Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. That assumption does not hold up very well in this particular instance - if we check through all of the promises, oaths and covenants in B'resheet, nowhere is the Land described as "flowing with milk and honey". The first reference to the Land with that well-known adjective is in Sh'mot 3:17, when God charges Mosheh Rabbenu with his mission to the elders of Yisra'el. What, then, are we to make of this phrasing in Vidui Ma'as'rot?

Ramban, in his commentary to D'varim 26:15, addresses this question and suggests two answers:

"Now, do not find it difficult here that in the oaths made to the patriarchs, "A Land flowing with milk and honey" is not mentioned.

(1) Since at that time the Land was a Land flowing with milk and honey, [it would have been redundant to describe it explicitly. Therefore it was as if] He swore to them about a Land flowing with milk and honey.

(2) Or it may be that "unto our fathers" [here does not mean the patriarchs] but those who came forth from Egypt, for it was to them that it was said: "unto a Land flowing with milk and honey"...

Ramban, in his second answer, provides the starting point for us to answer our third question.

V. TWO DIMENSIONS OF KEDUSHAH

The Ramban, in the commentary quoted above, alludes to the notion that besides the covenant with the Patriarchs (B'rit Avot), there was a later promise, given to the generation of the Exodus (and, by extension, to the generation that entered the Land - see our shiur at <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5757/dv/dt.57.5.01.html> where we discussed the connection and association between the two) - known as "B'rit Yotz'ei Mitzrayim". The Land was not only promised to Avraham and to his seed - for which purpose Avraham himself walked the length and breadth of the Land as a form of acquisition (see B'resheet 13:17 and BT Bava Batra 100a in the name of R. Eliezer). The Land was also promised to the generation of the Exodus - a promise that was first pronounced at the onset of Mosheh's mission.

This "doubled promise", however, seems a bit superfluous; if we were already given the Land by virtue of the promise to the Patriarchs, what need is there for a further, second promise?

The answer to this lies in an understanding of the basic dialectic which underscores several areas of Halakhah relating to "Kedushah".

For example, the firstborn of the flock and herd is sanctified (Sh'mot 13:2) - yet, there is a Mitzvah to declare the holiness of a B'khor (D'varim 15:19). R. Yehudah haNassi teaches that even though the B'khor is "sanctified from the womb" (i.e. from its birth), nevertheless, it is a Mitzvah to sanctify it (BT N'darim 13a). Why is there a Mitzvah to sanctify something which is already holy?

Similarly, even though Shabbat is already holy from sunset, there is a Mitzvah to declare its sanctity via Kiddush (and to

declare the end of its sanctity via Havdalah, even though Shabbat is already over; see MT Shabbat 29:1 for an interesting insight into the relationship between Havdalah and Kiddush). Again, why is there a Mitzvah to declare Shabbat to be holy? It seems that the Torah is interested in having us participate in the process of Kedushah, such that instead of playing the role of passive recipients, beneficiaries and observers of that which is holy - we can claim a stake and feel a sense of active participation in that process.

This perspective intensifies when we examine the topic of the sanctity of Eretz Yisra'el - and our claim to the Land.

Although the Land was promised to our forefathers - and certainly had a "special quality" to it from that point on (if not earlier), it was not yet Halakhically considered "Eretz Yisra'el". That only took place - vis-a-vis the various obligations which obtain only in the Land - when the B'nei Yisra'el, under the leadership of Yehoshua and organized into camps, tribes and ancestral homes, came into the Land (when some obligations "kicked in") - and conquered it (the rest of those obligations came into force).

Unlike the sanctity of the B'khor or Shabbat, where the level of sanctity is not enhanced via the individual's declaration (but that declaration does allow the individual to participate in the process of sanctification after a fashion), the sanctity of Eretz Yisra'el was dependent on two independent factors. First, there had to be a Divine promise, a gift from God, of the Land. Secondly, those heirs who stood to conquer and settle that Land had to fulfill an act of sanctification - via conquest.

[Note that although the same principle applies to the sanctity of Yerushalayim - that the place of the Mikdash became sanctified through human action - the nature of that sanctification was significantly distinct from the sanctification of the Land. That is the reason that when the Land was conquered by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians, the sanctity became nullified - but the sanctity of Yerushalayim remained. Rambam's explanation is for this distinction will serve us well:

"Why do I maintain that regarding the [sanctity of the] Mikdash and Yerushalayim 'The first sanctification was valid for the future', yet regarding the sanctity of the rest of the Land of Yisra'el...it was not sanctified for the future? Because the sanctity of the Mikdash and of Yerushalayim is on account of the Shekhinah - and the Shekhinah is never nullified...however, the obligation of the Land with regards to Sh'mittah and tithes is only on account of the National Conquest; once the Land was taken from their hand, the Conquest was rendered null and void." (MT Beit haB'hirah 6:16)]

To recap: In several areas of Halakhah, we have discovered that there are two dimensions of Kedushah: Passive Kedushah (it is sanctified before we approach it) and Active Kedushah (our role in sanctification). Although the Land was promised to our forefathers, the generation of the Exodus (through their children), faced with a fait accompli, nevertheless played an active role in sanctifying the Land and completing the process of that gift.

This is why the Ramban refers to a second oath regarding the Land - because the generation of the Exodus was charted to complete an active part of the fulfillment of that Divine promise.

VI. TWO LEVELS OF INCLUSION

We can now return to the problem of the convert. Although someone who converts becomes a (retroactive) descendant of Avraham - he is not considered a member of any particular tribe (which would, of course, be impossible). In other words, as much as the call "you shall be a father of multitudes" allows the convert in to the nation as a whole, he cannot be considered a member of a particular grouping within the nation.

That being the case, the convert shares, along with all of the B'nei Yisra'el, a membership in the "seed of Avraham" who are destined to inherit the Land. As such, he can claim a piece of the Land (besides being able to call the Patriarchs "our fathers") in the most general way.

On the other hand, he cannot claim a piece of the Yehoshuan inheritance, divided by lottery and by conquest among the nine and a half inheriting tribes.

When we look at the text of the Mikra Bikkurim, we note that the declarant refers to the Land as "a land flowing of milk and

honey" - not in the context of the Divine promise, rather as a real-life description of the good Land. This is not the case with Vidui Ma'as'rot, where the phrase is mentioned in the context of the oath.

Following Ramban, we can make the following distinction: Mikra Bikkurim is a celebration and thanksgiving for the fulfillment of the Divine promise to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov to give their children the good Land (which, practically speaking, flows with milk and honey). That is why the convert can participate in this declaration - he is as much a part of the inheritance of Avraham as is any member of the B'nei Yisra'el.

On the other hand, the Vidui Ma'as'rot focuses on the oath given to the generation of the Exodus - an oath which includes the description of "flowing with milk and honey". That is why a convert cannot make this declaration - because, no matter how much retroactive imagination we employ, we cannot "plug him in" to a particular camp, tribe and ancestral home that he should be considered part of the conquest and division of the Land under Yehoshua.

This distinction helps us answer the first two questions we asked:

These two sections are the final sections in the Law Compendium because they demonstrate the dialectical relationship we have towards the Land - on the one hand, the Land is already ours, already special and already (in some sense) a sanctified place. On the other hand, the sanctification process is in our hands to complete. Since the entire Sefer D'varim was Mosheh's charge to the generation about to enter the Land, it was imperative that they understand the dual nature of our relationship to that Land - the Avrahamic legacy and the Sinaitic covenant.

This also explains why Mikra Bikkurim is exclusively a matter of praise, whereas Vidui Ma'as'rot focuses on the Halakhic details and restrictions of Ma'as'rot. Mikra Bikkurim, being a thanksgiving and celebration of the fulfillment of the Avrahamic promise, is simply an opportunity for praise. Vidui Ma'as'rot, on the other hand, is focused on the fulfillment of our role in that sanctification, which demands proper action - the subject of that Vidui.

This also explains one further distinction. Mikra Bikkurim takes place in the "place where God chooses to place His Name" (i.e. the Beit haMikdash), whereas Vidui Ma'as'rot takes place at home. Mikra Bikkurim is geared to that aspect of our relationship to the Land in which all of 'Am Yisra'el is "equal" and has no divisions by tribes or families. The only place where this can reasonably take place is in the place where God places His Name - the central locus of worship which belongs to all tribes.

Vidui Ma'as'rot is about our role in the conquest and sanctification of the Land - as specific members of specific tribes and families - and, as such, takes place in our own homes.

VII. VIDUI MA'AS'ROT - WHY THE "CONFESSION"?

Although we have already answered the questions we originally proposed, there are two ideas relating to the texts we analyzed that are worth sharing.

S'forno (in his commentary to D'varim 26), comments on the nature of Vidui Ma'as'rot. He wonders why there is a "confession" (trans. of "Vidui") when apportioning the tithes to all of their proper recipients.

S'forno answers (and this answer works quite well with our analysis) that the "confession" relates to the entire reason for tithes and why they must be taken out of the house. Originally, the first born of each family were to be the "Priests"; this is the meaning of the sanctification of the first born during the Exodus. Had that remained status quo, no one would have had to take any tithes out of their houses; they would have just given them to their own first-born children. Since the behavior of the first-born (of the non-Levi tribes) at the incident of the golden calf caused God to remove their special status and transfer it to the Levites, we now have to remove the tithes from our houses and give them to the proper recipients. This is, according to S'forno, the reason for the confession - it is an extended confession for the sin of the golden calf. (This supports our analysis in that it focuses the Vidui Ma'as'rot on the generation and events of the Exodus).

VIII. POSTSCRIPT

One further and final note: The statement from the Yerushalmi which creates a genealogical fiction and declares all

converts to be children of Avraham has its echoes in common practice. When someone converts and comes under the wings of the Shekhinah, he becomes known as "Ben Avraham Avinu" (for purposes of an Aliyah etc.). We could ask the question - why are "born-Jews" known as "B'nei Yisra'el" or "Beit Ya'akov"; yet "Jews by choice" (converts) are called "B'nei Avraham"?

If we examine Avraham's life (something we are surely going to do in detail in a couple of months), we see that his entire life was made up of isolation, turning his back on family and on everything he knew. Ya'akov, on the other hand, had the fortune of being born into the tradition of father and grandfather, which it was his job to absorb and maintain.

This is a crucial distinction between those of us fortunate enough to be born as B'nei Yisra'el - we are indeed followers of Ya'akov, who must absorb our ancestral tradition. Those who have the unique blessing to voluntarily come under the wings of the Divine Presence and convert are truly children of Avraham. They have turned their back on everything familiar, family, customs, faith and tradition - to embrace the Truth. Someone who has taken this bold step is surely a child of Avraham.

THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT KI TAVO

Saying 'thank-you': Ask any mother - it's not enough to 'think' it - a child has to **say** it. For some reason, a verbal declaration, be it of gratitude or regret, is of paramount importance not only for the listener, but - even more so - for the person who utters it.

In Parshat Ki Tavo, we find two such examples of obligatory declarations, precisely where the main speech of Sefer Devarim reaches its conclusion. In this week's shiur, as we study the concluding section of the 'main speech,' we attempt to explain why.

INTRODUCTION

As usual, we must begin our shiur with a quick review of the three basic components of the main speech in Sefer Devarim:

- * Introduction - the events at Ma'amad Har Sinai (chap. 5)
- * The **mitzva** section - (chapters 6-11)
- * The **chukim** u-mishpatim section - (chapters 12-26)

Our last several shiurim have focused on the mitzvot in the **chukim** u-mishpatim section, which began in Parshat Re'eh with the commandment to establish the National Center at **ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem**, then continued in Parshat Shoftim with mitzvot relating to national leadership and waging war, and concluded with a wide variety of civil laws ('mitzvot bein adam le-chavero') in Parshat Ki Tetzeh.

Now, in Parshat Ki Tavo, we find:

- A) two final mitzvot, which conclude the **chukim & mishpatim** section;
- B) Moshe Rabbeinu's concluding remarks (26:16-19);
- C) a special ceremony to take place on Har Eival (chapter 27);
- D) the 'Tochacha' - a lengthy rebuke (in chapter 28).

Off this backdrop, we will discuss these topics in three "mini-shiurim" into which our shiur will be divided.

PART I - THE TWO LAST MITZVOT OF THE MAIN SPEECH

Review the opening section of Parshat Ki Tavo (26:1-15), noting how it contains two mitzvot:

1) MIKRA BIKKURIM (26:1-11)

A special declaration made upon the presentation of one's first fruits.

2) VIDDUI MA'ASER (26:12-15)

A special declaration recited once every three years, when 'ma'aser sheni' [the second tithe] is given to the poor (rather than to the 'makom asher yivchar Hashem').

Then, review the next short 'parshia' (26:26-19), noting once again how it forms the concluding remarks of the 'main speech'.

[To verify this point, simply review the opening psukim of chapter 27, noting how they are written in third person narrative, and hence form the beginning of a new section.]

Based on this short analysis, it becomes quite clear that these two mitzvot were specially chosen to conclude the **chukim & mishpatim** section of the main speech of Sefer Devarim. In our shiur, we will attempt to explain why.

WHERE THEY 'REALLY' BELONG!

Before we discuss what is special about these two mitzvot, we must first take into consideration that both of them should have been recorded earlier in the speech, back in Parshat Re'eh. Let's explain why.

Recall how Parshat Re'eh discussed numerous mitzvot relating to "**ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem**" (note how that phrase appears over fifteen times in that Parsha and in the beginning of

Parshat Shoftim, see 12:5,11,14,18,21,26; 14:23; 15:20; 16:2,6,7,11,15,16; and 17:8). Afterward, that phrase doesn't appear again until the mitzva of bikkurim at the end of the speech (see 26:1-2)!]

Furthermore, back in Parshat Re'eh, we already found laws relating to bringing other produce to **ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem** (see 14:22-23). Hence, it certainly would have made more sense to record the laws of **bikkurim** back in Parshat Re'eh.

[In fact, if we compare this to the pattern established in Parshat Mishpatim (see Shmot 23:14-19, especially 23:19), then the mitzva of **mikra bikkurim** should have been recorded in Devarim chapter 16 (in Parshat Re'eh), together with (or immediately after) the laws of shalosh regalim (compare Devarim 16:9-12 with Shmot 23:14-19).]

Similarly, the laws of **viddui ma'aser** also should have been recorded in Parshat Re'eh, for the simple reason that all the other laws of the three year cycle of ma'aser sheni are found there (see 14:22-29).

Yet for some reason, Sefer Devarim prefers to uproot these mitzvot from Parshat Re'eh and record them instead as part of the finale of the entire speech.

MATCHING BOOKENDS

One could suggest that the relocation of these mitzvot yields a chiastic structure for the entire **chukim** u-mishpatim section of the main speech. In other words, the mitzvot of **ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem** serve as 'bookends' for the entire **chukim** u-mishpatim section (chapters 12-26), as it both begins **and** ends with mitzvot relating to this theme.

[In a previous shiur, we offered a similar explanation for the structure of the earlier **mitzva** section of Moshe's main speech. We suggested that the parshiyot of **shma** and **ve-haya im sham'o'a** serve as 'bookends' for this section (i.e. chapters 6-11), thus emphasizing the section's overall theme, 'ahavat Hashem' (see shiur on Parshat Va-etchanan).]

Nonetheless, a more basic question remains: i.e. Why were specifically these two mitzvot - **mikra bikkurim** and **viddui ma'aser** - selected (over all the others) to form this closing 'bookend'?

To answer this question, we must show how both of these mitzvot relate to thanking God for the Land of Israel, and how that concept is an underlying theme in the main speech.

To start, note how both mikra bikkurim and viddui maser contain declarations of gratitude for the fertile land granted to us by God:

1. MIKRA BIKKURIM

"You shall then recite: ...and God brought us to this place and gave us this **land**, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I now bring my first fruits of the **soil** which You have given me" (26:9-10).

2. VIDDUI MA'ASER

"When you set aside your **ma'aser**...you shall declare before Hashem: I have [fulfilled all my obligations]... Look down from heaven and bless Your people Israel and the **soil** You have given us, a **land** flowing with milk and honey, as **You swore to our fathers**" (26:12-15).

Note as well how both declarations thank God not only for the Land but also recall His covenant with the Avot (which included God's original promise of the Land).

This element emerges explicitly in **viddui ma'aser** (see quote above / 26:15), and is expressed more subtly in **mikra bikkurim**, as that proclamation reflects thanksgiving for God's fulfillment of his covenant at 'brit bein ha-btarim' - when the land was promised to Avraham's offspring (see Breishit 15:18 / also compare Breishit 15:13-16 w/ Devarim 26:5-8!).

[See Further Iyun section for a more complete explanation.]

Recall as well how the primary purpose of the main speech was to teach Bnei Yisrael the various laws which they must keep

when they enter the land. For example,:

"And **these** are the **mitzva, chukim** u-mishpatim that God has commanded me to impart to you, to be **observed in the land** that you are about to enter and conquer..." (6:1).

[See also 5:28 and our introductory shiur to Sefer Devarim.]

These observations suggest that Sefer Devarim intentionally 'saved' these two 'declarations' for the conclusion of the main speech - because both of these mitzvot relate to the need for Am Yisrael to recognize why God gave them the land of Israel. Hence, it becomes most appropriate that the final mitzvot of this speech include expressions of gratitude to God for the **land** He has given us.

In this sense, one could understand the mitzva of **mikra bikkurim** in a slightly different light. Instead of viewing this mitzva as a yearly thanksgiving to God for our fruits, it should be viewed instead as a yearly thanksgiving to God for the Land. In other words, we thank God for the Land and bring a sampling of our first fruits as a 'token of our appreciation!' [To verify this, carefully read 26:3-8 once again.]

[This may also explain why we quote **mikra bikkurim** in the **Haggada** on Pesach as part of the mitzva of retelling the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim and thanking God for His fulfillment of brit bein ha-bitarim. Whereas the primary purpose of this mitzva is to thank God for fulfilling His covenant, this declaration is appropriate as well for **maggid**, in which we thank God for His fulfillment of brit bein ha-bitarim. (See Shmot 13:8 and compare with Devarim 26:3, noting the use of '**ve-higgadeti**' in both contexts!)]

Recalling God's covenant with the Avot serves another purpose, as well. The farmer not only thanks God for fulfilling His promise to our forefathers, but also reminds himself of the reason **why** God gave us the land - to become a great nation to represent Him in the world. [See Breishit 12:1-3 and our shiur on Parshat Lech Lecha.]

As such, these declarations are significant in that they emphasize the reason for keeping **all** the mitzvot of the main speech in Sefer Devarim - that Bnei Yisrael become an '**am kadosh**' (a holy nation), a model for all nations to follow. [See Devarim 4:5-8.]

PART II / THE FINALE - MOSHE'S CONCLUDING REMARKS

This same theme continues in Moshe Rabbeinu's concluding remarks of the main speech (which follow these two mitzvot):

"On this day, God commands you to observe these **chukim** u-mishpatim... God has affirmed this day that you are His '**am segula**' (treasured nation) and He will set you high above all the nations, that you shall be, as He promised, a '**goy kadosh**' (a holy nation)..." (see 26:16-19)

Moshe concludes the main speech by reiterating the primary purpose behind keeping these mitzvot: that Am Yisrael becomes an **am kadosh**, a holy nation, worthy of representing God.

BACK TO HAR SINAI

Moshe's concluding remarks also feature a striking parallel to God's original charge to Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai. Recall that when Bnei Yisrael first arrive at Har Sinai, God summons Moshe to the mountain and proposes a special covenant with Bnei Yisrael:

"And now, if **you will listen to my voice and keep my covenant**, then you shall become for Me a '**segula**' amongst all the nations...and you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a **goy kadosh**..." (Shmot 19:5-6).

This proposal, which actually forms the prelude to the Ten Commandments, explains the central function of Matan Torah - that Am Yisrael will become a **goy kadosh** to represent God.

At the conclusion of the main speech, in which Moshe Rabbeinu repeats those mitzvot which were **originally given at Har Sinai** (immediately after the dibrot - see our introductory shiur to Sefer Devarim), this very same theme is repeated:

"And God has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you [at Har Sinai!], His **am segula** who shall **observe** all of His

commandments, and that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made; and that you shall be, as He promised [at Har Sinai!], a **goy kadosh**..." (26:18-19).

Moshe's concluding remarks thus appropriately close his presentation of the mitzvot that will facilitate Bnei Yisrael's development into a **am segula** and an **am kadosh**, just as He had originally promised at Har Sinai!

THE PROPER BALANCE

Moshe's concluding remarks also beautifully tie together the two sections of the main speech. Recall that the **mitzva** section, whose primary topic is ahavat Hashem, opened with the commandment to love God - 'be-chol levavcha u-vechol nafshecha' - with all your heart and soul. Now, at the conclusion of the **chukim** u-mishpatim section, Moshe explains how these two sections relate to one other:

"The Lord your God commands you this day to keep these **chukim** u-mishpatim; observe them faithfully - 'be-chol levavcha u-vechol nafshecha' - with all your heart and with all your soul..." (26:16).

In other words, the numerous specific mitzvot recorded in the **chukim** u-mishpatim section must be observed with the proper attitude, as explained in the **mitzva** section. Thus, Moshe's speech has come full circle. The general values of faith and love of God outlined in the **mitzva** section must combine with the practical, day-to-day details and guidelines of the **chukim** u-mishpatim section, to form a mode of behavior capable of producing God's special nation in His special land.

PART III - THE COVENANT AT ARVOT MO'AV AND HAR EIVAL

The thematic and textual parallel to Ma'amad Har Sinai at the conclusion of the main speech continues in the next parshia as well:

"Moshe and the elders charged the people, saying: Observe everything that I command you today... for when you cross the Jordan, you must erect large stones and coat them with plaster [in order that] you shall write on them all the words of this Torah [the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim]... erect these stones on Har Eival... And you shall build there a **mizbeich**... (note parallel to Shmot 20:22), and you shall offer upon it **olot** and **shlamim**..." (Devarim 27:1-8).

You might recall that an almost identical ceremony was conducted some forty years earlier, at Ma'amad Har Sinai, immediately after Moshe taught Bnei Yisrael the laws he was taught after the Ten Commandments:

"And Moshe came [down from Har Sinai] and told the people all of God's commandments and the **mishpatim**... Moshe then wrote down all of God's commandments. Then, he woke up early in the morning and built a **mizbeich** at the foot of the mountain and erected twelve large stones... and they offered **olot** and **shlamim**..." (Shmot 24:3-8).

Furthermore, the requirement that a tochacha be read as part of the ceremony on Har Eival (see Devarim 27:11-28:69) parallels the tochacha delivered at Har Sinai (Vayikra 26:3-46, see also 25:1).

Thus, this ceremony on Har Eival, which consists of the writing and teaching of the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, the construction of a **mizbeich** and offering of **olot** and **shlamim**, parallels the covenantal ceremony at Ma'amad Har Sinai, when Bnei Yisrael proclaimed 'na'aseh ve-nishma' (see Shmot 24:3-11).

The reason behind this parallel is simple. Since this generation (which stands on the brink of entry into the Land to fulfill these mitzvot) was not present at the original ceremony, a **new** ceremony is required for the new generation to reaffirm their commitment to the covenant.

This ceremony will take place on Har Eival, where Bnei Yisrael will 'relive' the experience of Har Sinai by studying the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, which will guide them towards the establishment of their new nation.

TODAY

It is not often in our history that a generation is granted the opportunity to fulfill a destiny originally intended for an earlier generation. Aware of the immense potential latent in such an opportunity, Moshe encourages the new generation in the desert to rise to the challenge of establishing an **am kadosh** in the Promised Land, as God had originally planned for their parents.

Although this challenge by Moshe Rabbeinu to Am Yisrael is some three thousand years old, it takes on additional significance today, as our own generation has been granted the opportunity to fulfill this very same destiny, a privilege that had remained but a dream for so many years.

The tragedies of this past week in Yerushalayim and Tzrifin, that cut short the lives of wonderful people who had dedicated their entire lives to the realization of these ideals, certainly cloud those dreams. Yet their memory must serve as our source of inspiration to continue.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Carefully compare the declaration in **mikra bikkurim** with God's covenant with Avraham Avinu at brit bein ha-btarim (Breishit 15), the original covenant with Avraham, which includes God's promise of the Land to his offspring.

Pay particular attention to Breishit 15:7-21 and relate these psukim to Devarim 1:7-11, Moshe's opening remarks in his introductory speech. Note the use of the word 'yerusha' and/or shorash y.r.sh. in both contexts, and specifically 've-rishta' in 26:1!

Also, note the historical process described in Breishit 15:13-16 and how it relates to 26:5-8. Relate this as well to Shemot 6:2-8.

Finally, see the dispute among the mefarshim as to whom the introduction to mikra bikkurim - 'Arami oved avi' refers. See Rashi and the Haggada, as opposed to Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and Seforno - these are the two most common interpretations. Then look at Rashbam's peirush (which appears as well in the commentary of Rabbeinu Yosef Bechor Shor). Explain why Rashbam's explanation fits best into our reading of mikra bikkurim. If 'arami' does refer to Lavan, could we still associate 'arami oved avi' with brit bein ha-btarim? Compare Breishit 15:13 and 31:40-42. See also 'Da'at Mikra' on Breishit 15:13 and the Netziv's peirush ('He'amek Davar') on Dvarim 26:5.

B. Regarding the importance of a verbal declaration, see Rashbam on 26:13 and Sefer Hachinuch on both mikra bikkurim and viddui ma'aser.

C. In terms of the connection between viddui ma'aser and the bet hamikdash: Several Rishonim maintain that viddui ma'aser must take place in the bet hamikdash - see Sefer Hachinuch, Tosfot Sota 33a 'birkat' and Ra'avad Hilchot Ma'aser Sheni 11:4. How would the other Rishonim (Rambam and others) explain the clause 'lifnei Hashem Elokecha' in 26:13?

D. Many people have questioned why the declaration after distributing ma'aser is called viddui ma'aser - the "confession" of ma'aser. The expression viddui usually has to do with confession of wrongdoing. Here, the individual does just the opposite - he declares, "I have done everything You have commanded me." Why, then, do Chazal refer to this declaration as viddui? See Rashi and Metzudat David in Divrei Hayamim II 30:22 who translate the word 'mitvadim' as 'expressing gratitude'. (See the two versions of the Targum there, as well.) Relate this to viddui ma'aser and the above shiur.

D. How many stones are taken from the Yarden in Sefer Yehoshua (4:1-10)? What is done with these stones?

How does this relate to Shmot 24:3-10?

What other parallels exist between Sefer Yehoshua and the generation of Yetziat Mitzrayim?

As you answer this question, pay particular attention to chapters 3 & 5 in Sefer Yehoshua!

See Yehoshua 8:30-35. Is this the fulfillment of the mitzva in

Devarim 27:1-11? Why is this mitzva performed only after the battle against Ha-Ai? [Or is it? Three opinions exist as to when this ceremony actually took place. See Sota 36a (quoting the Tosefta) that Bnei Yisrael performed this ceremony immediately upon crossing the Yarden, as opposed to Rabbi Yishmael's view in Yerushalmi Sota 7:3, that this occurred only after the 14 years of 'kibbush ve-chiluk' (conquest and settlement). In 'pshat,' of course, this ceremony occurred after the war with Ha-Ai, and this is the shitta of Abarbanel and the Malbim.]

E. If the blessings and curses of Har Grizim and Har Eival serve as a reenactment of Ma'amad Har Sinai, then we would perhaps expect the blessings / curses to correspond to the Ten Commandments.

(Hopefully you're not yet fed up with asseret hadibrot parallels from last week's shiur.) While some of them are more obvious than others, it might just work. Let's give it a try:

- 1) "Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image..." A clear parallel to the first two dibrot ('Anochi' and 'lo yihyeh lecha').
- 2) "Cursed be he who insults his father or mother" - honoring parents.
- 3) "Cursed be he who moves his fellow countryman's landmark" - stealing (see Rashi here).
- 4) "Cursed be he who misdirects a blind person on his way" - a bit more tricky. Rashi explains this as referring to intentionally misleading someone with bad advice, which seems to relate to Rashi's interpretation of 'lifnei iver' - see Vayikra 19:14. There, Rashi explains the case as involving one who persuades another to sell property in order to acquire it himself. If so, then this curse may correspond to 'lo tachmod', excessive desire for the property of others.
- 5) "Cursed be he who subverts the rights of the stranger, the orphan and the widow." Take a careful look at the Torah's presentation of the mitzva of Shabbat in Shmot 23:12, and consider the role played by Yetziat Mitzrayim as a basis for this mitzva (Dvarim 5:15) and Seforno there in Shmot and in Dvarim 5:12. See if this curse could thus correspond to at least one element of the fourth commandment - Shabbat.
- 6) "Cursed be he who lies with his father's wife... who lies with any animal... who lies with his sister... who lies with his mother-in-law..." - 'lo tin'af.
- 7) "Cursed be he who strikes down his fellow countryman in secret" - 'lo tirtzach'.
- 8) "Cursed be he who accepts a bribe" - "lo ta'aneh be-re'acha" (dishonesty in the courtroom).
- 9) "Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Torah..." See Rashi's comment that this curse constitutes an oath to keep the Torah, perhaps corresponding to 'lo tisa'.

F. The ceremony at Har Grizim & Har Eival may have served another purpose, beyond the reenactment of Ma'amad Har Sinai. Note the geographic location of these mountains as described in Parshat Re'eh (Dvarim 11:30) and compare closely with Breishit 12:6. Now see Rashi there in Breishit, as well as the next pasuk (12:7 - note especially the mizbeiach!!). Explain why this parallel takes on particular significance according to the view of the Gemara in Sota cited above (in B). [See also Da'at Mikra on Yehoshua, introduction to 8:30-35.] Is this necessarily a different explanation from the one presented in the shiur?

G. A note regarding methodology: Throughout our series on Parshat Ha'shavua, we have seen numerous examples of how a specific parsha can be better understood by studying not only its **content** but also its **location** within the framework of an entire Sefer. Use the above shiur on Parshat Ki Tavo to support this approach.