

TIMELESS TORAH

KI TAVO - THE GRATITUDE JOURNEY: FROM WORDS TO ACTION

Mitzvot of Reflection and Humility

While the previous two parshiyot contain numerous mitzvot instructing us how to conduct ourselves both as a nation and as individuals, Parshat Ki Tavo marks the transition to the final stage of Moshe Rabbeinu's parting address to the Jewish people. The two mitzvot of this parshah — *bikkurim* and the confession of the *ma'asrot* — focus on the need for self-reflection; both *bikkurim*, the mitzvah to bring the first fruit of one's crop to the Beit HaMikdash, and *viduy ma'asrot*, the mitzvah to declare that one's tithes have been properly apportioned, underscore the gratitude that we have towards Hashem for granting us a homeland and the opportunities for spiritual growth that it brings.

Significantly, the mitzvah of *bikkurim* begins by introducing Eretz Yisrael as the land, '*yerishtah v'yashavta bah* – that you have inherited and settled'. This phrase, as the Kli Yakar (d.1619) notes, is only found here and regarding the mitzvah of appointing a king. As the nation settles into their own land, building a stable economy and a self-governing state, there is a concern that they will develop a feeling of ownership and entitlement, encapsulated by the phrase 'inherited and settled'. The mitzvah of *bikkurim* tempers this sentiment. However bountiful our crops have been, and however successful we have become, we are directed to humbly bring the first fruit of our harvest to the Beit HaMikdash and thank Hashem for the good that He has bestowed upon us.

Indeed, the Kli Yakar points to a fascinating nuance in the verses that discuss *bikkurim*: Eretz Yisrael is initially referred to as 'the land that Hashem has given you', and only after the *bikkurim* have been brought is it called 'your land'. Our right to live and enjoy Eretz Yisrael is only inasmuch as we recognize that it is a gift from Hashem.

Parade of Gratitude

The Mishnah (*Bikkurim*, chap. 3) describes the remarkable procession of farmers who would visit Yerushalayim bringing their *bikkurim*. Starting in their hometown, they would decorate their baskets of fruit and make their way through the country, accompanied by music and singing, sleeping overnight in the town squares. Upon arriving in Yerushalayim, the local vendors and artisans would stop their work and rise in honour of the mitzvah being performed. Finally, the farmer would reach the Beit HaMikdash, offer his *bikkurim* next to the Mizbeach (altar) and proclaim his thanks to Hashem for bringing him, and the whole of the Jewish nation, to a land where he is able to live and sustain himself in peace.

This entire process is designed to drive home the feelings of gratitude that we must develop even for those basic elements of life to which we might otherwise feel entitled. The Kli Yakar teaches, in fact, that the word with which the farmer begins his proclamation of thanks is '*higadti* – I have told', which is in the past tense. It can only be, says the Kli Yakar, that more than the actual words of the proclamation, the journey to



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Yerushalayim that the one bringing *bikkurim* has undergone is itself a demonstration of gratitude. The dramatic parade and national celebration surrounding the *bikkurim* is the experience that brings us to internalise the good that Hashem gives us.

The verses of the *bikkurim* proclamation are so paradigmatic of an expression of gratitude that they are used as the core of the Pesach Haggadah, in which we relive and retell the story of our nation through the Egyptian exile and the Exodus. The Abarbanel (d.1508) observes that as we sit down to the Seder table, we can find no better and no more thorough way of expressing ourselves than to emulate the bringer of *bikkurim*, who tells his story from the very beginning: our ancestor, Yaakov, exiled to Aram, followed by the subjugation in Egypt, then the Exodus, and finally the entry to Eretz Yisrael and our development as a prosperous and stable nation.

Complete Rejoicing

According to Rav Hirsch (d.1888), the mitzvah of *viduy ma'asrot* is the final regular mitzvah of the Torah (the mitzvot of *hakhel* and writing a Sefer Torah, which come later in the Torah, are mitzvot that are intended to sum up the Torah in its totality). As such, we can understand that there is special significance to this mitzvah's unique requirement of retrospective avowal of the faithful fulfilment of other mitzvot, namely the tithes themselves. The purpose of this declaration must be to emphasise the principles that

the mitzvot of *ma'aser* promote. In Rav Hirsch's view, these principles are threefold: *Terumah* and *ma'aser rishon* are given to the Kohen and Levite, and with this tithe, we show our appreciation to those who care for our spiritual values and perform the service in the Bet HaMikdash on our behalf. *Ma'aser sheni* is a tithe that the farmer can enjoy himself, but it must be brought to Yerushalayim and eaten there in a state of purity. This tithe is focused on our own personal spiritual welfare and moral purity. Finally, *ma'aser ani* is given to the poor, and with it we manifest our care for those who are needy. This almost-final mitzvah of the Torah underscores our three-pronged approach in building a life whose material endeavours are devoted to spiritual growth.

In this way, *viduy ma'asrot* and *bikkurim* are very much a pair. Through the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, the simple farmer takes himself on a journey in which he recognises the history of the people he is privileged to be a part of and becomes able to appreciate his own capacity for greatness. Like the mitzvah of *ma'aser*, the parashah of *bikkurim* also ends with a directive to rejoice in the good that Hashem has given us, together with the Levite, the convert and the needy. This rejoicing, says the Netziv (d.1893), is a joy of *shleimut* – completion – as we fuse our material success with our Divine ideals. Having internalised this, we can indeed call upon Hashem to '*hashkifah mime'on kad-shecha* – look down from Your holy abode (26:15)' and bless us.

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