

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Happiness, said Aristotle, is the ultimate goal at which all humans aim. (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 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 less 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 G-d 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: "Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your G-d has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst" (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 *be-keri* with G-d, variously translated as 'with hostility,' 'rebelliously,' or 'contemptuously.' But the curses in Deuteronomy are provoked simply "because you did not serve the Lord your G-d with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things" (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 have first to 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 or 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 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 G-d, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all you have put your hand to, because the Lord your G-d 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" (16:11). *Simcha* is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.

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 G-d. 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*, a.k.a. *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

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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." (3:12)

"So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in his work, because that is his lot." (3:22)

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

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

My argument is 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 for ever 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 G-d's land, enjoying His blessing, 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." (Journals and Papers, vol. 2, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967, p. 493) 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. On Sukkot, 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 G-d. 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 G-d. Joy is the ability to celebrate life as such, knowing that whatever tomorrow may bring, we are here today, under G-d's heaven, in the universe He made, to which He has invited us as His guests.

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. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The covenant of which we read in our portion of Ki Tavo began to be described some 16 chapters ago in the portion of Re'eh-with the blessings which were to be on Mount Gerizim and the curses on Mount Ebal-and concludes with the blessing that is life and the curse that is death, commanding, Israel to choose life, at the end of the portion of Nitzavim. This is clearly a third and new covenant, in addition to the religious covenant which G-d made with Israel at Horeb and to be added to the original national Covenant between the Pieces (Gen. 15) in which G-d guaranteed Abraham eternal descendants and a familial homeland.

Most importantly, what did this Covenant, entered into by G-d and Israel directly before their entry into the Promised Land, add to the mission of Israel? The place of Covenantal agreement was Arvot Moav, the Plains of Moab at the entry point of Israel from the position of Trans-Jordan, that was the place of the two mountains, (the blessings and the curses) near the City of Shechem (Nablus). The Talmud (B.T. Sota 37b) enjoys a play on words, transforming arvot into arevut, or co-signership, responsibility. Responsibility for what and for whom? In our portion, the Israelites are commanded to take up twelve large stones on the day in which they cross the Jordan River, to build an altar of unknown stones without using any implements of iron, and to rejoice with whole burnt offerings and peace offerings just as they had done forty years before upon sealing their second covenant at Horeb-Sinai (Ex. 24:1-4). They were commanded "to write upon the stones all the words of the Torah, explained very well [be'er hetev] " (Deut. 27:8) -interpreted by our Sages and cited by Rashi as translated into seventy languages.

Logic would dictate that it was the twelve imprecations on Mount Ebal which were written on the twelve stones, each translated into seventy languages.

The crimes meriting the curses were reminiscent of the legal code of the Decalogue and even the Seven Moral Laws of the Noachides, cursing idolaters, degraders of parents, movers of boundaries of land, those who block the path taken by a blind person, perverters of justice due the proselyte, orphan and widow, sexual molesters and murderers.

The list of imprecations begins against the ish (generic human being) who makes a molten image, the noun Israelite never appearing in this context, however the introduction is presented by "Moses and the Kohanim- Levites to all of Israel, saying 'be attentive and hearken, O Israel; this day you have become a nation [Am] to the Lord your G-d'" (Deut. 27:9).

I would submit that this Third Covenant of Responsibility is our responsibility as the Jewish nation to the rest of the nations on the planet, to all of

humanity.

Way back at the dawn of history, before G-d entered into the Covenant between the Pieces promising Abraham eternal seed and a national homeland; He challenged the first Hebrew patriarch: "I shall make you a great nation and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3); G-d chose Abraham because Abraham was teaching his household the path of the Lord to do compassionate and moral justice"; and before the Second Religio-Legal Covenant of the Decalogue, G-d charged Israel with becoming a Kingdom of priest-teachers (to humanity) and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6).

So now, before our entry into Israel and our assumption-for the first time-of our national status, we are given the responsibility of teaching the nations of the world the message of Divine morality, the prerequisite of a world of peace and life rather than a nightmare of destruction and death: compassionate righteousness and moral justice.

Our Kohanim-Levites gave this mission to the entire Jewish people, near Shechem which is the burial place of the universalist Joseph, who brought G-d of morality to Egypt and dreamed of reaching the sun, moon and stars. And if we fail in this mission, then the result will be a world of mayhem and darkness, with Israel as its most vulnerable victims hence the chastisements (Deut. 28), which are even more chilling than the blood which is inextricably part of the earlier two covenants (the blood of circumcision and the blood sprinkled on the Divine altar and over the Israelites at Sinai).

We have now returned to our nation-state, and we are truly at center stage of world history; extremist Islam threatens to plunge the world into a black period of religious oppression, terrorist domination, and the jihadist embrace of brute force power.

Operation Protective Edge was an example of life against death, blessing against curse, freedom against slavery. May we continue to carry out our responsibility with courage and resolve; may the Almighty continue to give strength to His people and bless Israel and the world with peace. ©2015 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And now I brought the first fruit of the Land which the Almighty gave me, and you shall place it before the Almighty, your G-d, and you shall bow down before the Almighty, your G-d" (Deut 26:10).

We do not find the idea of bowing down to the Almighty mentioned with regards to other commandments. Why is it mentioned here in the bringing of the first fruits?

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelewitz teaches us that the

whole concept of bringing the first fruits to the Bais HaMikdosh (the Holy Temple in Jerusalem) is to show gratitude to the Almighty for all that He has given. It is an expression of our awareness that everything we have is a gift from the Almighty. Therefore, the Torah mentions that we bow down to the Almighty, which symbolizes our total submission to His will because all that we have is from Him. This applies to our material as well as our intellectual achievements. Be grateful to the Almighty for all that you understand in Torah and any novel ideas that He has blessed you with.

The greater your awareness that all you have is a gift from the Almighty the more you will appreciate it. As many commentators point out, a small gift from a very distinguished and important dignitary is a precious possession. The greater the giver the more you treasure what you were given. When you live with the reality that all you have is a gift from the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, you will immensely enjoy everything you have! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The next few parshiyot of the Torah, leading up to the final uplifting and glorious conclusion, portray for us a somber picture of the experiences that the Jewish people will undergo in their march through history. The descriptions of the horrors that will overtake the Jewish people, when their national entity is destroyed and they embark on a long and painful exile of millennia, are graphic, frightening.....and tragically accurate.

As we read in the Torah, the Jewish people wondered how it was possible for the world to worship with intense loyalty the false gods and imperfect faiths. Because of this vexing question, the Jewish people as a whole also succumbed to such worthless worship and falsity. This in turn led the Jewish people to wonder why they suffered such an onerous fate in their history.

The Torah itself will teach us in a later chapter that the nations of the world will also wonder in amazement as to the extent of the destruction that the Jewish people and their land will suffer at the hands of others. And even though the Torah proposes an answer to this question – that the Jewish people were guilty of forsaking their G-d and faith – they seem to be entitled to complain that the punishments inflicted upon them were unduly harsh and cruel.

The descriptions of these punishments that appear in this week's Torah reading, in their graphic detail, leave little room for imagination of the disasters that will fall upon the Jewish people individually and nationally. If there is a portion of the Torah that truly rattles our cage, this week's reading is certainly the one.

There are no easy words of comfort that can be offered to ameliorate the stark accuracy of the parsha or soften its impact. The only slight comfort that I can derive is that all of this, which has transpired literally before Jewish eyes over the last century, was predicted long ago, and that the words of the Torah remain true for all eternity.

Ramban, writing in the thirteenth century, stated then that the accuracy of the words of Moshe uttered seven hundred and fifty years earlier should be sufficient to renew the faith of every Jew in the veracity of Torah and the tenets of Judaism. How much more so is this relevant to our times and generation living as we do nine hundred years after the time of Ramban. The total accuracy of what Moshe prophesied is itself a proof of that truth as well as the greatness of his character and leadership.

Rabbi Akiva taught us that the fulfillment in every detail, of the prophecies of doom and destruction, is itself a confirmation of the accuracy of the prophetic writings about our redemption and restoration to physical and spiritual greatness and serenity. I had a history teacher who said that Jewish history is really mainly a story of pogroms and books. That is far too somber an assessment. It is much more than that. It is more importantly the history of loyalty and tenacity, creativity and purpose, faith and achievement and an undying belief in a better tomorrow for the Jewish people and all of humankind. ©2015 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Four sentences found in this week's portion have become a central element of the Passover Seder.

These sentences prescribe the ritual that is to accompany the presentation of the first fruits at the sanctuary in Jerusalem. A beautiful prayer is recited upon that occasion which deals with the Jews settling in Egypt; their being enslaved by Pharaoh; their crying out to G-d for help; and finally their being freed. (Deuteronomy 26:5-8)

Yet, why should verses from Deuteronomy be recited at the Seder table when there are chapters dedicated to the actual unfolding of the story in the Book of Exodus? Several answers come to mind.

The portion of the first fruits instructs the native Israeli to thank G-d for his bounty by bringing the first of his produce to the Holy Temple. Although not enslaved in Egypt he recalls the Egyptian experience in the first person as if he were there. Hence, this text is read on Passover night, as it is our challenge then, not only to "retell" the story of the Exodus but to "reenact" the

event as if we, living thousands of years later, were in Egypt. "Only through this total identification as a Jewish people," writes Rabbi Shlomo Riskin in his Passover Haggadah, "can we ensure the historical continuity of Judaism and Jewry." Just as the native Israeli acts as if s/he were there, we must do so as well.

Rabbi David Silber offers an alternative approach. Paradoxically, he argues, only the people who were not in Egypt can fully understand that bondage. In fact, many of the slaves who left wanted to return-as they never fully comprehended what it meant to leave Egypt. Only a free people could attain the proper perspective to recognize that the experience in Egypt may not have been a punishment but a covenantal opportunity.

Indeed, sometimes, one is better able to assess the significance of an event years after it has occurred. Seeing an experience from a distance gives one a more whole perspective of what happened. For example, the generation after the Holocaust, not having been there, has a different perspective on the significance and impact of the Shoah. Each generation has the potential to understand the Shoah in ways that even survivors may not.

A final thought comes to mind. The text chosen to be analyzed on the Seder night deals with the land of Israel to teach that leaving slavery has much more significance and meaning if it is followed by entry into the Jewish land of Israel. The land of Israel then takes its place as a central idea in the Passover Seder.

Centrality of Israel is a foundation of Judaism. There are, of course, communities in the Diaspora that have become exemplary expressions of Torah values. But the place, the only place, where the national destiny of the Jewish people can be carried out is in the land of Israel. Only there do we have the sovereignty, the independence, the autonomy, to potentially become a light to the nations. Thus, entry to Israel is inextricably bound to the exodus. Without it, redemption is incomplete. © 2015 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd you shall rejoice over all the good that Hashem, your G-d, has given to you and to your household" (D'varim 26:11). Since this verse is taught at the end of the instructions for bringing "Bikurim" (the first fruits of the season), it would seem obvious that we are rejoicing over the new crops that have started to ripen, giving thanks to G-d for the bounty He has bestowed upon us. However, the Midrash (Tanchuma R'ay 8/11, P'sikta d'Rav Kahana Aser T'aser) tells us that in the merit of two things we are worthy of delighting before G-d, in the merit of

Shabbos and in the merit of Ma'aser (tithes), bringing proof-texts for both. The proof-text for Ma'aser is our verse (equating "rejoicing" with "having delight"). How can our verse be a proof-text for Ma'aser if it is said in the context of bringing Bikurim?

[I translated one of the words of the Midrash as "delighting" (i.e. to be in a state of enjoyment), following the Aruch (ches-tes #1, which quotes the P'sikta) and the way the Shibolay Haleket (in his commentary on the Shabbos Musaf prayers, quoted by the Beis Yosef on O"C 286) quotes the Midrash, as this fits the context best (with "delight" and "rejoice" being its comparative words in the proof-texts). Although Eitz Yosef translates it as "become purified," the precise definition should not impact the issues being raised here.]

The continuation of the Midrash, which further expounds upon our verse, is just as puzzling, as we are told that the "good" (which Hashem gave us) refers to the Torah (citing another proof-text). So now we have the beginning of the Midrash using a verse that discusses Bikurim to teach us about Ma'aser, and the next part of the Midrash using that same verse, in the same teaching, to refer to Torah. What's going on?

It should be noted that when the Midrash is quoted by the Yalkut Shimoni (892), it is divided into two parts; first the two things that allow us to "have delight before G-d" are discussed (with their proof-texts), then another (separate) exposition on "rejoicing over all the good" is presented, with a proof-text that "good" refers to Torah. Nevertheless, this second part of the Midrash finishes by adding that "therefore Moshe cautioned/encouraged them to be diligent with Ma'aser," connecting it to Torah. So even if, at first glance, separating the Midrash into two parts makes things better (it is the preferred version of the Eitz Yosef in his commentary on the Tanchuma and of R' Sh'lomo Buber in his notes on the P'sikta), the first part still uses a verse referring to Bikurim to teach us about Ma'aser, and the second part uses the verse referring to Bikurim to teach us something (exactly what isn't clear) about Torah before connecting it back to Ma'aser. [Even if the Bikurim/Torah connection of the second part is meant parenthetically, with the Ma'aser reference at the end being part of the first part of the Midrash, we still have both connections made (Bikurim/Ma'aser and Bikurim/Torah). Additionally, even if all three (Bikurim/Ma'aser/Torah) aren't being connected directly, if A=B and B=C means A=C, then all three are still being connected indirectly.] Therefore, with all the connections still needing to be explained, and the three Midrashic sources (P'sikta, Tanchuma and Tanchuma Yoshon) having it as one teaching (as opposed to R' Shimon HaDarshan's compilation, where he may have separated it into two parts), I will treat it as one, and try to explain how we get from Bikurim to Ma'aser to Torah and then back again to Ma'aser.

Ba'al HaTurim says that the verse of "rejoicing

over all the good” is followed (in the next verse, which begins the next paragraph, and thereby the next topic) by what is said/done regarding Ma’aser because giving Ma’aser brings wealth (see Shabbos 119a), and when one is wealthy he can really appreciate “all the good.” Based on this, it can be suggested that the Midrash is telling us that we will be able to “rejoice before G-d” when we bring Bikurim because of “all the good” He bestows upon us for giving Ma’aser properly, which is why Moshe encouraged us to give Ma’aser. [We are still left with the need to explain the connection to Torah. Although Ba’al HaTurim continues by saying that the numerical value (“g’matria”) of “the good” is 22, corresponding to the Torah which was given via 22 letters (the Hebrew alphabet), this only further explains how the word “good” (specifically here, with “the” attached to it) refers to the Torah, not what the connection between Torah and Bikurim (or Ma’aser) is.]

Zeis Ra’anani (a commentary on the Yalkut Shimoni) references D’varim 14:23, which is the verse immediately after the one the Midrash quotes regarding Moshe encouraging us to give Ma’aser (and the same verse used by the Talmud to teach us that if we are diligent with tithes we will become wealthy), which says that by eating Ma’aser Sheini (etc.) “before Hashem your G-d, in the place He will choose” we will “learn to fear Hashem your G-d.” Although ostensibly referenced to connect Ma’aser with Torah because of the word “learn,” unless “learning Torah” is being equated with “learning to fear G-d,” this connection seems a bit tenuous.

One common denominator between Bikurim and Ma’aser is that both require interaction with either Kohanim or Levi’im. [Ma’aser Sheini, which, like Bikurim, must be brought to Y’rushalayim, doesn’t, but in Y’rushalayim there is a much higher concentration of Kohanim and Levi’im than elsewhere, and there is therefore much more interaction with them there. Ma’aser U’hni, which is given to the poor, is usually given to Levi’im because they are usually poor.] Giving Ma’aser to Levi’im (and T’rumah and Bikurim to Kohanim) not only supports those whose lives are dedicated to serving G-d and teaching His people (see D’varim 33:10), and enables them to focus on their spiritual growth in order to best fulfill their roles, but also forces increased interaction between the “teachers” and those they are supposed to teach (much as the need to for fundraising forces Roshei Yeshiva to maintain a connection with their alumni). The connection between “learning to fear G-d” and giving Ma’aser is, to a large extent, based on the spiritual growth attained through the interaction of those who teach Torah with those giving Ma’aser, something that occurs during the bringing of Bikurim as well.

It can therefore be suggested that when the Torah says “you shall rejoice over all the good” regarding Bikurim, since “good” refers to Torah (as

indicated by the Midrash’s proof-text as well as by Ba’al HaTurim gematria), we are being told that when we bring Bikurim we should not only appreciate (and rejoice over) the crops G-d has blessed us with, but also appreciate the opportunity to learn Torah (“all the good”) bringing Bikurim affords. This appreciation is not limited to bringing Bikurim though, as it applies to any situation where we are able to interact with our Torah teachers, such as when we give Ma’aser to the Levi’im, or are in Y’rushalayim where there are so many teachers to interact with.

The Midrash could therefore be read as follows: There are two things in whose merit we are able to rejoice before G-d, Shabbos and Ma’aser, with Ma’aser being a conduit through which we interact with our Torah teachers. The proof-text quoted for Ma’aser is our verse regarding Bikurim, since conceptually they are the same; just as we rejoice over the Torah learned when we bring Bikurim, we rejoice over the Torah learned when we give Ma’aser. The Midrash then brings a proof-text that “the good” referred to in the verse is the Torah we learned through the process of [bringing Bikurim and] giving Ma’aser, before adding that this is why Moshe encouraged the nation to be diligent with Ma’aser, as it brings about increased Torah growth. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

First Impressions

This week’s parsha begins by telling us what will occur when the Jews finally conquer and settle the Land of Canaan. “It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it, and dwell in it” (Deuteronomy 26:13). It relates the mitzvah of Bikurim: “You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there (Deuteronomy 26:2). The bikurim are then presented to the kohen. “You shall come to whomever will be the Kohen in those days, and you shall say to him, “I declare today to Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the Land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us” (Deuteronomy 26:3).

What kind of introductory remark is that? Of course, we come to the land! If we had not arrived, we would not be here! Why then do we tell the kohen that “I declare today that I have arrived”?

As a student in the Ponovez Yeshiva, I would spend some summer days in the resort town of Netanya. One day, I spotted what, to an American seemed like an anomaly: a small Yemenite man, long curly peyos dangling from his darkly tanned olive-skinned face, bouncing up and down as he, dressed in a policeman’s uniform, was directing traffic. I had never

seen an orthodox policeman, let alone one who had dangling side curls. My propensity to talk to fellow Jews and my inherent fascination with curiosities, spurred me to engage him in conversation.

As we talked, he told me about lineage. I mentioned that my name was Kamenetzky, and he froze in disbelief.

"Are you, by any chance, related to the famous Rabbi Kamenetzky of America who recently visited Israel?"

"Do you mean Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky?" I inquired. When he nodded, in excited corroboration, I added, "he is my grandfather." It was as if I had sent a charge of electricity through his body!

He beamed at me. "Do you know that your grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky attended my son's bris, right here in Netanya!"

I did a double take and thought, "Yeah Right! Sure. My 89-year-old grandfather came to Netanya for a Yemenite police officer's son's bris." The man registered my apparent skepticism, and proceeded with the following story. At the time, Kiryat Zanz, the community built by the Klausenberg Rebbe, in Netanya, had recently expanded its medical center. The administrators wanted Rabbi Kamenetzky to see the beautiful facility first hand. The revered sage's endorsement would surely boost their fundraising efforts. They picked Rav Yaakov up from his accommodations in Jerusalem, and drove him to Netanya. Entering the city limits, Rav Yaakov asked, "Are we going to the hospital?"

When the administrators and the driver, affirmed that destination, Rav Yaakov said, "No, we are going to the Rav. When one comes to a town, his first stop is to see the Rav. After we greet the Rav, we will see the hospital."

They went to the home of Rabbi Lau, (Israel's current Chief Rabbi) Rav of Netanya, but he was not there.

At that point in the story, the policeman became excited. "Do you know where Rabbi Lau was?" he beamed.

He did not wait for an answer. "Rabbi Lau was at my son's bris! And a few minutes later, your grandfather arrived as well!"

Imagine. It took the Jews fourteen years to settle and conquer the Land of Canaan. Until they settled, there was no mitzvah to bring bikurim, (first fruits). During all those years, no one had formally presented themselves to the Kohen. They may have gone to Jerusalem for the holidays, or for other occasions, but never was there a formal presentation to the kohen.

Thus, when the simple farmer finally presents himself to the kohen, he uses the words, "I declare, today, to Hashem that I have come." Perhaps the Torah is subtly sending a simple message: "Kohen, now that I

greet you, I declare that I have arrived." Because until you have greeted the kohen, you may have battled. You may have conquered. You may have sown, and you may have reaped. But you have not arrived. © 2001 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

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A Life Lesson

In this week's Torah portion, Moses reminds the Jewish people of the miraculous events they experienced while in Egypt and the desert. And after reiterating all that occurred, Moses adds: "But G-d did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day." (Deuteronomy, 29:3)

Even though the Jewish people had all personally experienced all the phenomenal miracles first-hand, Moses declared that they actually didn't actually know, see or hear any of it until right now. The reason behind Moses saying this will prove to be a powerful gateway in our own lives.

How many times have you looked back on some of your previous behavior in complete awe and astonishment as to how it was you could have acted a certain way? Just about all of us who look at a picture of our hairstyle in our high school or college yearbook will shriek, "What was I thinking?!"

The reason there is such a difference in how we view things now as opposed to how we saw them when they were unfolding is that all of our actions in the past were based upon the life experiences we had until that point. So years later -- after having experienced and lived through so much more -- we now have entirely new and different frame of reference upon which to base our decisions. And these decisions will often be radically different than the ones we initially made.

Moses wanted the Jewish people to understand this life-changing principle. Even though they had all witnessed and lived through countless miracles, in the future they'll always have more and more life experiences to add into their mental equation as they reflect on these memories. And this means they'll probably have a lower level of belief and conviction as to G-d's presence than they have right now.

The fact is, the moment something happens in our lives, we all have crystal clear clarity as to what has just occurred. But as time goes by, we look back on these same events with a new perspective and can dramatically change our belief of these events. We now have more experiences in our lives and will therefore look at back with an entirely different set of eyes than we had when those events first happened.

There are times when we have seen G-d's hand so clearly in our lives. We feel G-d totally in control and guiding us in the right direction. But as time goes on, we forget the solid, strong and unwavering belief we had.

Moses didn't want the Jewish people ever to look back on the miraculous events they experienced and lose the awesome clarity they had of G-d's existence and the love He has for them.

And that's the life-changing message for all of us. Think back to a time in your life when you knew G-d performed a miracle for you. And as you reflect on this event, also know that "G-d did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day." It's when you're able to bridge the natural gap in your belief and trust in G-d from where you are today to how you felt back then, that you truly will have embraced Moses' instructions and be able to live each day in an unbelievable, blissful spiritual reality. ©2008 A. Liberman & aish.com

RAV SHLOMO WOLBE Z"L

Bais Hamussar

A large portion of this week's parsha is dedicated to the tochacha (chastisement). Ninety-eight curses in all are spelled out for those who fail to abide by Hashem's commandments. It is scary to read it and even scarier to know that these prophecies all came true when the curses materialized into a reality during the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdosh (see Ramban to Vayikra 26:16). The severity of middas ha'din is overwhelming and one must stop and ask, "What could possibly be the reason behind all these calamities?"

Rav Wolbe (Daas Shlomo) explains that the world was created with an option for wickedness and iniquity. Our goal is to remain righteous despite the many challenges, temptations and enticements offered by the various evil forces present in the world. When one strays from the proper course, the purpose of middas ha'din is to alert the transgressor that he has veered from the beaten path.

Dovid Hamelech declared, "The judgments of Hashem are true, altogether righteous" (Tehillim 19:10). Rav Wolbe explains that just as this declaration refers to the rulings and penalties found in the Torah, it applies as well to Hashem's judgments manifested through middas ha'din. The numerous persecutions and expulsions which the Jewish People have suffered over the past two and half millennia are actually the very secret of their survival (Rashi to Devarim 29:12).

Rav Wolbe related a most astounding conversation he once had. He was talking to a man who was in Auschwitz and worked near the gas chambers for two years. This man had the terrible misfortune of witnessing complete transports of Jews being led to their deaths. He related that many of the Jews barely even knew that they were Jewish but every single Jew, without exception, cried out at the last second, "Shema Yisrael!" Jews who, had their lives continued peacefully, would have had no chance of earning a proper portion in the next world, due to

middas ha'din earned themselves a ticket to Olam Habba in their last moments of life! While it does not explain all the atrocities that occurred, it gives us a whole new outlook on middas ha'din.

It drives home the reality that we have no way of comprehending the depth of Heavenly calculations.

Although middas ha'din also strikes the other nations of the world, there is a fundamental difference between their punishments and the punishments meted out to the Jewish Nation. Other nations suffer from middas ha'din only after the fact. When they have already failed their purpose in creation and lost their right of survival, Hashem metes out a punishment that obliterates them from the face of the earth. In contrast, the Jewish Nation is castigated and disciplined before things get too out of hand. The result is that we are punished more than once, but this suffering is the key to our continuity.

The Yomim Ha'Noraim were given to us to prompt us to evaluate if we have veered from the proper path and enable us to straighten ourselves out should the need arise.

This yearly occasion prevents the buildup of sin and enables us to start each year with a clean slate. Take a moment to review the various manifestations of middas ha'din this past year: the Har Nof massacre, the Sasson Family tragedy, the Arab hostilities worldwide to mention a few. These jolts might very well have been sent to prompt us to improve our davening, Shabbos observance or our relationships *bein adam l'chaveiro*.

Chazal tell us (Megillah 31b) that we read the curses in parshas Ki Savo before Rosh Hashana so that "the year and all its curses should end." Our heartfelt tefillah to Hashem is to please put an end to the tragedies -- but allow their message to remain. We have an opportunity to clear the slate and start anew. Let us grab the opportunity and run with it before these holy days are behind us! ©2015 Rav S. Wolbe & The AishDas Society



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