

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Howard Gardner, professor of education and psychology at Harvard University, is one of the great minds of our time. He is best known for his theory of “multiple intelligences,” the idea that there is not one thing that can be measured and defined as intelligence but many different things – one dimension of the dignity of difference. He has also written many books on leadership and creativity, including one in particular, *Leading Minds*, that is important in understanding this week’s parsha.¹

Gardner’s argument is that what makes a leader is the ability to tell a particular kind of story – one that explains ourselves to ourselves and gives power and resonance to a collective vision. So Churchill told the story of Britain’s indomitable courage in the fight for freedom. Gandhi spoke about the dignity of India and non-violent protest. Margaret Thatcher talked about the importance of the individual against an ever-encroaching State. Martin Luther King told of how a great nation is colour-blind. Stories give the group a shared identity and sense of purpose.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has also emphasised the importance of narrative to the moral life. “Man,” he writes, “is in his actions and practice as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” It is through narratives that we begin to learn who we are and how we are called on to behave. “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”² To know who we are is in large part to understand of which story or stories we are a part.

The great questions – “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our task?” – are best answered by telling a story. As Barbara Hardy put it: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a

metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time, from Abraham and Sarah’s journey from Mesopotamia to Moses’ and the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert. Judaism is less about truth as system than about truth as story. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.

A large part of what Moses is doing in the book of Devarim is retelling that story to the next generation, reminding them of what God had done for their parents and of some of the mistakes their parents had made. Moses, as well as being the great liberator, is the supreme storyteller. Yet what he does in parshat Ki Tavo extends way beyond this.

He tells the people that when they enter, conquer and settle the land, they must bring the first ripened fruits to the central sanctuary, the Temple, as a way of giving thanks to God. A Mishnah in Bikkurim³ describes the joyous scene as people converged on Jerusalem from across the country, bringing their first-fruits to the accompaniment of music and celebration. Merely bringing the fruits, though, was not enough. Each person had to make a declaration. That declaration became one of the best known passages in the Torah because, though it was originally said on Shavuot, the festival of first-fruits, in post-biblical times it became a central element of the Haggadah on seder night: My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there, few in number, there becoming a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5-8)

Here for the first time the retelling of the nation’s history becomes an obligation for every citizen of the nation. In this act, known as vidui bikkurim, “the



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¹ Howard Gardner in collaboration with Emma Laskin, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

³ Mishnah Bikkurim ch. 3.

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confession made over first-fruits,” Jews were commanded, as it were, to become a nation of storytellers.

This is a remarkable development. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi tells us that, “Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”⁴ Time and again throughout Devarim comes the command to remember: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt.” “Remember what Amalek did to you.” “Remember what God did to Miriam.” “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.”

The vidui bikkurim is more than this. It is, compressed into the shortest possible space, the entire history of the nation in summary form. In a few short sentences we have here “the patriarchal origins in Mesopotamia, the emergence of the Hebrew nation in the midst of history rather than in mythic prehistory, slavery in Egypt and liberation therefrom, the climactic acquisition of the land of Israel, and throughout – the acknowledgement of God as lord of history.”⁵

We should note here an important nuance. Jews were the first people to find God in history. They were the first to think in historical terms – of time as an arena of change as opposed to cyclical time in which the seasons rotate, people are born and die, but nothing really changes. Jews were the first people to write history – many centuries before Herodotus and Thucydides, often wrongly described as the first historians. Yet biblical Hebrew has no word that means “history” (the closest equivalent is *divrei hayamim*, “chronicles”). Instead it uses the root *zachor*, meaning “memory.”

There is a fundamental difference between history and memory. History is “his story,”⁶ an account of events that happened sometime else to someone

⁴ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Schocken, 1989, 9.

⁵ Yerushalmi, *ibid.*, 12.

⁶ This is a simple reminder not an etymology. *Historia* is a Greek word meaning inquiry. The same word comes to mean, in Latin, a narrative of past events.

else. Memory is “my story.” It is the past internalised and made part of my identity. That is what the Mishnah in Pesachim means when it says, “Each person must see themselves as if he (or she) personally went out of Egypt.”⁷

Throughout Devarim Moses warns the people – no less than fourteen times – not to forget. If they forget the past they will lose their identity and sense of direction and disaster will follow. Moreover, not only are the people commanded to remember, they are also commanded to hand that memory on to their children.

This entire phenomenon represents a remarkable cluster of ideas: about identity as a matter of collective memory; about the ritual retelling of the nation’s story; above all about the fact that every one of us is a guardian of that story and memory. It is not the leader alone, or some elite, who are trained to recall the past, but every one of us. This too is an aspect of the devolution and democratisation of leadership that we find throughout Judaism as a way of life. The great leaders tell the story of the group, but the greatest of leaders, Moses, taught the group to become a nation of storytellers.

You can still see the power of this idea today. As I point out in my book *The Home We Build Together*, if you visit the Presidential memorials in Washington you will see that each one carries an inscription taken from their words: Jefferson’s ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .’, Roosevelt’s ‘The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself’, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and his second Inaugural, ‘With malice toward none; with charity for all . . .’ Each memorial tells a story.

London has no equivalent. It contains many memorials and statues, each with a brief inscription stating who it represents, but there are no speeches or quotations. There is no story. Even the memorial to Churchill, whose speeches rivalled Lincoln’s in power, carries only one word: Churchill.

America has a national story because it is a society based on the idea of covenant. Narrative is at the heart of covenantal politics because it locates national identity in a set of historic events. The memory of those events evokes the values for which those who came before us fought and of which we are the guardians.

A covenantal narrative is always inclusive, the property of all its citizens, newcomers as well as the home-born. It says to everyone, regardless of class or creed: this is who we are. It creates a sense of common identity that transcends other identities. That is why, for example, Martin Luther King was able to use it to such effect in some of his greatest speeches. He was telling his fellow African Americans to see themselves as an equal part of the nation. At the same time, he was telling white Americans to honour their commitment to

⁷ Mishnah Pesachim 10:5.

the Declaration of Independence and its statement that 'all men are created equal'.

England does not have the same kind of national narrative because it is based not on covenant but on hierarchy and tradition. 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."⁸ England, historically, was a class-based society in which there were ruling elites who governed on behalf of the nation as a whole. America, founded by Puritans who saw themselves as a new Israel bound by covenant, was not a society of rulers and ruled, but rather one of collective responsibility. Hence the phrase, central to American politics but never used in English politics: "We, the people."

By making the Israelites a nation of storytellers, Moses helped turn them into a people bound by collective responsibility – to one another, to the past and future, and to God. By framing a narrative that successive generations would make their own and teach to their children, Moses turned Jews into a nation of leaders. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For I have come to the land which the Lord swore to our forebears to give to us." (Deuteronomy 26:3) When the individual Jew brings the first fruits of the Land of Israel to the Holy Temple on the Festival of Shavuot, he addresses God as if He represents the entire historic People of Israel: "My father (Jacob) was a wandering Aramean... the Egyptians afflicted us the Lord took us out of bondage." And indeed it is true that 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 what of the convert to Judaism who is not a descendant of generations of past Jews? The Mishna teaches (Bikkurim 1,4): "These are the individuals who are responsible to bring [the first fruits], but do not declaim [the entire 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 Amidah] 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 Amidah 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 and Sarah!

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 (MeKitzei 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 is considered to have entered Jewish history, and even to have Abrahamic –Saradic "blood" pulsating through his/her veins. 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 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

⁸ Roger Scruton, England, an Elegy, Continuum, 2006,16.

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 Haim Amsalem (former member of Knesset), 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? Michael Freund, Director of *Shavei Yisrael*, pointed out to me (during an unforgettable trip to India for meetings with the *Benei Menashe*) 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 Sarah and restore them to their land and their Jewish ancestry! ©2019 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Saying thank you is one of the basic courtesies of human interaction. Though elementary and straightforward, it is often forgotten or neglected. In saying thank you, we are acknowledging that we are dependent upon the goodness and consideration of others and that we are not completely in control over events and even of our own decisions in life.

In traditional homes, both Jewish and general, some of the first words that children are taught are “thank you,” “please” and “may I.” In fact, these words are the building blocks of civilized behavior and of being able to get along peacefully and gently in this world. But because of our egotistical nature, as children and later in life as adults, we resent the necessity of having to use these words and to thereby acknowledge our dependence upon others.

It is always ironic that we expect expressions of gratitude from others but are very sparing in granting them ourselves. If this be true, as I feel it is in families and among other relationships, it is also true regarding our relationship to our Creator. The Torah refers to the lack of gratitude as a cardinal sin of personality. It is based in arrogance and a false assessment of one’s place in the world. Therefore, Judaism stresses humility, for only in humility can one expect to find expressions of gratitude.

The Torah reading of this week begins with the necessity for expressions of gratitude for the blessings of a bountiful harvest and the first fruits of the agricultural year. These fruits were to be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem as an offering to the priests serving there and as an acknowledgment of appreciation to God for having provided this bounty to the farmer.

There is no question that the farmer invested a great deal of effort, sweat and toil in bringing his crops to fruition. Because of this effort and the investment on the part of the farmer, there is a temptation that he will view these new fruits as an entitlement. For after all, he was the one who devoted the time and effort necessary to produce them. There is a danger that he will forget that there really are no entitlements in life and that one has to say thank you for everything that is achieved, though ostensibly we have labored to achieve this much desired goal.

Rather, it is incumbent upon the farmer to thank his Creator for the land and the natural miracles that occurred daily in the production of food, grain and fruit. As the old year winds down, we should all remember to say thank you for life, goodness and family, and pray that the new year will bring us more of the same. ©2019 *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*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Eating of the First Fruits

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week’s portion there is reference to the Mitzvah of “Bikurim” (first fruits) and the Mitzvah of “Maaser Sheini” (tithes that one must bring and consume in Yerushalayim). However the Mitzvah of actually eating the “Bikurim” and “Maaser Shani” is found elsewhere. The Mitzvah of eating Bikurim is found in Devarim 12;5,6, and of the eating of “Maaser sheni” in Devarim 14;26.

Since however, both Mitzvot are mentioned in this week’s portion and are in close proximity to each other and have many similarities, our sages learn one from the other with the exception that “Maaser Sheni” is eaten in Yerushalayim by its owners, but the “Bikurim” are presented to the “Kohanim” (priests) when the people arrive in Israel with their first fruits.

The declaration when one brings his “Maaser Sheni” to Yerushalayim is “I have not eaten of it in my intense mourning” which we derive that one must be happy when eating of the “Maaser Sheni” when one comes to Yerushalayim. As well, the Kohen who is receiving the “bikurim” must also be happy and not in a state of mourning. Some derive this from the passage

“And you should be happy because of all the good”.

The Mitzvah of “Bikurim” and all of its requirements, is not only upon an Israelite who brings his fruit to a Kohen, but also is applicable to the Kohen who receives the “Bikurim” and indeed he is required to recite the blessing “Asher kidishanu b’mitzvotav vtzivanu le’echoi Bikurim” (who has commanded one to eat Bikurim) when he receives the “Bikurim”. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVINE

This Day

In Parashat Ki Tavo we find that Moshe concludes the mitzvot of the Torah with the mitzvot of bringing the first fruits to the Temple and the recitation of a declaration that the individual has done as Hashem commanded concerning these first fruits. There is also the declaration of the fulfillment of setting aside the various tithes (terumah, ma’aser, ma’aser sheni, and ma’aser ani) and the specific years in which they were given. The last part of the parasha deals with the blessings and curses which will come to the people depending on whether they observe the mitzvot or abandon them. Sandwiched in between these two sections is a short reminder to the people of their unique relationship with Hashem.

The Torah tells us the words of Moshe, “This day Hashem, your Elokim, commands you to perform these statutes and the laws, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and all your soul. You have distinguished Hashem today to be an Elokim for you and to walk in His ways and to observe his statutes, His commandments, and His laws, and to listen to His voice. And Hashem has distinguished you today to be for Him a treasured people as He spoke to you and to observe all His commandments. And to make you supreme over all the nations that He made, for praise, for renown, and for splendor, and so that you will be a holy people to Hashem, your Elokim, as He spoke.”

Almost all of the commentators ask about the use of the phrase, “this day” in the words of Moshe to observe Hashem’s Torah. There have been nearly forty complete years since the Torah was given on Har Sinai and the B’nei Yisrael were certainly commanded to observe the Torah all of the years in the desert. Most of the commentators explain that the laws of the Torah were incomplete until this final set of laws concerning the first fruits and the declarations to the Kohein were given that day. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that in parshiot R’ei, Shoftim, Ki Teitzi, and part of parashat Ki Tavo, Moshe reviews many of the laws that were found in the previous books of the Torah. These laws were given on Har Sinai and were explained by Moshe during the forty years in the desert. Some wish to say that now Moshe taught the meaning of many of the laws which he had not done earlier.

Another explanation is that Moshe now focused on those laws which until now could not be performed because the B’nei Yisrael were not yet in their land. The Or HaChaim states that all of these laws were given at Sinai but that there were two categories of those laws: mitzvot which could already be practiced at this time (of Sinai) and mitzvot that could only be fulfilled after a time (only when they lived in the land). The Kli Yakar ties this statement into the declaration that occurs in the next few sentences in which Hashem singles out the B’nei Yisrael as His people and they single out Hashem as their G-d. It is because of this act that Hashem can now fully command the people to accept His mitzvot and perform them. Rashi gives us a more esoteric explanation that these words mean that every day we must look upon the mitzvot as if Hashem has commanded us on that day to observe these mitzvot anew.

The Torah here states that there are different kinds of laws: statutes and judgments. The Or HaChaim explains that statutes are laws that do not carry with them any explanation. They are given in such a way as to demand loyalty to Hashem. Judgments are laws which one can understand on his own even if no stated explanation were given. The Or HaChaim explains another kind of law which is a judgment by a court when there is a dispute. The judgment of the court becomes the law in this case even if a mistake was made. Moshe began by stating statutes because he had just finished discussing the laws of first fruits and tithes which carry no explanation of why these portions were brought to the Temple and why the declarations that accompanied them needed to be said.

The Ramban likens this entire section to the B’nei Yisrael at Har Sinai when they heard the word of Hashem and accepted His Torah. Here we see a new generation, the sons of those who left Egypt, hearing a review of the Torah and being told that they will become a treasured nation if they follow the mitzvot of Hashem. Hashem gave these mitzvot to no other nation for He knew that the B’nei Yisrael would preserve these mitzvot even should many within the nation abandon them. There are rewards for observing the mitzvot that accrue to the individual but other rewards that accrue to the nation as a whole. Because we have dedicated ourselves to this task, we become a nation which is kadosh, holy, to Hashem. The word kadosh has another meaning which is “set aside for a special purpose.” The B’nei Yisrael became the one nation which is “set aside” and dedicated to this purpose of Hashem. The ibn Ezra explains that Hashem will make the B’nei Yisrael a nation which is raised high above all the other nations in the world because of this special relationship with Hashem.

We are quickly approaching the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah through

Yom Kippur. This is a time to reevaluate our lives, to judge for ourselves whether we have fulfilled our tasks under our covenant with Hashem. We must acknowledge in our own minds those mitzvot which we fail to observe properly. This is an individual task but it is also a task of the nation. We must search out what we can do as individuals and as a nation to improve ourselves and be worthy of our special relationship with Hashem. We must try to understand what motivates us as individuals and as a nation. We must honestly assess our actions and sincerely judge our motivations. This is the key to Teshuvah, returning to Hashem and His values and placing those values over us so that they will guide our lives properly. Now during the month of Elul, we seek that opportunity to reflect and set our goals for the future. If we each choose to filter our goals through serving Hashem in the way in which He has demonstrated through His mitzvot, we will truly become a unique people dedicated to Hashem. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion includes the law of viduy ma'asrot-confession of the tithes. According to the Torah, tithes are taken from the crops in three year cycles. In each of these two cycles, one-tenth of the produce was given to the Levi who serves in the temple (ma'aser rishon). An additional tenth is consumed in Jerusalem during the first, second, fourth, and fifth years (ma'aser sheni). In the third and sixth year, the second tenth is set aside for the poor (ma'aser ani). After two of these cycles fully take place, the sabbatical year (the seventh year) occurs when no tithe is taken at all.

The law of viduy ma'asrot states that on the last day of Passover, in the fourth and seventh years, the owner of the crops comes forward to declare that during the previous years he had been faithful to his tithe obligation.

In the words of the Torah; "then you shall say before the Lord your God, 'I have removed the holy things from the house (ma'aser sheni) and I also have given it to the Levite (ma'aser rishon), to the proselyte, to the orphan and to the widow (ma'aser ani), according to whatever commandment you have commanded me.'" (Deuteronomy 26:13) Indeed, if the owner has failed to give ma'aser correctly, he has the opportunity to complete the obligation at this time. (Rashi, Deuteronomy 26:13)

Interestingly, although the term viduy, confession, is not found in the Biblical text, these laws are commonly referred to as viduy ma'asrot. What does confession have to do with this practice?

Seforno argues that the confession is not directly linked to the tithe process, but rather with the original sin of the golden calf. Had that event not

occurred, the first born rather than the Priest or Levite would have undertaken the mission to perform divine service in one's home. It follows that only because of the golden calf did the need arise to give to the Priest or Levite.

Another thought comes to mind. It is, of course, possible that upon reciting the formula, one honestly forgot to give ma'aser. Or on the conscious level, there was no intent to violate the law. On the subconscious level, if one didn't give ma'aser, it may show a deep reluctance to part with the produce altogether.

Could it be that ma'aser, the giving of one's produce to others, is deemed so difficult that if missed even once it is suspected that the missing was intentional.

The practice is, therefore, called viduy as each owner comes before God, searching out the inner intent of his soul. If a mistake was made, there is concern that even if on the surface it seemed unintentional, deep down it was intentional.

An appropriate reading just weeks before the introspective days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - where we struggle to be honest with ourselves and discern the fine line between sins committed without intention and those committed with malice. ©2017 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 KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

In this week's Torah portion, "the Almighty lists the many blessings that one receives for fulfilling the mitzvot, the commandments. Unlike other religions which promise reward in the World to Come, the Torah only speaks of this world rewards -- blessings of food in your storehouse, peace from your enemies, healthy offspring."

The Torah goes further than listing the blessings, it states, "And it will come to you all of these blessings and they will reach you, when you listen to the voice of the Almighty, your God" (Deut. 28:2). If the Torah says "and it will come to you," why does it add the seemingly extra words "and they will reach you"?

A person does not always realize what is truly good for him or her and mistakenly runs away from the blessing. Therefore, the Torah guarantees that the blessing will pursue the person and reach him even though he is trying to escape from it. Only after he receives the blessing will he become aware of what is really good for him.

This idea will save a person much suffering. When things happen that seem to be a negative occurrence, be patient before you make a final judgment. As one event leads to another you will

frequently see before your eyes that what you thought was negative in the end turned out to be clearly positive! Be aware of occasions when this already happened to you in the past and then you will be able to internalize this awareness for the future! *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**T**oday I have told Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the land that G-d has sworn to our forefathers would be given to us” (D'varim 26:3). These are the first words spoken by one who brings his "bikurim" (first fruits) to the Temple in Jerusalem (Rambam, Laws of Bikurim 3:10). Or are they? In his commentary on the Mishna (Bikurim 1:1) the Rambam explains the "reading" as starting from "An Arami (referring to Lavan) tried to destroy my father (Yaakov)" (D'varim 26:5). Tosfos Chadishim (Bikurim 3:6) points out that Rabbeinu Ovadia from Bartenura follows the explanation given in Rambam's commentary regarding where the reading starts, despite an explicit Mishna (3:6) saying that it starts from the earlier verse (see also Mishna Rishona on Bikurim 1:1). Which is actually considered the beginning of the Bikurim statement, saying that he has come to the Promised Land or recapping the nation's history?

Additionally, as Rav Moshe Feinstein z"l points out (Darash Moshe 2), the language of that earlier verse seems inaccurate. Why is the farmer saying that he has come to the Land of Israel, when he has already been there for years? This procedure was followed throughout the entire Temple era, even after the Children of Israel had been in the Land of Israel for centuries. Yet each person who brings Bikurim makes it seem as if he just got there! How can we say something that is misleading (even if no one is being misled)?

Another aspect that deserves a closer look (as pointed out by Rav Mordechai Gifter z"l in Pirkay Torah) is that throughout the entire statement, G-d is referred to in the third person (e.g. "He brought us out of Egypt," "He brought us to this place" and "He gave us this land"), until the very last statement, where it switches to the second person ("I have brought the first fruits of the ground which you, G-d, gave to me"). Why is most of the statement of gratitude said in the third person, and only the last line said directly to the One to whom thanks is being given? (Rav Gifter suggests that as we internalize all the things G-d has done for us, and truly appreciate the gifts He has given us (including the produce), we feel closer to Him, including having the sensation that we are standing in His presence.)

One of the purposes of bringing the first fruits to the Temple is to demonstrate our recognition that, despite all the work that was put in, and that the land

has been "owned" by the family for generations, it all came from G-d. Not just the fruits themselves, but the land as well. In order to accomplish this, the farmer must recall the history of the land, and how it didn't always belong to his family. Just as every Pesach we must consider it as if we were slaves in Egypt (even though it happened over 3,000 years ago), the farmer must consider it as if the land has just been given to him. [Rav Yitzchok Sorotzkin (Rinas Yitzchok II) takes it a step further, as we couldn't have gotten to the Promised Land without first leaving Egypt; if we must consider it as if we ourselves have left Egypt, then, by extension, we must consider it as if we ourselves have come to the land.] Just as on Pesach we tell over the story of the Exodus through the Haggada, the farmer has a "haggada" ("higadeti hayom") to tell. Through the process of the Bikurim, the farmer will (hopefully) gain a full appreciation of all that G-d has done for him (and the nation as a whole).

This process starts when the farmer leaves his hometown area, with a whole entourage (Bikurim 3:2-3). When they approached Yerushalayim, they were welcomed by the local leaders, who joined them until they reached the Temple (3:3-4). At this point, the farmer tells the Kohain (see D'varim 26:3) that he has come to the land that G-d had promised to his ancestors. After the Kohain takes the basket of fruit and "places it before G-d's altar" (26:4), the farmer "answers" the rest of his statement of thanks (26:5). What was the farmer "answering"? Rashi says it means raising his voice, indicating that a new stage of the process is starting. Ibn Ezra's first suggestion is that the Kohain asks what it is that the farmer brought; if so, then the "answer" should just be "my first fruit," not a recap of our national history. Perhaps the Kohain questioned how the farmer could think he just entered the land if the nation has already been here for years/decades/centuries. In response (or, according to Rashi, to begin the next stage of the process), the farmer recites a brief history of the nation, recalling what G-d has done for his ancestors, leading up to His giving the Land of Israel to the Children of Israel, indicating that he considers it as if G-d has just given him the land.

The Chinuch says that in order to fully comprehend and feel the impact of the statement, it must be read aloud, as actually saying the words has a far greater effect than just thinking them. But, as Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi points out, the words are being said not to G-d, but to himself. They are a vehicle through which the farmer can fully recognize that the harvest and the land are gifts from G-d. By recalling the history, he gains a perspective of his place in that history, that it was only because of G-d's promise to his ancestors, and His taking the nation out of Egypt and bringing them to the land, that enabled him to have any first fruits in the first place. Since the farmer is not talking

directly to G-d yet, but reviewing why he considers it as if he just came to the Promised Land, G-d is referred to in the third person.

After internalizing this, the farmer then directs his words to G-d Himself, thanking him for all the good He bestowed upon him. (This is similar to our saying "P'sukay d'Zimrah" at the beginning of our morning prayers, to awaken within us an appreciation of Who we are praying to. These "verses of praise" are said about G-d, prior to our addressing G-d directly.)

The process (in Yerushalayim) starts with the farmer saying he has entered the land that G-d had promised to his forefathers, but the "reading" that is designed to bring the farmer to a full appreciation of what G-d has done for him starts with the retelling of the history. Therefore, when the Mishna, and Rambam, refer to the "process" of bringing the Bikurim, the earlier verse is referenced, but when Rambam, and Bartenura, discuss the "reading," they are only referring to the part of the process that starts with the historical overview.

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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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