



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ד Ki Tavo

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By: Rabbi Avi Cohen

Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

In the glorious days of the Holy Temple, every week, in cities all over the Land of Israel, one of the 24 families of Cohanim (and the Levites assigned to them), would meet to travel together to Yerushalayim. There were 24 “Cohen” families (Elazar and Itamar, Aharon’s two sons, had 16 and 8 sons respectively, and each son represented one family). King David arranged that each family serve in the Holy Temple for two weeks out of the year, alternating in a specific sequence determined by lot. King David also divided the Levites into 24 groups by lot, and each Levi group was assigned to one of the Cohen families to sing and help them in the Temple. Thus, when their week came to serve in the Temple, the family of Cohanim and Levites from each city would gather to make the journey to Jerusalem together.

Beginning after the holiday of Shavuot and through the holiday of Sukkot, the Cohanim and Levites would often have guests travelling with them. These were the people fulfilling the mitzvah of bringing their *bikurim* - בכורים (the first fruits) to Jerusalem. They travelled as a group because ברב עם הדרת מלך - the more people who do a mitzvah together, the greater the honor to the King, Hashem.

This is how this week’s portion begins (Deuteronomy 26:1,2):

א) וְהָיָה כִּי תָבוֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְדֹד אֱלֹקֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וַיִּרְשָׁתָהּ וַיֵּשְׁבֶתָ בָּהּ
ב) וְלִקְחָתָּ מִרְאשִׁית כָּל פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תָּבִיא מֵאֲרָצְךָ אֲשֶׁר יְדֹד אֱלֹקֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ
וְשָׂמְתָּ בַטֵּנָא וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְדֹד אֱלֹקֶיךָ לְשִׁבְּן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם

1) And it will be when you enter the land that Hashem your G-d gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it. 2) 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 into a basket and go to the place that Hashem your G-d will choose to make His Name rest there.

The Torah commands each landowner to bring the first of his fruits to the Holy Temple. This is the mitzvah of *bikurim*. The elaborate and joyous festivities in bringing the *bikurim* to Jerusalem occurred as follows:

The mitzvah of *bikurim* applies only to the seven fruits for which the Land of Israel was praised in the verse (Deuteronomy 8:8),

(ח) אֶרֶץ חֵטָה וְשֵׁעֶרָה וְגִפְן וּתְאֵנָה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדִבְשׁ

8) (It is) A land of **wheat, barley, and grapes, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive oil, and (date) honey.**

When the new crop began to emerge and the owner saw the first fruit blossom in his orchard, he would tie a string around it to label it as the first. Then, when that fruit fully developed, he picked it to bring it to Jerusalem. He would do this for all of the seven types of fruit that he grew. The exact mitzvah, *i.e.*, the minimum requirement, calls for only a single piece of fruit: one kernel of wheat or barley, one grape, etc. However, if he wanted to bring more than one of each fruit, he certainly could, and many gladly did. The wealthy people would place their first fruits in gold or silver bowls, whereas the poor would place them in wicker baskets. They would place each one in its own bowl, one bowl inside the other. Barley was on the bottom, then, moving upward, came wheat, olives, dates, pomegranates, and figs. The top bowl would be garnished with clusters of grapes. They also brought two doves and two turtle doves with them. The two doves were placed on the rims of the bowls and brought as sacrifices, and the two turtle doves were carried in their hands and given to the Cohen as a present. Those who lived close to Jerusalem brought fresh fruit, while those who lived far away brought raisins and dried figs.

Whoever had *bikurim* to bring to Jerusalem would bring his fruit and join the Cohanim and Leviim from his city who were travelling to Jerusalem that week. They would sleep in the streets (not entering any houses so as not to become טמא - spiritually unclean, which would prevent them from entering the Holy Temple when they reached their destination).

In the morning, the head of the Cohen family “on call” would gather the travelers to begin their journey with the announcement:

קוּמוּ וְנַעֲלֵה צִיּוֹן אֶל (בַּיִת) ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

“Rise and we will go up to Zion, to the house of Hashem our G-d!”

Leading the troupe was a flutist to create merriment and draw attention to the parade of people on their way to perform the mitzvah of *bikurim*. Next came a cow, its horns plated with gold, and a wreath of olive branches crowning its head. The cow was offered as a קרבן שלמים, a *peace offering*, an integral part of the *bikurim* protocol. The people followed and travelled this way until they reached the outskirts of Jerusalem. As they travelled, they would sing Psalm 122, which begins, שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד שֶׁמְחַתִּי בְּאִמְרֵי לִי בַּיִת יְדוּד גִּלְיָהּ

“A song of ascents, of David: I rejoiced when they told me, ‘let us go to the House of Hashem...’”

From there they sent a messenger to the Holy Temple to inform them that they had arrived with *bikurim*. In the meantime, they beautified the fruit in their baskets by putting the nicest ones on top.

Out of the Holy Temple came a group of Cohanim and sextons equal in number to those bringing their *bikurim*, to greet them and escort them to the Temple. As they proceeded down the streets of Jerusalem making their way to the Temple, all the workmen they passed would

interrupt their work, stand up, and greet the troupe saying, *“Welcome travelers from so and so! You have come in peace!”*

That the workers were required to interrupt their work to greet the group exemplifies how truly important the people bringing *bikurim* were. The general rule is that workers engaged in their work are not even allowed to stand up for a Torah Sage, because stopping work even for a moment causes a loss of work to their boss! Yet, for the people bringing *bikurim*, they are obligated to cease work and stand up.

The flute played until they reached the Temple’s outer courtyard. There they continued Psalm 122 and said, עֲמֻדוֹת הָיוּ רַגְלֵינוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם - *“Our feet stood firm in your gates, Yerushalayim.”*

When they reached the Temple, the owner of the fruit would then put his baskets of fruit on his shoulder and bring them into the outer sanctuary where the altar was. While they traveled, anyone was permitted to carry the bowls or baskets of *bikurim*, but only its owner was permitted to carry it into the Temple. As he carried the fruit from the outer courtyard to the Sanctuary, he would sing Psalm 150, the last Psalm,

א) הַלְלוּ יְהוָה הַלְלוּ אֵל בְּקִדְשׁוֹ הַלְלוּהוּ בְּרַקִיעַ עֵזוֹ

“Halleluyah! Praise Hashem in His Sanctuary, praise Him in the firmament of His Power...,” repeatedly reciting the Psalm until he reached the gates of the Sanctuary where the altar was. He would complete the last verse of the Psalm as he entered the Sanctuary.

ו) כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְהוָה הַלְלוּ יְהוָה

Let all souls praise Hashem, Halleluyah!

As soon as he entered the Sanctuary, the Leviim would begin to sing from Psalm 30.

ב) אֲרוּמְמָךָ יְדוּד כִּי דָלִיתָנִי וְלֹא שָׁמַחַת אִבִּי לִי

“I will exalt You, Hashem, for you have drawn me up, and not let my foes rejoice over me.” All the singing that was done was mandatory and part of the mitzvah. The goal of the singing was to rejoice with the fruit and sing Hashem’s praises.

With the baskets of fruit still on his shoulder, he would begin the mandatory reading for the one who brings *bikurim* (Deuteronomy 26:5-10):

ה) וְעִנִּיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְדֹדְךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲרָמִי אֲבֹד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִם וַיְגַר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מֵעַט
וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וְרַב
ו) וַיִּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה
ז) וַנִּצְעַק אֶל יְדֹדְךָ אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְדֹדְךָ אֶת קִלְנוֹ וַיִּרְא אֶת עַנְיֵנוּ וְאֶת עֲמַלְנוּ וְאֶת
לְחִצְנוּ
ח) וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ יְדֹדְךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה וּבְמָרָא גָּדֹל וּבְאִתּוֹת וּבְמִפְתֵּיִם
ט) וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ
י) וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה הֵבִאתִי אֶת רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי יְדֹדְךָ וְהִנְחִיתוּ לִפְנֵי יְדֹדְךָ
אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי יְדֹדְךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ

5. Then you should call out and say before Hashem your G-d, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather, who descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation – great, strong, and numerous. 6. The Egyptians mistreated and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. 7. 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. 8. Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awe, and with signs and wonders. 9. He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, Hashem!”

(Sound familiar? We read these verses every year from the Haggadah at the seder on Pesach!)

At some point during the reading, the person would take the baskets from his shoulder and hold them by the rim. The Cohen would put his hands under the bowls and, with the owner, wave them back and forth, up and down. This was done twice, after which the owner placed the bowls of fruit next to the altar, and then bowed down. The bikurim fruits were given to the Cohanim who worked there.

They would then sacrifice the doves and the cow that they brought, after which he was free to leave the Holy Temple.

After leaving the Temple, however, the farmer wasn't yet done. He still needed to stay overnight in Jerusalem. He was not permitted to just go home. He had to soak up a little more of the holiness of Jerusalem before setting out on his return journey.

Maimonides writes (Laws of Bikurim 3:14):

נמצאת אומר שהבכורים טעונין שבעה דברים: הבאת מקום, וכלי, קריאה, וקרבן, ושיר, ותנופה, ולינה.

To properly fulfill the mitzvah of bikurim there are seven requirements: 1. Bring it to the proper place 2. in a vessel 3. Recite the paragraph 4. Offer an animal sacrifice 5. Sing 6. Wave it 7. Stay overnight in Jerusalem.

Wow! What a big to-do about a few little fruits! This major annual production involves many people in many different roles, all directing their attention to someone carrying a few little bowls of fruit! What could this be about?

The Sages attribute a very profound meaning to the mitzvah of bikurim. They say;

מדרש רבה בראשית - פרשה א פסקה ד

ר' הונא בשם ר' מתנה אמר בזכות ג' דברים נברא העולם בזכות חלה ובזכות מעשרות ובזכות בכורים... ואין ראשית אלא בכורים שנאמר (שמות כג) ראשית בכורי אדמתך וגו'

Rav Huna quoted Rav Masna to say: *The world was created for bikurim. How do we know this? The first verse in the Torah (Genesis 1:1) says, "Be-reishit bara Elokim" Hashem created the world for "reishit" and bikurim are called "reishit" (Deuteronomy 26:2 above), by this we conclude that the world was created for bikurim.*

The world was created for bikurim - those few fruits brought to Yerushalayim by their growers? What could be the meaning of this?

Our Sages explain how these few fruits epitomize the purpose for creation.

One of the most important qualities or maybe even **the** most important quality that a person must have is הכרת הטוב - *gratitude*. It is essential that a person recognize and acknowledge the good that others do for him. Since nobody owes him anything, yet has elected to bestow kindness upon him out of the goodness of his heart, at least, the recipient owes the bestower a debt of gratitude for what he has done, and a *"Thank you!"* is in order.

Hashem created man to shower him with His sublime goodness. This will bring man the greatest pleasure possible, the likes of which is incomprehensible to us. This perfect pleasure is what awaits our soul after it leaves this world and enters the World to Come. How does man earn that unimaginable pleasure? By recognizing Hashem as his Creator and thanking Him for having created him to receive that great pleasure.

Hence, the primary, deepest and most sincere feelings of gratitude must go to Hashem for having created us, and for giving us life. With

the life that Hashem has given us, we can recognize Him, and earn reward for the World to Come.

Nachmanides (Exodus 13:16) puts it like this.

ולפיכך אמרו (אבות פ"ב מ"א) הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שכולן חמודות וחביבות מאד, שבכל שעה אדם מודה בהן לאלהיו, וכוונת כל המצות שנאמין באלהינו ונודה אליו שהוא בראנו, והיא כוונת היצירה, שאין לנו טעם אחר ביצירה הראשונה, ואין אל עליון חפץ בתחתונים מלבד שידע האדם ויודה לאלהיו שבראו, וכוונת חוממות הקול בתפלות וכוונת בתי הכנסיות וזכות תפלת הרבים, זהו שיהיה לבני אדם מקום יתקבצו ויודו לאל שבראם והמציאם ויפרסמו זה ויאמרו לפניו בריותיך אנחנו

Therefore, our Sages have said (Ethics of the Fathers 2:1) "Be as careful with a seemingly small mitzvah as you are with an important one, because they are all very beloved; Why? Because through performing them, one shows his thanks to Hashem. For the objective behind all the mitzvot is that we should show our belief in Hashem and thank Him for having created us. That is the purpose for creation! There is no other reason for the Creation other than this! Hashem has no benefit from the lowly creatures of this world, except for a person's thanks to Hashem for having created him. The purpose for raising our voices in prayer, and for having Synagogues for people to come together and pray in, is so that people have a place to get together and thank Hashem, Who created them. With this, they publicly proclaim before Hashem, "We are your creations, thank You for having created us!"

The mitzvah of bikurim helps us to acquire the attribute of gratitude. After toiling in the field for months to bring forth the crops, the first sign of success is seen; the first fruit has begun to emerge. This little fruit is very meaningful and precious to its producer. But what is he doing with it? He is taking it to Yerushalayim as a thanksgiving offering

to Hashem! He offers this as a token of his appreciation to Hashem for blessing his handiwork! This is truly a very worthy endeavor.

This is why there is such fanfare in the fulfillment of this mitzvah. All who catch a glimpse of these great people who have gone through so much to express their deep, heartfelt gratitude to Hashem, must be inspired by it, and recognize their personal obligation to do the same and thank Hashem for all that they have! This mitzvah is designed to be contagious and affect as many people as possible and spark feelings of gratitude for Hashem within them. With this, we fulfill the purpose for creation.

There is yet another benefit to this mitzvah.

Upon entering the Land of Israel after 40 years of traveling in the wilderness, life for the Jewish people would undergo a major change from life as they knew it. No longer would they find their daily food right outside their door in the form of mana. No longer would they drink water from the miraculous well that travelled with them. No longer would their clothes grow with them and their shoes not wear out. And no longer would they be protected from the elements by a cover of clouds. Life in Israel meant receiving one's daily bread through hard work, the conventional methods of planting and harvesting the crop that grew from one's own planting.

This presented a problem. In the desert, there was no question as to where their sustenance and life-giving needs came from - directly from Hashem. There was no other option; they saw it clearly every day with their own eyes. But in Israel, they would have to work the land themselves and harvest the crops that they planted. This could lead them to think that they alone were the source of their sustenance and that they no longer needed Hashem. They could forget that the source of their success is still Hashem Who blesses their handiwork allowing it

to produce fruit. Hashem is there making it rain, bringing the sunshine, and all the other elements seeds need to grow into crops. He also protects the crops from any crop “killers” that could destroy a healthy yield.

To counter this problem, the Torah gave us the mitzvah of *bikurim*. A farmer has a difficult life. He must work very hard to prepare the land for the crop, plant the crop, fertilize it, weed it, water it appropriately, and then wait patiently to see if his hard work paid off and produced a suitable crop. There are no guaranties. After waiting for a few months, when a fruit finally emerges, the tendency of the farmer would be to cherish that first fruit and eat it at a special time. This is the fruit that signaled that year’s successful crop. But instead, the Torah tells us to save that fruit, bring it to the Holy Temple, and give it as a present to the Cohen. Why would a person do that?

The mitzvah of *bikurim* comprises two of the Torah’s 613 mitzvot (commandments): #91 – מצות הבאת ביכורים - The Mitzvah to bring the *bikurim* to the Temple, and #406 – מצות קריאה על הבכורים - The mitzvah to read the paragraph in the Temple upon bringing the *bikurim*.

The Holy Temple is the source of all blessing in the world. It is through the Temple that Hashem channels His blessing into the world, much like the umbilical cord channels the oxygen and nutrients to the child in utero. (Today it is our prayers three times a day which substitute for the sacrifices that were brought daily in the Temple.) The Cohanim are Hashem’s loyal servants in His Holy Temple. By bringing his first fruits to the Temple, the farmer expresses his acknowledgement that his crops’ success comes from Hashem. And he has come here, the place where Hashem dwells, so to speak, to express his gratitude and thanks for the blessings that Hashem has bestowed upon him. He is excited to show Hashem that he realizes that He is the source of all his success, not his

excellent farming skills. His journey to the Holy Temple with his baskets of fruit serves as a reminder to all who see him that they are also the recipients of Hashem's great goodness.

Even the workers must interrupt their work to acknowledge the person bringing *bikurim* to Jerusalem because there is a profound message here for them, too: You have a job and work for a living, but never forget that it is Hashem's goodness that gave you the knowledge and skill that you use to perform your craft. Never forget that it is Hashem Who has given you favor in your boss's eyes that he hired you in the first place. Never forget that it is Hashem's blessing that has given your efforts success. There is no more important a message for a Jewish person than this one.

The second mitzvah – the reading of the verses – adds depth and understanding to the acknowledgment of Hashem as his benefactor, and, while holding his basket of first fruit, he expresses his gratitude in words.

5. Then you should call out and say before Hashem your G-d,

I am expressing my thanks to Hashem for His kindness to me. I am not an ingrate.

“An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather.

This is a reference to the story in the Torah when Yaakov and his fledgling family ran away from Lavan, his father-in-law, who had every intention to kill Yaakov and his entire family. Unbeknownst to Yaakov, Hashem came to Lavan in his dream and warned him not to touch Yaakov or he will suffer the consequences. Lavan changed his tune, and when he caught up with Yaakov did not harm him. Had the Torah not revealed that Hashem appeared to Lavan in his dream, we would never know that Lavan intended to kill Yaakov and his whole family, and that

Hashem saved them from certain death by appearing to Lavan in his dream.

In the same sense, Hashem is behind the scenes putting all the necessary components for a successful crop in place without anyone seeing it happen.

This message is true not only of one's crops, but also of a myriad of other events in one's life that go swimmingly well or don't crash. Hashem is working His magic behind the scenes, helping us at every turn, yet we have no obvious clue.

With the *bikurim*, the farmer expresses his gratitude to Hashem for all the hidden miracles that He performed for him to bring forth his new crop.

He (Yaakov) descended to Egypt and sojourned there,

Not to settle permanently, but only to sojourn there for a limited time. The appropriate place for a Jewish family is in Israel where they can keep the laws of the Torah freely.

few in number, and there he became a nation – great, strong and numerous.

Here Hashem saved us from assimilating into the Egyptian nation.

6. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. 7. 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 is our savior and Hashem is our benefactor. It is none of our own handiwork that is responsible for our success.

8. Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awe, and with signs and with wonders.

Through the miracles and the 10 plagues that Hashem performed for us in Egypt, we saw Him with our own eyes. We saw His might and His wonder! Through that, we also know that even though He is in “stealth mode,” He still controls everything from behind the scenes, and we can easily see His miraculous handiwork if we wish to.

9. He brought us to this place and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

He brought us to the Land of Israel after 40 years of miraculous existence in a hostile wilderness. Manna from heaven, water from a stone, and protection from clouds. Wow!

10. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me O Hashem!”

I have brought my most precious first fruits to the Holy Temple to acknowledge Your goodness to me and to thank You for it.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, these two ideas about *bikurim*, (1) Appreciating the gift of life and thanking Hashem for creating us, (2) appreciating that all the blessing in our lives comes from Hashem, are very relevant. Here we are after a whole year of goodness bestowed upon us by Hashem. Acknowledging Hashem as the source of our blessing and thanking Him for it is, in and of itself, the greatest source of blessing. When Hashem sees that we appreciate what He has done and continues to do for us, and that we are connected to Him through it, He will want to give us even more to deepen our relationship with Him. The time is ripe for us to look into our lives and ponder deeply all of the great good that Hashem does for us and carefully thank Him for it.

We should even use this inspiration as a tool to motivate us to serve Hashem more faithfully. After all, it is the least we can do to show Him

our gratitude. “Hashem, You do so much for me, *what can I do for You?*” If we say to Hashem that we wish to serve Him better in the year to come, Hashem will surely bless us all with a healthy, happy new year so that we can fulfill our pledge!