

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Ki Tavo

Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

Moses instructs the people of Israel: When you **enter the land** that G-d is giving to you as your eternal heritage, and you settle it and cultivate it, bring the **first-ripened fruits** (*bikkurim*) of your orchard to the Holy Temple, and declare your **gratitude** for all that G-d has done for you.

Our Parshah also includes the laws of the **tithes** given to the Levites and to the poor, and detailed instructions on how to proclaim the blessings and the **curses** on Mount Grizzim and Mount Ebal -- as discussed in the beginning of the Parshah of **Re'ei**. Moses reminds the people that they are G-d's **chosen people**, and that they, in turn, have chosen **G-d**.

The latter part of Ki Tavo consists of the *Tochachah* ("Rebuke"). After listing the blessings with which G-d will **reward** the people when they follow the laws of the Torah, Moses gives a long, harsh account of the **bad things** -- illness, famine, poverty and **exile** -- that shall befall them if they abandon G-d's commandments.

Moses concludes by telling the people that only today, **forty years** after their birth as a people, have they attained "a **heart to know, eyes to see, and ears to hear**."



Ki Tavo

Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8
Summary and Commentary

"When you come in to the land," opens the Parshah of Ki Tavo, "...You shall take of the

first of all the fruit of the land... and put it in a basket; and you shall go to the place which the L-rd your G-d will choose to place His name there..."

Upon presenting the *bikkurim* ("first ripened fruits") at the Holy Temple, the Jewish farmer makes a

Commentary

first of all the fruit: *You shall take of the first of all the fruit of the land... (Deuteronomy 26:2)*

Everything that is for the sake of G-d should be of the best and most beautiful. When one builds a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than his own dwelling. When one feeds the hungry, he should feed him of the best and sweetest of his table. When one clothes the naked, he should clothe him with the finest of his clothes. Whenever one designates something for a holy purpose, he should sanctify the finest of his possessions; as it is written (Leviticus 3:16), "The choicest to G-d." (Maimonides)

The rule, "the choicest to G-d," applies in all areas of life. If the school day must include both sacred and secular studies, the former should be scheduled for the morning hours when the mind is at its freshest and most receptive. If one's talents are to be divided between two occupations, one whose primary function is to pay the bills and a second which benefits his fellow man, he should devote his keenest abilities to the latter.

In devoting the "first-ripened fruits" of his life to G-d, a person, in effect, is saying: "Here lies the focus of my existence. Quantitatively, this may represent but a small part of what I am and have; but the purpose of everything else I do and possess is to enable this percentile of spirit to rise above my matter-clogged life." (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

You shall take of... the fruit of the land (26:2)

Not all fruits are subject to the mitzvah of *bikkurim* ("firstfruits") -- only those from the Seven Species [for which the land of Israel is praised]. Here, in our verse, it says the word *eretz* ("land"), and there (in Deuteronomy 8:8), it says, "A land of wheat and barley, vines and figs and pomegranates, a land of oil-producing olives and honey[-producing dates]." Just as the earlier verse (Deut. 8:8) is referring to the seven species through which Eretz Israel is praised, here too, the fruits of which the verse speaks are those with which the Land is praised. (Talmud; Rashi)

declaration avowing his gratitude for all that G-d has done for His people:

And you shall speak and say before the L-rd your G-d:

An Arammian nomad was my father, and he went down to Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous.

And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us; and they laid upon us hard bondage.

And we cried to G-d, the G-d of our fathers; and G-d heard our voice, and He looked on our pain and our toil and our oppression.

Commentary

Arammian: *An Arammian nomad was my father... (26:5)*

This phrase -- *Arammi oved avi* -- also translates as "The Arammian [sought to destroy] my father," and is interpreted as a reference to Laban the Arammite's attempts to harm Jacob. Thus we read in the Passover Haggadah (which devotes several pages to commentary on the *bikkurim* declaration): "Go out and see what Laban the Arammite wanted to do to Jacob our Father! Pharaoh condemned only the males, while Laban wished to uproot all."

A number of interesting explanations are proposed by the various commentaries as to when and how Laban endeavored to destroy the people of Israel. The most basic explanation is that it refers to his desire to compel Jacob to remain with him in Charan, or at least leave his wives and 11 sons there, claiming (Genesis 31:43), "The daughters [i.e., Leah and Rachel] are my daughters, the sons are my sons, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine..." Had he succeeded, G-d forbid, there would have been no Jewish people.

Another explanation is that it refers to his plot to poison Eliezer and thus prevent Rebecca's marriage to Isaac (in which case Jacob would never have been born. -- see the account of Eliezer's mission to Charan in the Parshah of Chayei Sarah). Yet another thesis is that it was Laban's deception of Jacob in marrying him first to Leah, instead of Jacob's chosen bride Rachel which created the situation in which Jacob regarded Joseph as his true first born and the leader amongst his sons, when, in truth, the leadership belonged to Leah's children. This led to the tragic schism which rent the Jewish people in two for much of their history.

And G-d brought us **out of Egypt** with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great awe; and with signs, and with wonders.

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

And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land, which You, O G-d, have given me.

And you shall set it before the L-rd your G-d, and worship before the L-rd your G-d. And you shall rejoice in **every good thing** which the L-rd your G-d has given you, and your household -- you and the Levite and the stranger that is among you.

Clearing the Tithes

Commentary

toil: And He looked on our pain and our toil (26:7)

"Our pain" -- this is the disruption of marital life; "our toil" -- these are the children. (Passover Haggadah)

out of Egypt: And He brought us to this place, and gave us this land (26:9)

Should not the order be reversed? The Holy Temple was built by King Solomon in Jerusalem hundreds of years after the Children of Israel took possession of the land under Joshua. The correct order should therefore be, "He gave us this land, and He brought us to this place"!

But here we have an allusion to that which the Targum Yonatan relates: that on the first Passover (while still in Egypt) the Children of Israel were carried on "wings of eagles" (see Exodus 19:4) to the Temple Mount, where they brought the Passover offering. (Etz Chaim)

every good thing: You and the Levite and the stranger (26:11)

When one eats and drinks [on the festivals], one must also feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and the other unfortunate paupers. But one who locks the doors of his courtyard and feasts and drinks with his children and wife but does not feed the poor and the embittered -- this is not the joy of mitzvah but the joy of his stomach...

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Festivals 6:18)

The law of *bikkurim* is followed by the rules governing the separation of the various tithes the Jewish farmer sets aside from his crop (for the Levite, the poor, and for his own consumption in the holy city of Jerusalem. Every three years, any undistributed tithes must be "cleared from the house." Like the bringing of *bikkurim*, this, too, is accompanied with a "declaration":

When you have made an end of tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing; and you have given it the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your gates, and be replete--

You shall then declare before the L-rd your G-d:

I have removed the hallowed things out of my house, and also have given them to the Levite, and to the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed your commandments, neither have I forgotten them.

I have not eaten of it in my mourning, neither have I consumed any part of it when unclean, nor given of it for the dead; but I have hearkened to the voice of G-d my G-d, and have done according to all that You have commanded me.

Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel, and the land which You have given us, as You did swear to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Mutual Regard

This day G-d your G-d has commanded you to do these statutes and judgments; you shall keep them and do them with all your heart, and with all your soul.

You have avouched G-d this day to be your G-d, and to walk in His ways, and to keep His decrees,

Commentary

You have avouched: You have avouched G-d this day to be your G-d... And G-d has avouched you this day to be a people for His own possession... (26:17-18)

It happened that Miriam the daughter of Tanchum was taken into captivity, she and her seven sons. What did the tyrant do? He imprisoned each one separately from the others. He brought out the first son and said to him: "Bow to the idol, as did your brother." Said he: "G-d forbid! My

and His commandments, and His judgments, and to hearken to His voice.

Commentary

brother did not bow, and neither shall I." "Why not?" "Because it is written in our Torah (Exodus 20:2), 'I am the L-rd your G-d.'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the second son and said to him: "Bow to the idol..." and so on. [He, too, refused] "Because it is written in our Torah (Exodus 20:3), 'You shall have no [other god before Me].'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the third son [who refused] "Because it is written in our Torah (Exodus 22:19), 'One who slaughters [sacrifices] to alien gods shall be destroyed.'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the fourth son [who refused] "Because it is written in our Torah (Exodus 34:14), 'You shall not bow to a strange G-d.'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the fifth son [who refused] "Because it is written in our Torah (Deuteronomy 4:39), 'Know this day, and consider it in your heart [that G-d, He is G-d in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is nothing else].'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the sixth son [who refused] "Because it is written in our Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4), 'Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one.'" The king commanded that he be killed.

He brought out the seventh son, who was the youngest of them all. [He, too, refused to bow to the idol, saying:] "We have already sworn to our G-d that we shall not exchange Him for another deity, as it is written (Deuteronomy 26:17) 'You have avouched G-d this day to be your G-d.' And just as we have sworn to Him, so has He sworn to us that He shall not exchange us for another people, as it is written (Deuteronomy 26:18) 'And G-d has avouched you [this day to be a people for His own possession].'"

Said the king to the child: "If so, I shall throw this ring before the idol, and you go retrieve it -- so that it should be said that you obeyed the ruler and bowed to the idol."

Said the child: "Woe to you, ruler! If you, who are yourself flesh and blood, fear flesh and blood like yourself, I should not fear the King of all Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He, King of the Universe...?"

The king commanded that he be killed... The sages calculated the years of that child, and found them to be no more than two years, six months, and two and one half hours... (Yalkut Shimoni)

And G-d has avouched you this day to be **a people** for His own possession, as He has promised you; and that you should keep all His commandments.

And to make you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, and in name, and in glory; and that you be a holy people to the L-rd your G-d, as He has spoken.

Inscribing the Torah

Moses then instructs the people on the particulars of the **special "swearing in" ceremony** -- mentioned earlier in the Parshah of Re'eh -- which they will conduct when they enter the Promised Land under the leadership of his disciple, Joshua.

A special altar, build from twelve stones (representing the 12 tribes of Israel) taken from the Jordan River, should be constructed on Mount Ebal; the stones should be plastered over, "And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah very plainly."

Commentary

a people: *This day you have become a people (27:9)*

The Jewish people are unique among the peoples of the world: their nationhood was forged not at the point at which they gained their own land, or developed a common language or culture, but on the day on which they pledged to uphold the Torah... (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch)

special "swearing in" ceremony: *The following shall stand upon Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon... (27:12)*

Six tribes ascended to the top of Mount Gerizim, and six to the top of Mount Ebal; the Kohanim, the Levites and the Ark stood below in the valley.

The Levites turned their faces towards Mount Gerizim and began with the blessing: "Blessed be the man who does not make a graven or molten image...", and both the tribes on Mount Gerizim [the tribes on Mount Ebal] answered "Amen!" Then the Levites turned their faces towards Mount Ebal and began with the curse, saying: "Cursed be the man who makes any graven [or molten] image...", and both groups of tribes responded "Amen!"... Thus it continued in this manner for all of the blessings and curses, until the very last curse, namely (verse 26): "Cursed be the one who does not uphold [the words of this Torah]..." (Talmud, Sotah 32a)

The twelve tribes then divided into two groups: Shimon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin positioned themselves on Mt. Gerizzim, while Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali faced them across the valley on the opposite Mt. Ebal. The blessings (for those who uphold the Torah) and curses (for those who violate it) were then pronounced -- the blessings upon Mt. Gerizzim, and the curses upon mount Ebal.

Reward and Rebuke

Moses proceeds to spell out the **blessings** of a life in harmony with the divine will:

And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently to the voice of G-d your G-d, to observe and to do all His commandments which I command you this day; that G-d your G-d will set you on high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall befall you, and overtake you, if you shall hearken to the voice of G-d your G-d.

Blessed shall you be **in the city**, and blessed shall you be in the field.

Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts; the offspring increase of your cattle, and the young of your sheep.

Commentary

blessings: *And all these blessings shall befall you, and overtake you (28:2)*

Even if you fail to recognize the blessings as such and run away from them, they will pursue you... (Shaar Bat Rabbim)

in the city: *Blessed be you in the city, and blessed be you in the field... (28:3)*

In other words, don't be "a tzaddik in a fur coat"; rather, your goodness should influence your surroundings, in the "city" and the "field."

(There are two ways to get warm on a cold winter day -- build a fire, which warms everyone else in the room as well, or wrap yourself in furs, which conserves your own warmth but does not generate any heat or warm anyone else. Thus Chassidim would refer to a righteous person whose only concern is with his own righteousness as "a tzaddik in a fur coat.") (Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa)

Blessed shall be your basket and your store.

Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be **when you go out**.

G-d shall cause your enemies that rise up against you to be smitten before your face; on one road shall they come out against you one way, and on seven roads shall they flee before you.

G-d shall command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you set your hand unto; and He shall bless you in the land which G-d your G-d gives you.

G-d shall establish you a holy people to Himself, as He has sworn to you; if you shall keep the commandments of G-d your G-d, and walk in His ways.

And all people of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of G-d; and they shall be afraid of you.

And G-d shall make you plenteous in goods, in the fruit of your womb, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your soil, in the land which G-d swore to your fathers to give you.

G-d shall open to you His good treasure, the heaven, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, and you shall not borrow.

And G-d shall make you the head, and not the tail; and you shall be above only, and you shall not be beneath; if you hearken to the commandments of G-d your G-d, which I command you this day, to observe and to do them. And you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.

Commentary

when you go out: *Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out (28:6)*

May your departure from the world be as free of sin as was your entry into the world. (Talmud; Rashi)

The very opposite, however, shall come to pass, "if you will not hearken to the voice of G-d your G-d, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you this day. These curses shall come upon you, and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field..." and so on.

After spelling out the flip-side of the enumerated blessings, Moses launches into an even more detailed account (called **The Rebuke**) of the terrible calamities destined to befall the errant people -- ninety-eight "**curses**" in all, including the horrible

Commentary

The Rebuke: ... *Because you did not serve G-d with happiness and with gladness of heart, in abundance of everything; therefore, you shall serve your enemies...* (28:47-48)

Because you did not serve G-d when you enjoyed happiness and the abundance of all good things, you shall now suffer want. (Rashi)

Not only did you sin, you did so "with happiness and with gladness of heart" -- for this the punishment is doubly severe. (Maayanah Shel Torah)

Even though you served G-d, you did not serve him with joy -- that is the source of all afflictions. (Ari)

Just like in the case of two people wrestling, each trying to throw down the other, if one of them moves with sloth and lethargy, he will be easily defeated and felled, even if he is stronger than his fellow. So, too, in battling one's evil inclination, one can prevail over it ... only with alacrity that comes from joy and from a heart that is free and cleansed from every trace of worry and sadness... (Tanya)

curses: *It shall come to pass, if you will not hearken to the voice of G-d... that all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you...* (28:15)

It was the custom of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi to officiate as the "reader" (*baal korei*) of the weekly Torah reading in his synagogue. One year, the Rebbe was away from home on the Shabbat on which the section of *Ki Tavo* (Deuteronomy 26-29) is read. In the Rebbe's absence, someone else did the reading.

That week, Rabbi Schneur Zalman's son, DovBer, who was about twelve years old at the time, was so affected by the "curses" of the Rebuke that he developed a heart ailment. Three weeks later, when Yom Kippur came around, he was still so weak that his father was hesitant to allow him to fast.

scene (which came to pass during the siege of Jerusalem) of fathers and mothers eating the flesh of their children in their desperate hunger.

The Time of Recognition

And Moses called to all Israel, and said to them:

You have seen all that G-d did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land. The great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles.

Yet G-d has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, **until this very day...**

Keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do

Commentary

When the young DovBer was asked, "But don't you hear the Rebuke every year?", he replied: "When father reads, one does not hear curses."

until this very day: Melancholy is not a sin. But the spiritual damage which melancholy can cause, the gravest of sins cannot cause. (Chassidic saying)

G-d has not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this very day (29:3)

This teaches us that a person does not comprehend the mind of his master until after forty years. (Talmud)

CROSSING THE BORDER

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

"I offer thanks to You, O living and everlasting king, for having restored my soul within me; great is Your faithfulness."

Our first conscious act of the day is to avow our indebtedness and gratitude to our Creator. As soon as we wake from sleep, before getting out of bed or even washing our hands, we recite the above-quoted lines of the *Modeh Ani* prayer, acknowledging that it is He who grants us life and being every moment of our existence.

The ideas contained in the ostensibly simple lines of *Modeh Ani* fill many a profound chapter in the legal, philosophical and mystical works of Torah. In an essay by the Lubavitcher Rebbe called *Inyanah Shel Torat HaChassidut* ("On the Essence of Chassidism"), the Rebbe speaks of the many layers of meaning contained within every part of Torah; using the twelve Hebrew words of *Modeh Ani* as an example, the Rebbe extracts from them insights into the nature of the omnipresence and all-pervasiveness of G-d, the principle of "perpetual creation" (G-d's constant infusion of vitality and existence into the world, without which it would revert to utter nothingness), the laws governing the return of a *pikadon* (an object entrusted to one's care), and the Kabbalistic concept of *Sefirat HaMalchut* (the divine attribute of Sovereignty).

If so, asked the Rebbe in another occasion, why is the *Modeh Ani* said immediately upon waking, with a mind still groggy from sleep? Would it not have been more appropriate to precede it with a period of study and contemplation of these concepts?

Night and Day

The physiology of our bodies and the rhythm of the astral clocks partition our lives into conscious and supra-conscious domains. During our waking hours, our mind assumes control of our thoughts and actions, screening, filtering and interpreting the stimuli that flow to it, and issuing commands and instructions to the body. But at night, when we sleep, the "command-center" shifts to a deeper, darker place within our psyche -- a place where fantasy supersedes logic, sense supplants thought, and awareness is replaced by a more elemental form of knowing. Hard facts become pliant, absurdities become tenable, in this nocturnal world.

There are certain truths, however, that are unaffected by these fluctuations of knowledge and awareness. Our faith in G-d, His centrality to our existence, the depth of our commitment to Him -- we know these things utterly and absolutely, and we know them at all times and in all states of consciousness.

Wakefulness and sleep affect only the external activity of the intellect; what we know with the very essence of our being, we know no less when plunged into the deepest recesses of slumber. On the contrary: when awake, we must wade through the presuppositions and polemics of an intellect shackled to the "realities" of the physical state in order to arrive at these truths; asleep, our mind loosened from its subjective moorings, we enjoy a closer and deeper (albeit less conscious) awareness of our innermost convictions.

The *Modeh Ani* prayer, explained the Rebbe, exploits a most unique moment of our day -- the moment that lies at the threshold of wakefulness, the moment that straddles the conscious and supra-conscious domains of our day. There are other moments, other prayers in the course of our day which take full advantage of our powers of intellect and reasoning -- prayers that follow lengthy and profound meditations upon their content and significance. But each morning, as we move from the liberating hours of sleep to a day of conscious thought, a most unique opportunity presents itself: the opportunity to express to ourselves a truth that inhabits our deepest selves, to declare what we already know to the awaiting day.

Jethro's Estate

A similar phenomenon can be discerned in a halachic discussion that underlies the mitzvah of *bikkurim* ("first-ripened fruits").

Bikkurim, like the *Modeh Ani* prayer, is a declaration of indebtedness and gratitude to G-d. In the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy, the Torah instructs:

And it shall be when you come in to the land which the L-rd your G-d is giving you for an inheritance, and you will possess it and settle in it;

You shall take from the first of the fruits of the land ... and place them in a basket; and you shall go to the place that the L-rd your G-d will choose to rest His name there.

And you shall come to the kohen that shall be in those days, and you shall say to him: "I proclaim today to the L-rd your G-d that I have come unto the land which G-d swore to our fathers to give to us...."

In his "proclamation," the *bikkurim*-bearing farmer goes on to recount the story of our liberation from Egypt and G-d's gift to us of "a land flowing with milk and honey," concluding with the pronouncement: "And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the land that You, G-d, have given me."

When did our forefathers begin bringing the first fruits of their newly-gained homeland to "the place where G-d chose to rest His name"? The first verse of the Torah's chapter on *bikkurim* contains conflicting implications as to when the practice of this mitzvah is to commence, giving rise to a legal debate between the Talmud and the Sifri (a halachic Midrash).

The Jewish people entered the land of Israel under the leadership of Joshua one month after the passing of Moses, in the year 2488 from creation (1273 bce). But fourteen years were to pass before the land would be conquered and each tribe and family allotted its share (the conquest of the land took seven years, and an additional seven years were required for its division into twelve tribal territories and more than 600,000 estates for the heads of households entitled to a share in the land). It is for this reason, says the Talmud, that the verse specifies to bring *bikkurim* "when you come into the land... and you will possess it and settle in it"--to teach us that the first fruits of the land should be presented to G-d only after the conquest and allocation of the land has been completed.

The Sifri, on the other hand, places the emphasis the same verses opening words -- "And it shall be when you come into the land" to imply that the obligation to bring *bikkurim* applied immediately upon the Jew's entry into the land. The Sifri bases its interpretation on the first word of the verse, *vehayah* ("And it shall be"), which throughout the Torah is indicative of an event that is to come to pass immediately.

However, notwithstanding their conflicting readings of the verse, there is not much practical difference between the Talmud and the Sifri with regard to the actual bringing of *bikkurim*. The Torah instructs that *bikkurim* should be brought from "the first-ripened fruits of your land"; this, agree all the sages, teaches us that the mitzvah of *bikkurim* applies only to a person who owns the land outright. So even if the obligation to bring *bikkurim* had applied, in principle, from the very first moment that the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel (as per the Sifri's interpretation), the mitzvah could not have been performed until the land was conquered and each family was allotted its own estate.

(Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud expresses the view that no single family assumed possession of the land allotted to it until every last family had received its

share. Even if the Sifri were to disagree with this position, it would have taken at least seven years--until the conquest of the land was completed--for the first Jewish farmer to acquire a plot of land from which to bring *bikkurim*.)

There was, however, one case in which the Sifri's concept of an immediate obligation to bring *bikkurim* could have applied in actuality. As a reward for joining their fate to that of the people of Israel, the family of Jethro was granted an estate in the Holy Land, in the environs of Jericho; this they received immediately upon the Jewish peoples entry into the land, as Jericho was the very first city to be conquered by Joshua. So there was at least one family estate from which *bikkurim* could have been brought immediately "when you come into the land."

Between Dream and Reality

While there is little difference, in terms of actual practice, if we say that the time for bringing *bikkurim* is when "you will possess it and settle in it" (as the Talmud holds) or immediately "when you enter the land" (as per the Sifri), the Talmud and the Sifri represent two very different conceptions of the mitzvah of *bikkurim*.

The Talmud's conception of *bikkurim* expresses the notion that true gratitude for something can only come after one has come to understand its significance and appreciate its impact on his life. Unless one has "taken possession" of something by studying and analyzing it, unless one has "settled in it" by experiencing it in an aware and informed manner, of what value are one's pronouncements and proclamations?

The Sifri, on the other hand, holds a Modeh Ani-like vision of the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, insisting that our very first moment in the land that G-d has granted us should be one of recognition and acknowledgment of the divine gift.

For forty years, as the people of Israel wandered through the Sinai desert, they dreamed of the land designated by G-d as the environment in which to realize their mission in life. Then came the great moment of crossing from dream to reality--a reality that actualizes the dream, but which also coarsens its purity. This is the moment, says the Sifri, in which to give expression to all that we know and sense about the Holy Land. For though our knowledge may be primitive and unformed by the standards of daytime reality, it comes from a place in us that will no longer be accessible when we have ventured further into this realm of conscious knowledge and feeling. Only by expressing it now, on the threshold between supra-conscious awareness and conscious knowledge, can

we carry over from the perfection and purity of our supra-conscious selves into the tactual reality of our conscious lives.

Regarding the debates between our sages on matters of Torah law, the Talmud states that "These and these are both the words of the living G-d." For although only one view can be implemented as Halachah (practical Torah law), both represent equally valid formulations of the divine wisdom, and both can, and should, be incorporated in our vision of and approach to life.

As per the Talmud, we must take care that we fully comprehend and identify with the gifts we offer and the feelings we declaim. As per the Sifri, we must seek connection with the supra-rational, supra-conscious self that underlies our conscious and intellectual persona and strive to carry over its unsullied perfection into our "daytime" lives.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Note: The Torah section of *Ki Tavo* (Deuteronomy 26-28), which includes the chapter on *bikurim*, is always read in proximity to the 18th of Elul, which is the birthday of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of Chassidism, and of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), founder of the Chabad branch of Chassidism.

The lives and work of these two great leaders parallel the two "versions" of *bikurim* put forth by the Sifri and the Talmud. Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov revitalized--and revolutionized--Jewish life with his emphasis on the depth and purity of the faith and commitment of the simple Jew. Rabbi Schneur Zalman taught the necessity of internalizing this faith and commitment through the structured intellectual and emotional processes he outlined in his "Chabad" philosophy and approach to life.

Based on the teachings of the [Lubavitcher Rebbe](#); adapted by [Yanki Tauber](#)

THE EVOLUTION OF EVIL

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

"All affairs of this world are severe and evil and wicked men prevail..." (Tanya ch. 6).

No one who is even minimally acquainted with world history, and marginally aware of current events, is likely to take issue with this assertion by Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Its stark accuracy underlies one of the most disturbing questions in the annals of religious thought. Why should, and how could, the world be this way? The cruelty, violence and pain that permeate earthly life present no difficulty at all for atheists, nihilists, or pagans. Anyone else, however, must square such a world with a loving, merciful, just, all-wise Creator.

This most distressing and demanding challenge to religious faith is constantly nurtured by a seemingly endless progression of individual suffering and horrendous historical upheavals. It is the subject of an entire book of scripture, Job, and, more recently, it has been assigned its own special title, Theodicy, reflecting its pivotal status in modern religious philosophy.

For most of us, however, this classic quandary usually assumes a somewhat more prosaic form. Why do bad things happen to good people? Where was G-d during the crusades, the holocaust, the Hebron pogrom, etc. ? How could G-d allow the black plague to happen? How can G-d tolerate, much less sustain, the likes of Hitler, Stalin or Arafat?

There are no answers to these questions, and misguided attempts at explaining them away invariably result in embarrassed retreats, waffling, and covering oneself with obvious platitudes regarding G-d's inscrutability. The subject is simply beyond us, and the questions are best left alone.

Chassidic teaching, however, does not leave them alone. Since the Torah is the foundation of all of existence, its inner facet, Chassidism, has the power to reveal G-dly purpose and grace within life's harshest realities. There are indeed no ultimate "answers". Chassidism, however, does not offer answers, but rather insights that recast the questions in a broader, more sophisticated context, and that reveal layers of meaning in life's long chain of seemingly random insults.

Brilliant Darkness

The question of earthly afflictions encompasses two dimensions; 1) the source and root of suffering, and 2) the form that suffering actually assumes in mundane life.

We can acquire insight into the first of these by examining the first blessing that introduces the morning recital of the *Shemah*. The prayer blesses G-d who "...forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things." The Hebrew word used here for "forms" is *yotzer* and that for "creates" is *borei*. These two verbs allude to two specific stages, or spiritual worlds, in the chain of cause and effect that extends downward from the essence of Divinity to culminate in the physical universe in which we live.

The verb *borei* refers to the world of *Briah* (creation) whereas *yotzer* denotes the world of *Yetzirah* (formation). The world of *Briah* is "higher" than that of *Yetzirah*, which is to say that it precedes *Yetzirah* in the sequential process of Divine emanation and is thus closer to the Divine source, the *Or Ein Sof*, or "infinite light". Furthermore, in the descent from *Briah* to *Yetzirah*, the Divine creative force or "light" is condensed, restricted, and obscured, such that the light, or "soul" of *Yetzirah* is only a dim reflection of that of *Briah*.

Briah is thus a lofty world of dazzling illumination compared to which lowly *Yetzirah* is relatively nondescript. Why then, in the above blessing, is *Yetzirah* characterized by light whereas *Briah* is associated with darkness?

The question is best addressed through an analogy. Newly-minted academics often fall into a classic trap when they first begin to teach. They are determined to deliver lectures of such brilliance, profundity, and eloquence that they will merit the adulation of their students, the admiration and recognition of their Chair, and the humble awe of their older colleagues. The outcome, of course is inevitably something else. They are indeed so brilliant, profound and eloquent that nobody can understand them, and they end up talking to themselves. The lectures are too deep and too densely packed with difficult material and advanced concepts. In short, the light is too abundant and too intense. Had the lecturer spoken in Swahili or remained silent altogether, it would have been all the same to the students, since they grasped nothing in any case. Thus, although there has truly been a great revelation of light, from the students' viewpoint, there is nothing but darkness.

Similarly, the light of *Briah* is so intense that it exceeds the capacities (the "vessels" in Kabbalist-

Chassidic terminology) of the lower realms to receive it and is, therefore, perceived as an absence of light which is to say, darkness. In the transition from *Briah* to *Yetzirah*, however, the light is reduced and veiled to the extent that it can be captured by the diminutive vessels of *Yetzirah* and thus recognized and appreciated as illumination.

The inference to be drawn from this is that life's events that are rooted in the highest levels of Divine beneficence necessarily transcend the capabilities of the created intellect, and are thus, most often, interpreted as an absence of good. Revealed good of a far lesser order, however, is enthusiastically embraced and mistakenly valued as the ultimate expression of Divine kindness.

Light and Vessels

Consider a parent who slaps the wrist of an eight-month-old child about to insert his finger in an electric socket. The slap is a form of communication. The parent wishes to convey to the child information essential to its very life, namely that the socket is charged with electricity of sufficient voltage to kill him should he succeed in inserting his finger. The problem is that this information or "light" infinitely transcends the intellectual capacities of the child. Eight-month-old children are incapable of relating to such advanced concepts as electricity, voltage, or death.

In the case of an adult the conceptual "light"--i.e., the information that a potential deadly electric shock awaits anyone who sticks his finger in a socket--is grasped, internalized, and appreciated by the intellect. This assimilation of the light within the intellectual "vessels" of the mind elicits an appropriate emotional response, alarm, which in turn evokes a determination to act. The end result is that the finger is withdrawn from the source of danger, and it is to this end that the entire process was initiated.

The mind of the child, however, can not absorb the "light", so that the communication necessary to remove him from harm must bypass his insufficient intellectual and emotional faculties and simply activate a withdrawal from the socket. Although, in this regard, the slap is most effective, the "skipped steps" result in an unbridgeable gap between the slap and the light that motivated it. Hence, despite the fact that the slap is literally a gift of life that originates in the highest level of parental love, the child experiences only the absence of light and interprets the slap as random, meaningless, suffering.

These and similar analogies help us to appreciate that the mundane afflictions, which we necessarily

experience as evil and harsh, are, in fact, rooted in the most sublime level of Divine wisdom and love.

However, while this line of inquiry sheds some light on the origin of earthly anguish, it does not address the enormous disparity between the lofty G-dly source of suffering and the dreadful, appalling forms that it assumes in this world. In the analogy above, for example, it is the parent him/herself who administers the slap to the child. Despite the inexplicable suffering, the child knows intuitively that the slap, delivered by his loving parent, does not express alienation or hostility; indeed, the parent comforts the child and wipes away the tears. In our case, however, it is nigh on impossible to discern the hand of our loving Father in the strikes that we receive through the agency of such vile, satanic creatures as Stalin, Hitler, etc. The forces and circumstances that afflict us seem to have a life of their own.

Chessed and Gevurah

The source of all mundane tribulations is the Divine attribute of *Gevurah*.

Gevurah, translated as strength, justice, or severity, is one of the ten *sefirot* (attributes or faculties) through which the Almighty interacts with creation. As a particular expression of G-dliness, *Gevurah* represents perfect goodness just as do the other *sefirot*, such as Wisdom, Kindness, and Mercy. Contrary to our intuition, *Gevurah* is as much an expression of G-d's love as is *Chessed* ("kindness"). Indeed, it is *Gevurah* that complements and perfects *Chessed*.

However, as manifestations of *Gevurah* extend downward through successively lower levels of creation, they assume the properties of the worlds through which they descend, and thus become progressively distorted and coarsened. Ultimately, the influence of the Divine attribute of *Gevurah* is invested within, and gives rise to the what the Kabbalists call *gevurot kashot*--"harsh severities"--a medium in which Divinity is concealed so deeply as to be completely unrecognizable. The cruel evils of this world, therefore, seem totally detached from any vestige of G-dly purpose, and they appear to exist, and to function independently.

This apparent dissociation of worldly afflictions from their supernal source can be appreciated, to some extent, by means of an analogy. Consider a Rabbinic court of wise and compassionate judges before whom stands an individual guilty of some heinous offense. The judges understand that in order to rectify the sin and to restore the spiritual integrity of the sinner's soul, lashes are required.

The judges abhor inflicting pain on anyone. Moreover, being extremely wise and learned, they could undoubtedly find a technicality on which to base an acquittal, thus saving the sinner from physical punishment and themselves from the anguish of causing physical suffering to another human. The judges realize, however, that a man's spiritual life is at stake, and their love and compassion motivate them to disregard their own feelings and to save the sinning soul before them by ordering lashes.

Thus far there is only love, compassion and understanding. It is not, however, the judges, but rather a court-appointed official who carries out the sentence. This official was not privy to the judges' deliberations, and he knows nothing of the love, compassion and understanding which is the source and cause of the punishment. His job is to administer lashes and he is only interested in the technical performance of his job. At this stage of the procedure, the judges are no longer a reality. The power and authority to dispense lashes, once the process has been initiated, falls to the official, who neither knows nor cares why he has been ordered to lash this particular individual.

In truth, however, the love and wisdom of the judges underlies the entire exercise. However, the traits that qualify men as judges render them uniquely unsuitable to administer lashes. Indeed, for the lashes to be effective and to thus achieve the desired result, namely the cleansing of a soul, they must be given by someone unimpeded by the refined sensibilities and the empathetic nature required to be a judge. Thus the ideal deputy through whom judges' prescription can be implemented is someone very different from the judges themselves.

Similarly, the Divine attribute of *Gevurah*, which is a particular manifestation of G-d's love and concern, of necessity appears removed from the very afflictions that it engenders. Were the hand of G-d perceivable in each of our travails, the authenticity of the ordeal would dissipate and our free will would be compromised, thus precluding the fierce inner struggle required for our intended spiritual rectification and growth. In short, there could be no transforming spiritual crisis and subsequently, no redemptive possibilities within the experience.

Thus, the earthly agents of suffering serve the crucial purpose of concealing the Divine compassion at the core of the tribulations. In reality, however, they are nothing more than instruments of Divine will, and they have no independent authority or autonomous existence.

Body and Soul

This is all very fine. There remains, however, one serious problem. In the analogies presented above, the subjects survive and benefit from their suffering. The child, saved from electrocution, can now safely grow up to lead a productive life. The erstwhile transgressor, relieved of the burden of sin, is transformed into an upstanding, valuable member of society.

But what about those who do not survive the cure? How can Jews killed by Hitler, Arafat or the black plague possibly profit from the experience?

The answer is quite simple: The premise on which the question is based is incorrect. No Jews died, nor ever will die. The G-dly soul, which is the reality of a Jew, is immortal. Only the soul's body, which is to say, the Jew's circumstances, are subject to change.

The soul is capable of existing on a myriad of levels (this world, the Lower Garden of Eden, the Higher Garden of Eden, etc.). However, the soul itself, as an extension of pure G-dliness, is eternal and immutable. As far as the soul is concerned, the changing circumstances signify progressively loftier manifestations of its own essence.

Furthermore, a Jew's departure from this world is only temporary. The culmination of the soul's quest for ultimate self-realization is *Techiat Hameitim*, the resurrection of the dead. Thus "death" is simply one of the many varieties of ephemeral mundane afflictions that a soul experiences in order to achieve elevation, perfection, and ultimate joy.

This is already apparent to those Jews who are, at present, unencumbered by a body. Although those of us currently residing in the physical world may have to wrestle with the problem of mundane suffering, souls see that no evil descends from on high. May the time soon arrive when this great truth is self-evident.

By Professor Yakov Brawer

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