

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Ki Tavo*

## How Can We Relate to the Mitzvah of *Bikkurim* (First Fruits) Today?

### Connecting With Hashem through the Fruits of the Land

This morning I went down into my garden to pray and to pick some breakfast of figs and grapes. I admired the reddening glistening pomegranates patiently awaiting Rosh Hashana and the beautifully clusters of purpling grapes dangling from our pergola. As I sat on my swing bench with my siddur (prayer book) and a basket of fruit on my lap overlooking the Judean hills, I felt so thankfully blessed. With each bite of delicious holy sweetness, I felt like I was ingesting Hashem's love. This experience really helped me to focus on my prayer, including the words of praising Hashem, which is what most of the prayers are all about. Usually, it is much easier to focus on my own personal requests and mumble the rest, but the fruits inspired me to feel genuine praise. The ability to connect to Hashem through the fruits of the land will be greatly multiplied with the First Fruit Offering at the Temple. The Torah emphasizes the importance of this mitzvah of *bikkurim* because it is both the first – רֵאִשִׁית/*reishit* and the purpose – תַּכְלִית/*tachlit* of all the mitzvot dependent on the Land. The Order of *Mishnah Zeraim* (Seeds) starts with the laws of prayers, *keriat shema* and *birkat hamazon*, and culminates in the mitzvah of *bikkurim* which also includes prayer and praise. In this way, *bikkurim* completes the circle of prayer for rain, planting, and bringing our choicest fruit while expressing thanks and praises to Hashem. The mitzvot depending on the land are wrapped in prayer and thanks for the good land; the prayer before the growing, and the thanking for the good produce. The Midrash teaches that the entire world was created for the sake of the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, as it states, "בְּרֵאשִׁית/*bereishit* – in the **beginning** Hashem created..." (*Bereishit* 1:1), and it states, "Bring רֵאִשִׁית/*reishit* the **beginning** of the first fruits of your earth to the house of Hashem your G-d" (*Shemot* 23:19, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 1:4). "What is so important about the mitzvah of *bikkurim* – bringing our First Fruits to the Temple as a gift offering – that the whole world is created for its sake?"

### *Bikurim* and the Attitude of Gratitude

Alshich explains that the mitzvah of *bikkurim* imparts the most fundamental outlook for any human being – the attitude of gratitude and *hakarat hatov*. This is so fundamental and primary that the whole world's creation was actualized specifically for this mitzvah. "There is nothing harder for the Hashem to live with than an ungrateful person. It was due to his ingratitude that Adam was exiled from the Garden of Eden. G-d presented him Chava as a gift, but Adam complained, "The woman you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate it" (*Bereishit* 3:12). It was this ungrateful response that caused the downfall of humanity (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 7). Today the attitude of ingratitude is running rampant. Many take everything coming to them for granted and expect others to jump upside down and do somersaults to please them. When something doesn't work out according to their expectations they get very upset. In contrast, developing gratitude helps us to experience true happiness, as we relate to every blessing as an undeserving gift. Because the Mitzvah of *bikkurim* instill

the important character trait of gratitude within us, it makes sense that it is repeated in the Torah more than any other mitzvah dependent on the land. This mitzvah is mentioned both in *Shemot* 23:16, 23:19, 34:26, and *Bamidbar* 18:13. Furthermore, the first eleven verses of our *parasha* – *Devarim* 26:1-11 are dedicated to the mitzvah of *bikkurim*. We are to bring the first and the best of our Seven Species crop in a beautifully decorated basket as part of a remarkable splendid musical parade with animals adorned with gold and olive branches and flutes playing. When arriving at the Temple Mount the king will join the parade with his basket on his shoulder. Once we reach the courtyard, the Levites will sing, “I will praise You, O G-d, for you have raised me up...” (*Tehillim* 30:2, Based on *Mishnah Bikkurim* 3:3-4).

The First Fruits offering is accompanied by a declaration expressing our gratitude to the Almighty in the context of a brief history of the Jewish people. Working on gratitude in general will help speed up the time when we once again may bring our gratitude fruit gifts to the Temple. The more we work on being grateful toward our spouse, parents, friends and neighbors the closer we come to developing true gratitude toward Hashem. This prepares us for the eternal world of total bliss when we will thankfully enjoy the splendor of Hashem’s Divine Presence (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 17a).

### Continued Thanksgiving for Ongoing Giving

The mitzvah of *bikkurim* as detailed in this week’s *parasha* emphasizes how the land of Israel is a gift of G-d to the Jewish people and how we are never to take this gift for granted.

#### ספר דברים פרק כ

(א) וְהָיָה כִּי תָבֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וַיְרִשְׁתָּהּ וַיֵּשְׁבֶתָ בָּהּ:  
 (ב) וְלִקְחָתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית כָּל פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תָּבִיא מֵאֲרֻצְךָ אֲשֶׁר הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ וְשַׂמְתָּ בַטֵּנָא וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל הַמְּקוֹם  
 אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשִׁכְּנֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם: (ה) וְעִנִּית וְאָמַרְתָּ... (ח) וַיֹּצִיאֲנוּ הָשֵׁם מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה  
 וּבְמַרְאֵ גָדֹל וּבְאֹתוֹת וּבְמִפְתֵּיִם: (ט) וַיְבָאֲנוּ אֶל הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ: (י) וְעַתָּה  
 הִנֵּה הִבְאֵתִי אֶת רֵאשִׁית פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי הָשֵׁם וְהִנְחִיתוּ לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ:  
 “When you enter the land that Hashem your G-d gives you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, take of the first of every fruit of the earth that you bring in from your Land that your G-d gives you. Put it in a basket and go to the place that your G-d will choose to establish His name... You shall then recite...Hashem freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by and outstretched arm and an awesome power, and by signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and brought us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore I now bring the first fruits of the earth which You Hashem has given me” (*Devarim* 26 1-10).

This short section mentions how Hashem is the one who gives us the land of Israel three times in order to offset the possible attitude of, “It is my own power and the strength of my hands” (*Devarim* 8:17) – the bravery of our soldiers and the sophistication of our war equipment etc. that enabled us conquer this land. Why do we need to give thanks for the land of Israel repeatedly, year after year during the annual *bikkurim* ceremony? Why is it not enough to give thanks upon our initial entry into the Land? Note that our section repeats, “The land that Hashem your G-d gives you” in the present tense. Just as we experience a continued giving relationship in marriage, our relationship with the Land of Israel is also an ongoing process. Therefore, we need to recognize that G-d is giving us this Holy Land anew every moment. This feeling is especially amplified as the *Shemita* year is coming to an end, and we renew our relationship with the land through planting and pruning.

### The Roots of the Mitzvah of *Bikkurim*

The mitzvah of *bikkurim* teaches us that it is not enough to remember that all our blessings are from Hashem, no matter how much of our own effort is invested. We must actually verbalize this realization in order to truly ingrain within our psyche the attitude of gratitude. *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that the root of the mitzvah of *bikkurim* is to arouse our thoughts and true feeling through the power of speech. Therefore, when G-d blesses us and our field to yield fruits and we merit to bring them to the Temple, it is proper for us to arouse our hearts through the power of speech expressing our awareness that everything we receive comes from the Master of the Universe. We must tell of G-d's kindness to us and to all the Jewish people. Therefore, we begin with by mentioning Ya'acov our father whom G-d liberated from the hand of Lavan, and continue to mention how we were slaves to the Egyptians, and G-d's saving us from their hands. After the praise, we request of G-d that He continue to bless us. We merit to become blessed both through the arousal of our soul in praising G-d and because of G-d's intrinsic goodness.

We can extend this concept gleaned from the mitzvah of *bikkurim* to include verbalizing our gratitude for all blessings in our life, thus amplifying them and entering into a self-enforcing cycle of blessing. This principle is the main reason why we recite *brachot* (benedictions) for food. There are several parallels between the mitzvah of reciting *brachot* over food and the mitzvah of *bikkurim*. Both are expressions of gratitude for the land with its crop. Until we recognize Hashem as King and owner of the land through the *bikkurim* and *bracha* recital, the land and its produce still belong to Hashem. It is only through the recognition that the land belongs to Hashem that He transfers its ownership to us. Note how in our Torah section the description of the land changes. First it is called *הָאָרֶץ/ha'aretz* – the land, (verse 1), whereupon it becomes *אַרְצְךָ/artzecha* – your land in verse 2.

Only after we express recognition that the Land belongs to Hashem through *bikkurim* does the Land of Israel become our land. Similarly, when we recite *brachot* over food we recognize that the food belongs to Hashem – “King of the universe, Creator the fruits of the tree.” It is precisely this recognition that changes the status of the food from being Hashem's to becoming ours. Thus, the more we give thanks the more blessed we become.

### Health Benefits of Gratitude

Today, scientific research confirms that gratitude brings about blessings. Novel research as actually discovered that an attitude of gratitude makes us happier and healthier. When we find authentic reasons for thanksgiving, we will attract good things to happen to us. Recent studies have concluded that the expression of gratitude can have profound and positive effects on our health, our moods and even the survival of our marriages. The old saying “If you've forgotten the language of gratitude, you'll never be on speaking terms with happiness” is more than a flimsy notion.

Several studies have shown depression to be inversely correlated to gratitude. It seems that the more grateful a person is the less depressed. Philip Watkins, a clinical psychologist at Eastern Washington University, found that clinically depressed individuals showed significantly lower gratitude (nearly 50 percent less) than non-depressed controls. "A growing body of research shows that gratitude is truly

amazing in its physical and psychosocial benefits" (Report by Drs. Blaire and Rita Justice for the University of Texas Health Science Center, <https://www.uthealthleader.org/story/grateful-ology>). In one study on gratitude, conducted by Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., at the University of California at Davis and his colleague Mike McCullough at the University of Miami, randomly assigned participants were given one of three tasks. Each week, participants kept a short journal. One group briefly described five things they were grateful for that had occurred in the past week, another five recorded daily hassles from the previous week that displeased them, and the neutral group was asked to list five events or circumstances that affected them whether positive or negative. Ten weeks later, participants in the gratitude group felt better about their lives as a whole and were a full 25 percent happier than the hassled group. They reported fewer health complaints, and exercised an average of 1.5 hours more (<http://emmons.faculty.ucdavis.edu/>).

Another study on gratitude was conducted with adults having congenital and adult-onset neuromuscular disorders (NMDs), with the majority having post-polio syndrome (PPS). Compared to those who were not jotting down their blessings nightly, participants in the gratitude group reported more hours of sleep each night, and feeling more refreshed upon awakening. The gratitude group also reported more satisfaction with their lives as a whole, felt more optimism about the upcoming week, and felt considerably more connected with others than did participants in the control group. (<http://www.dailygood.org/story/578/the-neuroscience-of-why-gratitude-makes-us-healthier-ocean-robbins/>).

### Acknowledging Our Debt to Farmers

According to Rav Kook in his commentary of *Mishna Bikkurim* 3:3, the gratitude expressed through the mitzvah of *bikkurim* includes gratitude toward the farmers. The colorful *bikkurim* ceremony, involving Jews from all walks of life, offers an opportunity to rectify the disrespect and alienation between academics and farmers. In the Torah, farmers are greatly respected. This recognition is demonstrated by the townspeople "standing up" before the farmers during the *bikkurim* ceremony. Today, most of us live the state of alienation from nature and farming. We may not even realize that many of the items we use in our daily lives—including food, medicine, and even plastic derive from nature. Today, the Jewish people are, on the whole, alienated not only from nature, but also from G-d, the Land of Israel, and each other. Until the time when we once again can bring *bikkurim* in our rebuilt Temple, we can still implement several of its features that will help reconnect us to living in harmony with the land, with each other and Hashem. We can grow and eat the seven species, taking the extra time to learn about their spiritual symbolism. We can be more conscious of how our moral and practical actions impact the abundance or lack of blessings from rain and dew. We can support farmers who keep the laws of the land including *Shemita* (the sabbatical year), and tithing. We can furthermore build healthy, diverse, moral communities in Israel (Based on Leiba Chaya David, <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/first-fruits/2/>).

### The Connection between *Bikurim* and Rosh Hashana

...We don't bring *Bikkurim* after Chanukah, for the *bikurim* after Chanukah are considered of the following year... (Rambam, *Bikurim*, section 2, Halacha 6)

Rambam alluded to a great principle in the order of creation. The world was created on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Elul. This is the culmination of the nine preceding months of gestation beginning with the conception on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev. Therefore, in the *bikkurim* cycle, Chanukah is considered the following year as the lights born the 25<sup>th</sup> of Elul in proximity to Rosh Hashana are conceived then. The first possible birth of *bikkurim* is on Shavuot following only six months gestation, whereas Rosh Hashana follows a full nine month gestation. *Bikkurim* is both the first of the mitzvot of the land and their purpose. It is an expression of the cyclic reality in which the beginning – ראשית/*reishit* is in-wedged in the end purpose – תכלית/*tachlit*.

The First Fruits are both the culmination and purpose of the entire year elevating our previous work of the land as well as the beginning and preparation for the New Year with its forthcoming mitzvot of the land, which infuse the upcoming crop with holiness. This explains why we read about *bikkurim* in proximity to Rosh Hashana, since both share the concept of being the end/purpose in-wedged in the beginning. They are both the culmination of the work of the previous year while they simultaneously influence on the upcoming year. This clarifies an amazing *chidush* about Rosh Hashana, by means of doing teshuva properly on Rosh Hashana we both elevate the previous year while completing the building of the new lights for the upcoming year. Even if we did not keep the mitzvot perfectly during the past year, when Rosh Hashana arrives, we can elevate the entire past year because it served as the preparation for this building of lights of the upcoming year on Rosh Hashana. How powerful is the attitude of gratitude. By expressing our gratitude and recognition of Hashem as our King and benefactor both through the Rosh Hashana prayers and in the *bikkurim* ritual we are empowered to elevate the entire previous year and infuse our upcoming year with new lights!

May we merit to ingrain within us true thankfulness for all of Hashem's blessings, and may this recognition activate a fountain of everlasting blessings!