

Parashat Ki Tavo

Why Do We Need to Tithe the Produce of the Holy Land?

Ingathering the Exiles by Performing the Mitzvot of the Land

Today I got the following SMS from my downstairs' neighbor and tenant Yehudit:

"*Boker tov* (good morning) I see there is a lot of fruit to be picked... Do you want help with this? Just let me know when and how." I am happy to share the fruits in the garden in exchange for picking help, especially since the pomegranate trees in my backyard are out of range of my cordless phone, making it difficult to find time to pick them. "Just bring me the fruits, I will take *ma'aser* and give you your share!" I told Yehudit. Taking *ma'aser* (tithes) of the fruits and veggies that grow in our garden is a mitzvah that we, who live out on the land, get to perform daily, sometimes several times a day. It is one of the *mitzvot ha'teluyot b'aretz* – special mitzvot that we only perform inside of the Land of Israel. The Vilna Gaon believed that the performance of these mitzvot connected to the land brings redemption closer as he explains based on the opening verse of *Parashat Ki Tavo*:

ספר דברים פרק כו פסוק א וְהָיָה כִּי תָבֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ...

"It shall come to pass, when you come to the land..." (*Devarim* 26:1).

This refers to the ingathering of the exiles, similarly it states, "when you come to the land, you will plant," (*Vayikra* 19:23), which means you must fulfill the commandments contingent on living in *Eretz Yisrael*. For the ingathering of the exiles depends on the blessings which follow the fulfillment of both verses, according to our Sages in the Talmud (*Megillah* 17b; and *Sanhedrin* 98a) ...this was the Vilna Gaon's great aspiration (*Kol HaTor* 3:7). We are very fortunate that we get to fulfill this aspiration and witness Jews returning to our holy land from the four corners of the earth! Why is the mitzvah of taking tithes so important and what does it involve?

The Fruits of the Land are Holier than Us

In the Land of Israel, the fruits are "holier than thou." What this means is that the essence of the fruits and vegetables from the Land of Israel is already in tune with the final redemption, whereas we are still in the process. These fruits are so holy that part of their holiness cannot be accessed today. Only at the time of redemption (may it be soon), will we and the Kohanim be able to eat them in purity and holiness. The fruits of the Land of Israel include a part that is already imbued with the holiness of the Temple, and can only be eaten at the Temple Mount. Therefore, growing fruits in the Land of Israel brings us closer to the final redemption. "But you, O mountains of Yisrael, you shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people of Israel; for they will soon be coming" (*Yechezkiel* 36:8). The Talmud comments, "...there is no more revealed end [of days] than that..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 98a).

The Tribe of Levi – Dedicated to Fulltime Temple Service

When the Jewish people originally inherited the Land of Israel, each tribe was allotted a portion corresponding to its spiritual essence. However, the tribe of Levi did not receive any portion of land, because they are chosen for the fulltime occupation of serving in the Temple. The demanding work of farming was not to detract from their one hundred percent dedication to the Temple – the place where Heaven and Earth meet. When the Kohanim would sacrifice, the Jewish people and the entire world would receive atonement, become elevated, and connected with Hashem.

Offerings of Elevation

How did the tribe of Levi support itself while engaged in selfless work to benefit the world? In addition to receiving specific parts of the sacrifices, each of the remaining tribes were to give ten percent of their produce to the Levites (*Bamidbar* 18:21, 18:24), who assisted the Kohanim in the Temple service and accompanied them with musical instruments. This tithe is called **מַעֲשֵׂר** /*ma'aser rishon* – first or primary tithe. The word **מַעֲשֵׂר** /*ma'aser* literally means “from ten” referring to the ten percent which every tribe was to give to the Levites. The Levites supported the Kohanim by giving them ten percent of the produce they received, (See *Bamidbar* 18:26, 18:28). This tithe is called **תְּרוּמַת מַעֲשֵׂר** /*terumat ma'aser* – contribution from the tithes. Receiving their main sustenance from the Levites, it was sufficient for the rest of Israel to give the Kohanim an undefined small amount (According to the Torah all we needed to give was **כֹּל שְׂהוּא** /*kol shehu* – something, even just one grain of wheat (*Rambam, Laws of Terumat*, Chapter 3, Halacha 1). The contribution given to the Kohen is called **גְּדוּלָה** /*terumah gedolah* – the great elevation, since we become elevated by means of giving an offering to the Kohen whose service connects every Jew with their Father in Heaven.

Integrating Working the Land with the Holiness of the Temple

In addition to the tithes for the tribe of Levi, *Parashat Ki Tavo* mentions **עֲנִי מַעֲשֵׂר** /*ma'aser ani* – the tithes for the poor to be given every third and sixth year of the Sabbatical year cycle. This tithe is one of the many ways that the Torah ensures that the poor will be supported and have all their needs met.

פֶּר דְּבָרִים פָּרַק כּו (יא) וְשִׂמְחָתְךָ בְּכֹל הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ אֶתְּהָ וְהָלֹא וְהָגֵר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ: (יב) כִּי תִכְלֶה לַעֲשֹׂר אֶת כָּל מַעֲשֵׂר תְּבוּאָתְךָ בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁת שָׁנַת הַמַּעֲשֵׂר וְנִתְּנָה לְלֹאֵי לֵגֵר לִיתוּם וְלֹאֲלֻמָּנָה וְאֲכָלוּ בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְשָׂבְעוּ... (טו) הַשְּׂקִיפָה מִמַּעַן קִדְשְׁךָ מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְרַךְ אֶת עַמְּךָ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לָנוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתֵּינוּ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ:

“You shall enjoy together with the Levite and the stranger among you, all the bounty that Hashem your G-d has bestowed you and your household. When you have set aside in full the tenth part of your yield – in the third year, the year of the tithe – and have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; that they may eat their fill in your settlements... Look down from your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers” (*Devarim* 26:11-15).

The remaining years, (one, two four and five following the *Shemithah* (Sabbatical Year) every Jewish farmer was to appear in Jerusalem with his **שְׁנִי מַעֲשֵׂר** /*ma'aser sheni* – secondary tithe, from the produce that he had grown himself in the Holy Land. He was to take off time from the demanding work of the Land, in order to become spiritually elevated while immersed in the holiness of the Temple environment. The *ma'aser sheni* assures the connection and integration of the physical work of the Land, with the spiritual holiness of the Temple. The mindful eating of the holy produce of *ma'aser sheni* at the holiest place on earth and the conscious thankfulness to Hashem with every bite chewed elevates the eating and reminds the farmer, that it is only Hashem's blessing rather than his personal effort, which brings about this abundance.

Perpetuating the Agricultural Tithes

Today, due to our long winded exile, we are, unfortunately, unable to keep all the laws of tithes the way the Torah originally intended. No one today, is able to eat anything in ritual purity, as we have not yet been able to access the means to properly purify ourselves from contact with death.

Therefore, it is neither possible for us to elevate *ma'aser sheni* – the tithe to be eaten in purity and holiness at the Temple Mount, nor for the Kohen to eat *terumah*. However, since the laws of tithes of our produce are written directly in the Torah, and are so important, we are required to keep these laws even in a more limited way today, in order to ensure that we do not forget them. I feel honored to be perpetuating the holy laws of the Land by keeping them in the manner possible today, and by teaching them to my students, ingathered from the exile to the Holy Land.

May the day come soon that we will once again be able to fulfill all the laws of the tithes in the highest way intended by the Torah! I can't wait to bring my tithes of grapes, figs and pomegranates, in decorated baskets to relish in the holiness of the Temple Mount.