



Are We on the Way of Returning to a Restructured Society Conducive for Tithing the Land?

Dreaming of Redeeming the Mitzvah of Tithes

I'm blessed to experience "...when you come into the land which Hashem, your G-d, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it..." Moreover, I'm blessed with a fruitful garden through which I can do my best to keep the mitzvot dependent on the land, such as *Orlah* (not to eat or benefit from fruits of a tree less than four years old), *kilayim* (not to plant various plant species together), *Shmittah* (not working the land during the seventh year), and lastly *ma'aser* (taking tithes), which is a mitzvah I often fulfill several times daily. However, I must admit, that often, I just put tiny pieces of produce in a bag that I wrap over itself to be considered a double wrap, and then I mumble some words, that I know by heart. I try to remind myself of the privilege to be able to harvest my own produce, here in the Land of Israel and have the merit to perform the mitzvah of *ma'aser*. Sometimes this helps me to regain mindful focus. But mostly, there is an emptiness and lack in the mitzvah of taking tithes from our produce, as long as we only perform it semi-symbolically, awaiting the rebuilding of our Temple. How I long to actually share some of my produce with real Kohanim, instead of respectfully double wrapping it and throwing it out in the garbage. Yet, it seems there are no longer real poor people, as none of the beggars that arrive in a taxi or private car to Bat Ayin, are interested in a share of my fruit. Believe me, I have offered them, so I know! What will happen when the Temple is rebuilt b"H? The first thing I hope for is that the fruits will be healed, so I no longer will need to cut out bugs all day long. Then, there will be real, nice, shining fruits to take to the Temple and share with the Kohen, the Levite, the poor, and also for ourselves; to be eaten in a state of ritual purity and holiness at the Temple Mount (After going through purification from contact with death, seminal discharge, and menstruation). But who says the poor will want the fruits then? Perhaps, even the Kohen and Levi would prefer buying their own produce?

The Pandemic Brings About a Society Conducive for Keeping the Mitzvot of the Land

It is hard to imagine that there is going to come a time soon, when the Levites will go door-to-door to collect their tithes from farmers in Israel. Most Levites, I know, would prefer one trip to the supermarket. In our modern Western world, we have become so estranged from living in harmony with nature and from working the land, that keeping the mitzvot of the Land fully, seems so farfetched from our current civilization. We are presently experiencing much upheaval and changes in society. Who would imagine, even just a year ago, a Jerusalem scenery with everyone wearing facemasks? Our current civilization is breaking down right and left, and we may be surprised to experience a completely new kind of development, with return to an agrarian lifestyle, suitable for keeping the mitzvot of the land. Perhaps, big supermarkets will not continue to exist, at least not in their current structure. The new age movement foresees a complete restructuring of our global monetary system. As a result of snowballing amounts of industry sector changes, the way we do business and our economies will need to be reorganized on all levels. Our home environment has already begun to become more significant, as many people have begun to grow their own produce and raise their own chickens. Perhaps, the purpose of our current pandemic is to return our planet to a more self-sustaining, heart-centered sharing, more in tune with the Torah way of living off the land. The transformation

that is currently happening all around us, will, with Hashem's help, lead us to a society conducive for keeping the mitzvot of the Land in the highest way.

The Tribe of Levi – Dedicated to Fulltime Temple Service

When the Jewish people originally inherited the Land, it was divided up into twelve portions. Each tribe was allotted the land-portion that corresponded to its essence. However, the tribe of Levi, including the Levites and the Kohanim, did not receive any portion of land (See *Bamidbar* 18:20, 18:23, 18:24). This tribe was chosen for Temple service, which is a fulltime occupation. The demanding work of farming was not to detract them from 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. The Levites were dedicated to the important task of assisting the Kohanim in the Temple service and accompanying them with song and their musical instruments, which left them no time for farming. How then did they support themselves, while engaged in selfless work to benefit the world? In addition to offering specific parts of the sacrifices to the Kohanim, each of the remaining tribes were commanded to give ten percent of their produce to the tribe of Levi (*Bamidbar* 18:21, 18:24).

Three Kinds of Tithes for the Levites and the Kohanim

The ten percent tithe for the Levite is called *מַעֲשֵׂר רִאשׁוֹן*/*ma'aser rishon* – 'first or primary tithe.' The word *מַעֲשֵׂר*/*ma'aser* literally means – 'from ten,' referring to the ten percent which every tribe must give to the Levites. The contribution given to the Kohen is called *תְּרוּמָה גְדוֹלָה*/*teruma gedola* – 'the great elevation,' since every Jew becomes elevated by means of giving an offering to the Kohen, whose service connects every Jew with their Father in Heaven. The ten percent tithe that Levites give to the Kohanim is called *תְּרוּמַת מַעֲשֵׂר*/*terumat ma'aser* – 'the elevation (contribution) from the tithe.'

Two Additional Tithes not for the Tribe of Levi

Not all the tithes were for the tribe of Levi. The two additional tithes are: *מַעֲשֵׂר שְׁנִי*/*ma'aser sheni* – 'secondary tithe,' which was for the Israelite himself, who grew produce in the Holy Land, and *מַעֲשֵׂר עָנִי*/*ma'aser ani* – 'the tithe for the poor,' described in *Parashat Ki Tavo*. *Ma'aser sheni* entails an additional ten percent of what was left of the produce, after the *ma'aser rishon* has been given to the Levites. This tithe was to be brought up to the Temple Mount and eaten by its owner in a state of purity. This way, each and every Jewish farmer would be encouraged to take off time from his demanding agricultural work, in order to become spiritually elevated, while immersed in the holiness of the Temple environment. *Ma'aser sheni* also assures the connection and integration of the physical work of the Land, with the spiritual holiness of the Temple. Each Israelite's mindful eating of the holy produce of his *ma'aser sheni* at the holiest place on earth and his 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. Every third and sixth year of the *Shemitta* (Sabbatical year) cycle, *ma'aser sheni* was replaced with *ma'aser ani* – 'the tithe for the poor.' This tithe is one of the many ways that the Torah ensures that the poor will have their needs met.

Verbal Declaration Keeps Us on our Toes to Perform the Mitzvah Meticulously

At this time of year, when the fruit harvest is at its peak, we are reminded about *vidui ma'aser* – the confession of tithing. At the end of the three-year tithing cycle, we are called upon to make an honest reflection and verbal acknowledgement of our fulfillment of the mitzvah of separating our tithes faithfully:

ספר דברים פרק כו פסוק יב כִּי תִכְלֶה לַעֲשֹׂר אֶת כָּל מַעֲשֶׂר תְּבוּאָתְךָ בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁית שְׁנַת הַמַּעֲשֹׂר וְנָתַתָּה לְלֵוִי לִגְר לִיתוֹם וְלֹאֲלֻמָּנָה וְאָכְלוּ בִשְׂעָרֶיךָ וּשְׂבַעוּ: (יג) וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּעֶרְתִּי הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִן הַבַּיִת וְגַם נָתַתִּיו לְלֵוִי וְלִגְר לִיתוֹם וְלֹאֲלֻמָּנָה כָּל מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִנִי לֹא עֲבַרְתִּי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ וְלֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי:

“When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give [them] to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat to satiety in your cities. Then you shall say before Hashem, your G-d, ‘I have removed the holy [portion] from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, according to all Your mitzvah that You commanded me; I have not transgressed Your mitzvot, nor have I forgotten [them]’” (*Devarim* 26:12-13).

This declaration almost seems a bit boastful, because we are so used to beating our breasts in guilt. The Torah teaches us that we need to say, “We have done the right thing! We’ve not transgressed but have done great!” As we approach the High Holidays, the message is that we not only look to rectify our faults but also to recognize our accomplishments! Knowing that we need to recite this confession honestly will help us to actually fulfill the mitzvot of tithing correctly. This reminds me of the system of Overeaters Anonymous, where the person must call her sponsor daily to report. Knowing she will have to honestly declare what she eats, helps her to keep to her eating plan. *Sefer HaChinuch*, (Mitzvah 607) explains that since the power of speech distinguishes human beings above all other creatures, people are more concerned about desecrating their speech, than of sinning in action. Since, the sustenance of the servants of G-d is dependent upon the tithes, in Hashem’s kindness He insures that we perform the tithes meticulously without benefitting from them, by having us verbally testify in the Temple that we did not lie about them. Knowing we need to make this declaration honestly helps us to be careful about the matter. Its challenging to take ma’aser today, because unlike the beautiful words of *Sefer HaChinuch*, no-one’s sustenance, except perhaps for the ants, is dependent on it. Since my desire to share with them is nil, I tend to separate off the worse parts of the produce, in order not to waste. Yet, considering that keeping the mitzvah of tithing our produce today is preparation for the future temple times, perhaps we should work on accustoming ourselves to separate off, if not the very best, then at least medium good!

The Holiness of the Fruits of the Land

In order to revitalize the mitzvah of tithing our produce, we can look deeper into the underlying reasons for this mitzvah. Contemplating on the mitzvah, it seems that the fruits of the Land are so holy, that part of their holiness cannot be accessed today. That part 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. This part is even now imbued with the holiness of the Temple, which can only be eaten at the Temple Mount. Therefore, growing fruits in the Land of Israel brings us closer to the final redemption. As it states, “But you, O mountains of Israel, 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). May we merit to experience the final redemption, when we can eat the fruits of the land at the Temple Mount, in purity and holiness together with the Kohanim and the rest of the people of Israel!