

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Ki Tavo

### How Does the Mitzvah of The First Fruit Offering Inculcate Gratitude?

#### Struggling to Notice the Blessings While Living in Limbo

Recently I have been feeling a bit down. The long-winding war and all the other long-winding matters in its wake are difficult to carry. Although I teach my students daily to “keep up the good emunah!” At times I, myself, struggle with living in limbo. Sometimes I ask myself and Hashem about all the things I keep praying for every single day, “What’s gonna be? What’s gonna be?” A picture of wounded soldiers with steel legs stirred my soul and made my tears flow, thinking of the hardships facing these brave young men and their families for years to come. While it aroused much sadness in my heart, this picture simultaneously instilled a feeling of immense gratitude, for my own lot in life. It’s like when I was a kid, and my parents reminded me about the starving children in Africa, and how grateful I ought to be to have my needs met in abundance. Today, in the Western world when most of us have our basic physical needs met, I believe our main problem is loneliness – that arises from not feeling understood. One of my spiritual healing clients complained that she was unhappy and lonely. It turned out that this woman was a successful professional, and although she had suffered much grief in the past, she was surrounded by children and grandchildren one of whom even lived with her. She had a good friend with whom she did weekly excursions, and a Torah community, where she was actively performing various acts of chesed. So, why was she unhappy and lonely? Because she had programmed herself to focus on the glass being half empty! In my experience, it is not success and wealth that bring about happiness, it is our attitude to notice the blessings in our lives even if they hide behind a murky façade. So, even if things don’t go our way – especially when they don’t – it is time to count our blessings. That’s what makes them increase. As I pray for all single women to find their soulmate, I thank G-d for the wonderful, supportive, loyal husband who loves me! While praying for our soldiers’ protection and healing of the wounded, I remind myself to thank Hashem for having two healthy, able-bodied sons. In my concern for the Jews in exile and prayer for their speedy return to the land of Israel, I thank Hashem that I have the merit to live in the Promised Land, in the scenic Village of Bat Ayin, tending a beautiful home with a large surrounding garden. Even if not all the plants and flowers survive, and although the fruit has worms that I spend hours cutting off, I must focus on the beauty of the flowers that do bloom and the divine taste of the fruit wedges I do manage to salvage.

#### The Ultimate Blessing is Being Aware of the Benefits We Receive

“Who is rich? He who rejoices from his lot” (*Pirke Avot* 4:1). Rashi adds that we may have all the riches in the world, but if we are unable to appreciate our blessings, we are no better off than the poorest of the poor. This concept is elucidated in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, in the introduction to listing the blessings: “All these blessings will come upon you, and they will reach you...” (*Devarim* 28:2). What does it mean that the blessings “will reach you?” We learn from this expression that the ultimate blessing is to be aware of the benefits we receive. We can only truly be blessed when the blessings reach us deep within – when we become aware of and internalize the appreciation for our blessings. Gratitude is so central to Judaism that we begin every day with “*modeh ani*,” thanking Hashem for believing in us and granting us another day to serve Him. A great part of our prayers are blessings of thanksgiving. Furthermore, the blessings we make over food and for the opportunity to observe a mitzvah are for the sake of instilling the feeling of thankfulness within us. Gratitude is so essential in the Torah, that we

must even extend it to inanimate objects. Moshe didn't strike the Nile, since it protected him as an infant. Instead, Aharon hit it to bring about the plague of blood or frogs (*Midrash Tanchuma, Va'era* 14). By showing gratitude even to objects that lack feelings, a person acquires *hakarat hatov* (recognition of the good) as a character trait not necessarily dependent on the emotional state of the other party. Hence, failing to have gratitude for inanimate objects. Moshe didn't strike the Nile, since it protected him as an infant. Instead, Aharon hit it to bring about the plague of blood or frogs (*Midrash Tanchuma, Va'era* 14). By showing gratitude even to objects that lack feelings, a person acquires *hakarat hatov* (recognition of the good) as a character trait not necessarily dependent on the emotional state of the other party. Hence, failing to have gratitude for inanimate objects constitutes a character flaw, as Meiri explains (*Bava Kama* 92b) regarding the ingratitude of throwing a stone into a well from which we drank: "Anyone who does this demonstrates a lack of good character and a debased and despicable nature." Showing gratitude to inanimate objects fosters the trait, so a person will subsequently express gratitude to people who benefit them (Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Michtav M'Eliyahu* III, pp. 95-101). Whereas Heaven determines our lot in life and its gifts, we employ our free will through our attitude to whatever life dishes out for us. It may be more natural to notice the lacks, and occasions for dissatisfaction and sorrow, yet we rise to our greatness precisely by making the extra effort to search for the nuggets of blessings in our lives. With "an attitude of gratitude," we learn to recognize the blessing of the simple and important things in life such as a roof over our heads, healthy children, food to eat, and a family to love. "What more do we need?" (Based on Dr. Laura Segall, *Gratitude – Parashat Ki Tavo*).

### **The Essence of the Mitzvah of the First Fruit Offering is Expressing Gratitude**

One of the main mitzvot designated to inculcate gratitude is *Mitzvat Bikkurim* – The mitzvah of the First fruit offering. Indeed, the "essence of the mitzvah of bikkurim is gratitude" (Rabbi A. Twersky MD).

**ספר דברים פרק כו פסוק ג ובאת אל הכהן אשר יהיה בימים ההם ואמרת אליו...**

"And you shall come to the kohen who will be [serving] in those days and say to him..." (*Devarim* 26:3).

"...And say to him: that you are not ungrateful [for all that Hashem has done for you]" (Rashi). The foundation of the mitzvah of bringing bikkurim lies in our appreciation for the Creator, as expressed in the text read during the bikkurim when we recall the goodness of our Creator who raised us out of lowliness to possess the Holy Land and grow its blessed fruit. "For we were commanded to recount His kindnesses which He has bestowed upon us, and which has saved us" (Rambam (*Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Mitzvah* 132). The expression of gratitude for the fruit we receive is cause for great celebration. This gratitude refers to the recitation that accompanies the first fruit offering from the seven species of the Land of Israel, (*Devarim* 8:8), during Temple times. It is the only offering in the Torah preceded by a speech, there was musical accompaniment, and the Levi'im sang their greetings to the fruit bearers, bringing a real element of simcha, joy, to the event. The Bikkurim Recital is a brief synopsis of how the Jewish people began through lowliness, slavery, and suffering, emphasizing that it was only by the grace of G-d that we were liberated and granted the land of Israel. This recital is an act of appreciation for the bounty provided by Hashem. Without the exodus and Divine assistance in conquering the land of Canaan, there would be no Jewish nation in the land of Israel. Without Hashem's blessings, there would be no produce. The

“narrative of goodness, beginning with Ya’acov and Lavan and culminating with bringing the first fruits of our land to the Temple, also encompasses the measure of humility, the ability of a person to recognize that everything comes from G-d, as Rambam said (*Guide for the Perplexed* III §39). Sefer HaChinuch describes the message of the recitation: “It is suitable for us to awaken our heart with the words of our mouth and contemplate that everything we have comes from the Master of the Universe. We must recount G-d’s kindness, upon us and the people of Israel.” The sentence following the recitation states, “And you shall rejoice in all the good granted to you by Hashem your G-d” (*Devarim* 26:11). Once we verbalize our gratitude to Hashem, we can truly rejoice over all the goodness He keeps granting us!

**Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Ki Tavo –  
Tips on Expressing Your Gratitude to Hashem and Anyone Who has Benefitted Us**

The mitzvah of bikkurim, which expresses gratitude for G-d’s goodness, “is most essential, for it is the foundation of all things and encompasses everything” (Rabbi Moshe Alshich, *Devarim* 26:1). The offering of the ‘first’ of everything we have represents our recognition that G-d is the Master of ALL our possessions and that He is the source of our bounty. What is the trait of *hakarat hatov*? (recognizing the good) We must show gratitude to those who help us. Just as we would show our appreciation for Hashem with our first fruit gift basket during temple times, sending a gift to anyone who has benefitted us is a way to say a lot without many words. The late motivational writer William Arthur Ward said: “Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.” Let’s remember to show appreciation to Hashem – the Source of our blessings and extend our appreciation to anyone who has done us a favor!

- **Make a Conscious Effort to Dedicate the Beginning of Everything You Do to Hashem** – as appreciation for His blessings. The Biala Rebbe explains based on his father’s teachings the Divrei Bina that in every matter a person needs to make a conscious effort that its beginning should be for the sake of heaven, for everything goes after the beginning. In heaven, they calculate mainly the beginning of the thoughts of a person, whether through fulfilling the Torah and the Mitzvot, or through physical matters, the beginning of intention needs to be for Hashem. When we have pure intentions in our every deed, to dedicate its beginning to Hashem, we fulfill the mitzvah of Bikurim even more than during Temple times! (Rabbi Ben Tzion Rabinowitz, *Shulchan Adam Mekaper, A Person’s Table Atones*, Chapter 5).
- **How do We Best Thank Someone Who Has Helped Us?** – Should we always give a gift in return, or is simply saying “thank you” enough? There is no black-and-white answer to this question. Often, just “thanks,” combined with other words of appreciation, is a sufficient way of showing appreciation. Yet, giving a gift, flowers, fruit, a bottle of wine or a plant is a beautiful way of showing appreciation to anyone who has helped us.
- **Give gifts of Appreciation to those who have Extended Themselves to You** – There is no better way to show appreciation than through gift giving. Although it’s the intention that counts try to carefully select a gift that the receiver will appreciate. Just as the first fruit offering was presented in a beautifully decorated basket, gifts should be nicely wrapped; presentation is as important as the content.
- **Send a Real Snail Mail Thank You Letter of Appreciation** – to someone who hosted you for a meal, visited you when you were sick, or helped you during other hardships.

- **Choose a Gift Your Recipient Will Love** – Choosing a thank-you gift requires thought and creativity. The primary reason we get a thank-you gift is to show appreciation, which means taking the time to find something the receiver will enjoy. When choosing a thank-you gift, let the recipient's interests guide your choices. Consider who they are and their hobbies, and then keep your selection in line with something you believe they'll love. Thank-you gifts are from the heart. Selecting a particular kind of flower or plant that you think the recipient loves is sensible. Get her something related to her passion, that she likely will use and enjoy. The bikkurim was presented beautifully, likewise, a beautifully wrapped gift shows more appreciation.
- **A Thank-You Gift Should Always Include a Heartfelt Thank-You Note** – If someone has gone out of their way for you, then including written words along with your gift makes the gesture much more meaningful. Whether you handwrite a letter or include a gift tag with the recipient's name and a short message, making it personal gives it a special touch. Here is an example of a thank-you note:

Dear [Name],

Thank you so much for [favor/act of kindness]. You're an amazing person, and your generosity means a lot to me. I know how much you love [reason you chose the gift], so when I saw this [gift], I knew I had to get it for you. Enjoy!

[Your Name]

- **How to Express Your Appreciation When Giving a Gift** – Verbally letting someone know how grateful you are for their generosity is a lovely gesture they're sure to appreciate. If you're at a loss for words when presenting a thank-you gift, then it is best to keep it short and simple.
- **Put Effort into Expressing Thanks But Don't Overthink It** – The effort you spend on a gift will be noticed and appreciated. The bottom line is to put your heart into it. Ironically, putting too much thought into selecting a gift can lead to choosing a gift that represents your own ideas instead of something the recipient would actually want. A thank-you gift is a wonderful way to show your appreciation while leaving a lasting impression. Sending a thank you gift, such as wine, sweet treats, personalized gifts, or thank you baskets, is never a bad idea, and even the smallest gesture can go a long way. Gratitude never goes out of style.