

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Re'eh: "Elevating Eating Through the Mitzvot of the Land"

How Do the Various Tithes Transform Eating into an Act of Gratitude and Generosity?

How Do We Know that the Produce of the Land of Israel is Holier than its People?

Today it can be challenging to understand and appreciate the mitzvah of separating *terumot* (the sacred portions set aside for the Kohanim) and *ma'aserot* (the various tithes) from the produce we grow. These mitzvot are among the commandments that depend on the Land and apply only in Eretz Yisrael. Baruch Hashem, I enjoy harvesting fresh apples, kale, and purslane from my garden. If I do not have time to separate *terumot* and *ma'aserot* immediately, I place the freshly harvested produce on the windowsill as a clear reminder that it is still awaiting their separation. This lets my husband know not to eat any of it before the sacred portions have been separated and disposed of respectfully. Since only the two of us live here, this simple system works well. At Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, however, we always separate *terumot* and *ma'aserot* immediately after harvesting to ensure that no one is tempted to sample the freshly harvested produce before they have been separated.

I sometimes find myself separating tithes several times a day, when I suddenly remember that I need another apple for my apple crisp or a few more greens for my smoothie. Although I have memorized the declaration for separating *ma'aser*, it remains a challenge to recite it slowly and mindfully, carefully designating each portion for the Kohen, the Levi, and, in the appropriate years, either for the poor or as *ma'aser sheni*.

During Temple times, these sacred portions were actually given to the Kohanim and Levi'im while *ma'aser sheni* was brought to Jerusalem to be eaten in holiness. It feels strange today, as we continue to mourn the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, that part of this holy produce must instead be respectfully double-wrapped and disposed of.

Yet there is a beautiful lesson hidden within this practice. The produce of the Land of Israel is, in a certain sense, holier than we are. Part of the holiness embedded within these fruits and vegetables already belongs to the future redemption. Because the Beit HaMikdash is not yet standing, we cannot fully access that holiness today. The designated sacred portions can only be eaten in a state of ritual purity, and *ma'aser sheni* may only be eaten in holiness in Jerusalem. Until the Temple is rebuilt, that dimension of their sanctity remains beyond our reach.

Every time we cultivate the soil of Eretz Yisrael and observe these mitzvot, we faithfully participate in the unfolding process of redemption. As the prophet Yechezkel declares:

ספר יחזקאל פרק לו פסוק ח

וְאַתֶּם הָרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲנַפְכֶם תִּתְּנוּ וּפְרִיכֶם תִּשְׂאוּ לְעַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי קָרְבוּ לְבֹא:

"But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they will soon be coming" (Yechezkel 36:8).

The Talmud comments, "There is no more revealed sign of the end of days than this" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a*).

May we soon merit the final redemption, when the Beit HaMikdash will be rebuilt, and we will once again eat the holy produce of the Land in purity before Hashem in Jerusalem together with the Kohanim and all the people of Israel.

What is Ma'aser Sheni and How Was it Eaten Before Hashem?

After separating the sacred portions for the Kohanim and the tithes for the Levi'im, the Torah commands every Jewish farmer to set aside another tenth of the remaining produce (except during the third and sixth years, when it was given to the poor). This tithe, known as *ma'aser sheni* (the second tithe), was unique because it was not given away. Instead, the owner and his family brought it to Jerusalem to eat in holiness before Hashem:

ספר דברים פרק יד פסוק כג וְאָכַלְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר לְשֹׁכֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם מֵעֵשֶׂר דִּגְגָךְ תִּירְשָׁךְ וַיִּצְהָרְךָ... לְמַעַן תִּלְמַד לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל הַיָּמִים:

“You shall eat before Hashem your G-d, in the place that He will choose as a dwelling for His Name, the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil... so that you may learn to fear Hashem your G-d always” (*Devarim* 14:23).

Unlike the other tithes, *ma'aser sheni* remained the property of the farmer. Yet it could not be eaten wherever he pleased. The Torah required it to be brought to the place Hashem chose for His Presence – the holy city of Jerusalem – where it was eaten in a state of ritual purity.

Since many families lived far from Jerusalem, transporting large quantities of grain, wine, oil, and fruit was not always practical. The Torah therefore provided an alternative. The holiness of the produce could be redeemed onto money, which is how we continue to observe this mitzvah today. During Temple times, however, that money was brought to Jerusalem to purchase food and drink to be eaten there in holiness (*Devarim* 14:24–26). If the owner redeemed his own produce, he was required to add a quarter to its value, encouraging people, whenever possible, to bring the produce itself rather than redeeming it.

This was no ordinary family meal or festive picnic. The produce that had grown through months of sowing, watering, weeding, and harvesting now became part of a sacred meal before Hashem. The farmer did not leave his harvest behind when he ascended to Jerusalem; he brought it with him. In this way, the Torah united heaven and earth. Through *ma'aser sheni*, the Torah transformed eating into an act of Divine service. The fruits of physical labor were elevated through holiness, teaching that the purpose of our material blessings is not merely to sustain our bodies but to deepen our relationship with the One who provides them. Even the busiest farmer was called away from his fields to leave behind the routines of daily life and ascend to Jerusalem, where every bite became part of a sacred encounter with Hashem.

What Does it Mean to Eat “Before Hashem”?

The Torah emphasizes that *ma'aser sheni* was to be eaten “before Hashem:”

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Yet Hashem has no physical need for food. What, then, did this expression mean? According to the straightforward explanation (*peshat*), “before Hashem” refers to the place where His Presence rested. There, at the Temple Mount, every meal unfolded in an atmosphere of holiness. The farmer and his family would see the Kohanim performing the Temple service, hear the songs of the Levi'im, encounter the sages who taught Torah and judged the people, and be surrounded by fellow Jews who had also come to rejoice before Hashem. Simply spending time in such an environment elevated the heart and inspired a greater awareness of the Divine (Rashbam; Bechor Shor; Chizkuni; Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Devarim* 14:23).

Rabbeinu Bachaya adds that by living for a time among the Kohanim and Levi'im, whose lives were devoted to serving Hashem, the people naturally absorbed their values and learned from their example. The journey to Jerusalem was therefore much more than fulfilling a ritual obligation. It became an opportunity to step away from the pressures of earning a livelihood and to immerse oneself in a community whose priorities were centered on Torah, holiness, and Divine service.

On a mystical level, *ma'aser sheni* was eaten specifically in Jerusalem because Tzion corresponds to Rachel, the revealed aspect of the Shechinah, while Jerusalem represents Leah, the higher, more concealed dimension of holiness rooted in Binah. Rabbi Chaim Vital explains that the two principal tithes reflect these complementary dimensions of holiness. Accordingly, *ma'aser rishon* (the first tithe, given to the Levi'im) is associated with Rachel, while *ma'aser sheni* (the second tithe, eaten by its owner in Jerusalem) expresses the return of Leah's hidden light to its source. By ascending to Jerusalem to eat *ma'aser sheni* "before Hashem," the farmer entered the city associated with Leah's higher holiness, where he was invited to move beyond the revealed dimension of holiness into a deeper encounter with the concealed Divine reality. There, even the simple act of eating became a profound encounter with the Divine, elevating an ordinary meal into an expression of hidden sanctity, a bridge from the revealed world to the concealed world of holiness (Rabbi Chaim Vital, *Ta'amei HaMitzvot, Parashat Korach*).

Whether through witnessing the Temple service or through the hidden spiritual influence of Jerusalem, every pilgrimage taught the Jewish people to see beyond the physical and recognize Hashem's Presence within everyday life.

How Does Eating Before Hashem Cultivate Reverence for G-d?

The Torah itself reveals the purpose of the mitzvah of *ma'aser sheni*: "...so that you may learn to fear Hashem your G-d always" (*Devarim* 14:23). Eating *ma'aser sheni* in the holiness of Jerusalem trained the hearts of the Jewish people to live in constant awareness of Hashem.

Rabbi Levi ben Gershon adds that families often brought more produce than they could consume and naturally shared it with the Levi'im and those in need, teaching that genuine reverence for Hashem is expressed not only through worship but also through generosity and kindness (Rabag, *Devarim* 14:23).

Although the Beit HaMikdash no longer stands, the lesson remains. While we await its rebuilding, may it be speedily in our days, every meal still offers us the opportunity to recognize Hashem as the Source of our nourishment, cultivate generosity by welcoming guests and sharing our blessings with those in need, and, in a spiritual sense, eat "before Hashem" by transforming every meal into an act of gratitude, holiness, and Divine service.

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin: Holistic Torah for Women on the Land is for women who seek to delve deeply into their souls through intensive textual study and creative expression. We engage women of all ages and nationalities in intense Torah study and sustainable living. Drawing on creativity and life experience, students participate in art & drama workshops, authentic movement, and organic gardening, and take turns cooking wholesome meals for each other. Our Holistic Torah involves connecting to Torah of the land, to our Creator, and to personal growth. Dormitory facilities are available in the peaceful, rural setting of Bat Ayin, nestled in the Judean Hills and located just 20 minutes south of Jerusalem.