

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

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Parashat Ki Tavo: “The Irresistible First Fig”

What Does Bikkurim Reveal About Our Instinct to Possess and Our Capacity to Share?

Why Do Figs Elicit My Most Basic Cravings and Survival Instincts?

The wonderful midsummer fig season has begun here in Bat Ayin. Our home is surrounded by fig trees – our own and those of our neighbors on both sides. Their fruit-laden branches leisurely stretch into our plot, as if embracing us with their sweetness. Figs are definitely my favorite fruit. They are also the fruit I find hardest to resist gobbling up and – I’m embarrassed to admit – the hardest for me to share. Luckily, my husband doesn’t eat fresh, homegrown organic figs, since they are notoriously difficult to check for bugs. The tiny white worms that share my passion for figs look remarkably like the numerous slender white pistils of the flowers modestly concealed within the fig. As I was turning into our driveway on my way home from teaching, I noticed a familiar bicycle parked beside the fig tree at the top of our driveway. The tree belongs to our neighbors, who are trying to sell their house and have already moved away, leaving no one to pick their fruit. Just the day before, I had enjoyed two delicious ripe figs from that tree which otherwise would have gone to waste, and I was planning to ask the owners for permission to continue picking them. Then I spotted the owner of the familiar bicycle busily picking figs from the tree. Although he is a kind family friend who lives farther down our street, I felt, somewhat irrationally, as though my fig territory was being invaded – even though logically I had no more right to those figs than he did. When I asked, “Did you get permission from the family to pick their figs?” he seemed a little uncomfortable and mumbled something like, “In previous years I did.”

Afterward, I kept thinking about my reaction. I tried hard to connect with my more altruistic side. After all, our family friend doesn’t have fig trees of his own, while several fig trees grow abundantly in our back garden, where no one else would dream of picking without permission. Surely there were enough figs to go around! Yet despite all my reasonable arguments, something about those sweet, ripe figs had awakened a surprisingly primal possessiveness within me. Why do figs, more than any other fruit, seem to arouse such powerful cravings and even touch upon our most basic survival instincts?

Perhaps this is connected with the deeper spiritual nature of the fig. According to the Arizal, the fig corresponds to *Netzach* – the sefirah associated with victory and endurance (See my book, *The Seven Fruits of the Land of Israel with their Mystical & Medicinal Properties*). When Chava was first tempted to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, she “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise” (*Bereishit* 3:6). Maharal explains that the attraction to the tree because it was “good for food” corresponds to the lowest level of the soul, the *nefesh*, associated with eating and physical survival. He connects this dimension specifically with the fig (*Derech HaChaim*, commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 4:22).

Figs revive the *nefesh* and awaken the appetite; their luscious sweetness seems to invite us to reach for just one more. It is therefore no coincidence that our Sages mention the fig first when describing the mitzvah of *bikkurim*. The Mishnah describes a person going down into his field and seeing a fig that has begun to ripen, a cluster of grapes that has begun to ripen, or a pomegranate that has begun to ripen. He ties a reed around it and declares, “This is bikkurim” (*Mishnah Bikkurim* 3:1). It is striking that the fig is mentioned first, although grapes generally precede figs in the Torah’s listing of the seven species and in the order of preference for blessings, and grapes generally ripen earlier as well. Precisely the fruit that can awaken such an immediate desire to pluck and devour becomes the first fruit mentioned when teaching us to restrain our desire and instead dedicate it to Hashem. Once we relinquish this desired fruit to Hashem, something remarkable happens: through dedicating the fig to the Temple, we are offering our very

cravings to Hashem, transforming our most basic desire for food into sacred nourishment for the Kohen.

How Does Giving Up the First Fruit Transform it into Sacred Nourishment?

The mitzvah of *bikkurim* begins at precisely the moment when our desire to eat is awakened. A person enters the field, notices the first fig beginning to ripen, ties a reed around it and declares, “This is *bikkurim*” (*Mishnah Bikkurim* 3:1). The fruit that naturally awakens our greatest anticipation is thus set aside before we can enjoy it ourselves. Yet the Torah does not demand that this delicious fruit go to waste. On the contrary, after being brought to the Beit HaMikdash, it ultimately becomes sacred food for the Kohanim.

This transformation is reflected in the special halachic status of *bikkurim*. Rambam explains that the first fruits are given to the Kohanim serving in the current *mishmar* (priestly watch), who divide them among themselves like the sacred offerings of the Beit HaMikdash. Although *bikkurim* are fruits rather than an animal or flour offering placed upon the altar, they are imbued with sanctity. They may be eaten only by Kohanim, and only after they have been brought within Jerusalem and placed in the Temple courtyard. They are eaten according to the same laws as *terumah*, with additional requirements particular to *bikkurim* (Rambam, *Hilchot Bikkurim* 3:1, 5).

This progression reveals a profound transformation. The first ripe fruit begins as something I instinctively desire for myself. Rather than immediately satisfying that desire, I designate the fruit for Hashem and carry it all the way to His chosen place. The very fruit that awakens my desire to take becomes sanctified through my choice to give. It is transformed from ordinary produce into holy nourishment for the Kohen. The Torah does not negate the physical pleasure of eating the luscious fruits of the Land. Rather, through the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, our desire for food is redirected and elevated. What I relinquish for Hashem does not cease to nourish; it becomes nourishment infused with holiness.

Why Must We Retell Our History When Bringing Our First Fruit Offering?

The mitzvah of *bikkurim* entails much more than bringing our first ripe fruits to the Beit HaMikdash and giving them to the Kohen. The Torah requires the farmer to accompany his offering with *Mikra Bikkurim* – the declaration over the first fruits. Remarkably, rather than simply thanking Hashem for a successful harvest, the farmer recounts the essential milestones of Jewish history. This same passage became the foundation upon which our Sages structured the retelling of the Exodus in the Pesach Haggadah. Why must we recall our national history while standing before Hashem with a basket of freshly harvested fruit?

ספר דברים פרק כו פסוקים ה' וענית ואמרת לפני השם אלהיך ארמי אבד אבי ויֵרַד מִצְרַיִם... וְנִצַּעַק אֶל־הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע הַשֵּׁם אֶת־קוֹלֵנוּ... וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ הַשֵּׁם מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה... וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן־לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלֶב וּדְבַשׁ: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת־רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתָּה לִּי הַשֵּׁם... “You shall answer and say before Hashem your G-d, ‘An Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he descended to Egypt... We cried out to Hashem, the G-d of our fathers, and Hashem heard our voice... Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm... He brought us to this place and gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the soil that You have given me, Hashem...” (*Devarim* 26:5–10).

The fruit in the farmer’s basket is thus not merely the product of his own labor. Its story began long before he planted his field. Had Hashem not redeemed our ancestors from Egypt, brought us into a covenant with Him, and given us the Land of Israel, this farmer would not be standing in the Beit HaMikdash presenting its luscious fruits. The declaration therefore weaves together our national and personal stories. Hashem brought us out of Egypt; Hashem gave us this Land; and now He has given me its fruit. The words “And now, behold, I have brought...” connect thousands of years of Divine kindness with the tangible nourishment held

n the farmer's hands.

Remembering this history is not intended merely to awaken nostalgia for the past. Recalling everything Hashem has done for us deepens our awareness of our ongoing relationship with Him. Our appreciation naturally calls forth a response: just as Hashem has continually bestowed His goodness upon us, we dedicate ourselves and the blessings He bestows upon us to serving Him. *Bikkurim* thus teaches us to recognize that the food nourishing us today is part of a much greater story – the unfolding relationship between Hashem, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel (Based in part on Hannah Goldman, *The Times of Israel*, [Missing the Point of Bikkurim](#)).

How Does Relinquishing Our Cravings Enable Us to Rejoice in Hashem's Abundance?

The mitzvah of *bikkurim* culminates not with self-denial, but with joy. After bringing the first fruits, recounting Hashem's kindness throughout Jewish history, placing the basket before Hashem, and bowing down, the Torah commands us to rejoice:

ספר דברים פרק כו פסוק יא

וְשִׂמְחָתָּ בְּכָל־הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּלְבֵיתְךָ אֶתָּה וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ:

"You shall rejoice in all the good that Hashem your G-d has given you and your household – you, the Levi, and the convert who is in your midst" (*Devarim* 26:11).

Netivot Shalom explains that the mitzvah of *bikkurim* instills within us both *emunah* and *kedushah*. When the farmer takes the first fruit, which is especially precious to him, and dedicates it to Hashem, he uproots the illusion of כָּחִי וְעֹצְמִי – "my strength and the might of my hand" (*Devarim* 8:17) – the feeling that his success and possessions are truly his own. By bringing the first fruit and reciting its declaration, he acknowledges that the Land, the harvest, and even the strength with which he cultivated it all come from Hashem. In dedicating the first of his produce, he thereby dedicates all his strength and labor to Hashem (*Netivot Shalom*, *Ki Tavo*, pp. 161–162).

This recognition does not diminish our enjoyment of Hashem's blessings. On the contrary, *Netivot Shalom* connects *bikkurim* specifically with *simchah*. When we loosen our possessive grip and recognize that everything we have is a gift from Hashem, our enjoyment becomes part of serving Him with joy. Perhaps the *tikkun* (rectification) for my intense craving for figs is therefore not to love them less. I can savor their luscious sweetness while remembering that they were never exclusively mine in the first place.

It is striking that the Torah's command to rejoice includes not only the farmer and his household, but also "the Levi and the convert who is in your midst." The ultimate joy of *bikkurim* expands beyond ourselves. Hashem's abundance is not diminished when others partake of it. The fig that initially awakened the instinct to grasp and possess can instead teach us to open our hands. By offering our cravings to Hashem, we transform possessiveness into gratitude, physical pleasure into holiness, and the sweetness we desire for ourselves into the deeper joy of sharing Hashem's abundance with others.

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