

Gratitude
Ki Tavo, 5781
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Rabbi Eliyahu Meisel (1821-1912), the rabbi of Lodz, was well known for his herculean efforts on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised. Many stories are told about his dedication to the mitzvah of tzedakah.

For example, one time he needed to raise money to purchase firewood for the poor. He visited a wealthy man on a bitter cold day in order to make a request for funds. The wealthy man invited the rabbi in for some hot tea. Rabbi Meisel refused to go inside and instead insisted on speaking with the wealthy man while he was standing outside. Out of respect for the rabbi, the wealthy man came outside to ask the rabbi what he needed. When the rabbi explained that he needed firewood for the poor, the wealthy man agreed at once. He then asked the rabbi, "You know that I always respond favorably to your requests, so why didn't you come inside and drink some hot tea?" The rabbi responded, "I knew that you would support the poor people and help them get wood for fuel, but I wanted you to realize just how desperate they are for some heat. That's why I needed to talk with you outside."

There is a story about Rabbi Meisel that relates to a mitzvah from our parasha, the mitzvah of bikkurim (26:1-11).

One time Rabbi Meisel was walking on the street and he saw a prominent businessman. He asked the man, "so, how is everything going?" The man responded with a laundry list of complaints. One of his partners was cheating him, one of his employees was stealing, another employee was quitting abruptly, and the government was raising taxes on him. On top of all this, his business was doing very poorly and he wasn't making anywhere close to the amount he needed to make. Rabbi Meisel gave him a blessing and continued on his way. A few months later he saw this same business man on the street and the rabbi again asked him how he was doing. This time the man responded by simply stating, "everything is good."

Rabbi Meisel replied to the business man, "This reminds of a midrash to parashat Ki Tavo. The verse states, 'Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, Hashem, have given me' (v. 10). The midrash comments, 'A person offers praise with a soft voice, and offers complaints in a loud voice'" (From *Mei'Otzreinu Hayashan*; cited by Rabbi Shalom Rosner, 5772).

Rabbi Meisel's point was that when it came to pointing the negative aspects of his life, the business man was very thorough and precise. However, when it came to the positive developments in his life, the man used one simple word and that sufficed.

The sad reality is that often times we are more likely to focus on the negative aspects of our life than the positive aspects. This is despite the fact that for most of us the positives in our lives

far outweigh the negatives. Nevertheless, it is human nature to focus on the negatives and to allow the negatives to outweigh the positives. For example, if someone asks us how we are feeling, we might say, "My stomach hurts and I have a headache." But if we are feeling healthy, how many of us would respond, "I am feeling great. My stomach doesn't hurt and I don't have a headache."

The mitzvah of bikkurim reminds us that it is an essential spiritual responsibility to focus on the positive aspects of our life.

The Torah tells us regarding the mitzvah of Bikkurim:

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, "I acknowledge this day before the LORD your God that I have entered the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to assign us." The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O LORD, have given me." You shall leave it before the LORD your God and bow low before the LORD your God. And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the LORD your God has bestowed upon you and your household (26:1-11).

With this mitzvah the Torah is teaching us how to express our gratitude to Hashem for the fruits of our harvest. Consider the following aspects to the mitzvah:

- 1) We must verbalize our gratitude. It is not enough merely to think it. We must pronounce it in a loud voice. The Torah says, "*ve'anita veamarta*, you must declare and say" (verse 5). Rashi says, "in raised voice." We are commanded to shout out loud our gratitude to Hashem.
- 2) When expressing our gratitude, the expression must be a priority of our harvest. Gratitude is not an afterthought. It is as core to the harvest as the fruits themselves. The Jerusalem Talmud teaches that the beginning of the process of gratitude comes even before the harvest itself: "How does one separate the bikkurim? One should go down into one's field as soon as one sees a ripening fig or a cluster of grapes ripening. One should immediately tie a reed around the fruits and say 'these are the bikkurim.'"

- 3) The gratitude must be said with great specificity and should acknowledge where we would be without the blessing of this gift. This is why the formula of the Torah recounts our early days as a wandering Aramean and our time period as slaves in Egypt. By stating the phrase in this manner, the recipient is acknowledging that it was by no means certain that there would one day be fruits to harvest and that it is an incredible gift from Hashem to be able to celebrate a harvest at all.

These are some lessons about gratitude that we can glean from the bikkurim ceremony.

There is another aspect to the concept of gratitude that we can derive from the end of our portion. Too often we only express our gratitude if everything works out exactly the way we want it. However, actually, we should also express our gratitude for any blessing that we receive, even if the blessing appears incomplete.

There is a story that we came across in our daf yomi studies this week that relates to this message. It is a strange story about two men—one was named Sason, and the other was named Simcha. The literal meaning of both of their names is joy. At first glance we might assume that the words sason and simcha really mean the same thing—joy. But in the Talmud's telling, the two men, Sason and Simcha, have an argument over who has a better name:

There were these two heretics, one named Sason and one named Simḥa. Sason said to Simḥa: I am superior to you, as it is written: "They shall obtain joy [sason] and happiness [simḥa], and sorrow and sighing shall flee" (Isaiah 35:10). The verse mentions joy first. Simḥa said to Sason, On the contrary, I am superior to you, as it is written: "There was happiness [simḥa] and joy [sason] for the Jews" (Esther 8:17). Sason said to Simḥa: One day they will dismiss you and render you a messenger [parvanka], as it is written: "For you shall go out with happiness [simḥa]" (Isaiah 55:12). Simḥa said to Sason: One day they will dismiss you and draw water with you, as it is written: "With joy [sason] you shall draw water" (Sukkah, 48b).

It is a difficult story to understand. How are we to understand the meaning of Sason and Simcha arguing over whose name is better? Certainly, the story cannot be taken at face value and has a deeper message.

My teacher, Rabbi Avi Weiss taught me that the words simcha and sason represent different types of joy.

Simcha represents complete joy – a feeling of total happiness.

Sason represents something else—a different type of joy.

The word *sason* appears in our parasha. The verse states, "*yasis Hashem aleichem le-haavid etchem u-lehashmid etchem*, And as the Hashem once delighted (*sas*) in making you prosperous

and many, so will Hashem now delight (*sas*) in causing you to perish and in wiping you out; you shall be torn from the land that you are about to enter and possess” (28:63).

Taken literally the verse means that Hashem will delight over our destruction. This is very difficult and challenging to understand. Does God really rejoice over our downfall?

The Talmud therefore suggests an alternative reading of this verse:

Rabbi Elazar said that this is how the matter is to be understood: Indeed, God Himself does not rejoice over the downfall of the wicked, but He causes others to rejoice. The Gemara comments: One can learn from the language of the verse as well, as it is written: “So the Lord will rejoice [ken yasis]” (Deuteronomy 28:63). And it is not written yasus, the grammatical form of the verb meaning: He will rejoice. Rather, it is written yasis. The grammatical form of this verb indicates that one causes another to rejoice. Consequently, these words are understood to mean that God will cause others to rejoice. The Gemara concludes: Indeed, learn from it that this is the case (Megillah, 10b).

According to this reading, God does not rejoice over Israel’s downfall. God only causes others to rejoice.

However, there is another possible explanation which stays closer to the literal meaning of the verse by expanding our definition of *sason*. Rabbi Aaron Frank suggests that the word *sas* differs from the biblical term *simcha*. *Simcha* means total joy, whereas *sas* refers to a joy that comes in the middle of difficult times – it is a joy in feeling God’s protection even in life’s most challenging moments.

Rabbi Weiss writes: “Note the text recited at a wedding, *sos tasis v’tagel ha’akarah*, which can be understood to mean that Israel, the barren one, is joyous in knowing that no matter how bleak the barrenness it will be protected by God.”

Sas represents a joy that is incomplete; a joy within sadness. This is the argument between *Sason* and *Simcha*. *Simcha* argues that my joy is better than yours as my joy is complete and total joy. *Sason* responds by arguing that my joy is better, because even though my joy is incomplete and often bookmarked by sadness, it represents the ability to find joy even in the most difficult circumstances and even in the darkest of times.

This, then, is another message about the *bikurim* and about the obligation to express our gratitude to Hashem. The spiritual obligation to express gratitude to Hashem is not only when life’s events meet our hopes and expectations. There is also an obligation to express our gratitude to Hashem during life’s most difficult moments.

This is the message of *sason*—of expressing our gratitude even when the joy is incomplete and the joy is surrounded by hardship. It is one thing to express gratitude when one reaps the

bounty of an overflowing harvest. It is another thing to express our gratitude—but we must—when the harvest is weak and insufficient.

That is the responsibility of a spiritual approach to gratitude: to express our thanks to Hashem when the joy is total and overwhelming and also even when the joy seems incomplete. *Sason* and *Simcha* together.

You can now watch a YouTube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NT6xWk_XG3U