

*Pay Attention to Your 'First Fruits'*

Parashat Ki Tavo

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It used to be very common to walk into a restaurant, a coffee shop, a bakery, a little market or boutique or barber shop and see either on the wall behind the cash register or even taped to the cash register the very first dollar bill that business earned. The reason I say it used to be very common is that as more and more of these small businesses were taken over by chain stores or big corporations, that expression of appreciation of a small business owner, who toiled to set up his or her own shop; who scraped together some investors, who thought about where to place each bin or rack on the storeroom floor, who planned their own promotions, advertisements and sales became less and less common. Even though Starbucks calls their employees “partners” and offers them discounted stock options, you’re not likely to walk into your neighborhood Starbucks and see the first dollar they made taped up between the coffee bean grinder and the espresso machine. I bet even Howard Schultz doesn’t know where the first Starbucks’ dollar is located. But the individual business owner appreciates not just every dollar, but every penny in the cash register. Everything in the cash register is a reward for the planning, the preparation, the execution of a business plan. I read that some chambers of commerce are giving out First Dollar Awards to newly created businesses. I was thinking of my maternal grandfather, who owned a deli, and then a kosher food wholesale company; my paternal grandparents who owned a women’s clothing boutique; my father-in-law of blessed memory who came to the U.S. from Canada in the late 70’s and opened a plastic bag and packaging business. There were plenty of years of financial uncertainty as he established himself, before the business really took off. I bet they all saved the first dollar they made in their businesses.

These memories came flooding back to me as I read the opening verses of our parasha this week, which describes what I believe is the ancient, biblical version of magnifying the first dollar made in a business. The Torah says that when the Jewish people finally enter and settle in the land of Israel,

*V'lakachta mei'reishit kol pri ha'adamah, asher tavi mei'artzecha...*

And, after planting and then harvesting the first produce of the season, rather than eating it or selling it right away, the mitzvah is to take a specific amount of all of the crops grown in your

field or farm or orchard, place them in a basket, bring them to Jerusalem, and make a public declaration before the Kohen—a declaration that is also found in the Passover Haggadah—which associates that piece of fruit, that vegetable with the entire history of the Jewish people! That declaration describes the journeys of the Jewish people from the beginning of their history, the challenges and triumphs along the way, and ultimately *vayitein lanu et ha'aretz ha'zot, eretz zavat chalav u'dvash*...you brought us to this land, God, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Just like how a business owner looks at that first dollar and remembers the very beginnings of setting up shop; all that hard work, the wondering if any customers would wander in, if anyone would buy anything, if the risk would pay off. And also, for those businesses that grow and succeed, I imagine that first dollar is a major sign of gratitude for all the prosperity that person has enjoyed since then. So too the simple farmer whose first fig or olive or orange becomes part and parcel of the larger narrative of the Jewish people. Each piece of produce a fulfillment of a divine promise.

Nowadays, in the absence of the Holy Temple, we no longer bring first fruits from the fields to Jerusalem. Ironically, for many years it was the secular kibbutzim in Israel that would keep the bikkurim festivities alive...staging big municipal festivals; parades of kibbutzniks dressed as ancient Israelites, wearing wreaths and marching through the streets with wagonloads of fruits and vegetables. In the early 1900's the Chief Rabbi of Haifa demanded that the kibbutzniks not use the biblical term bikkurim for these festivals because they were not really fulfilling the mitzvah. Certainly Jews in the diaspora had even less of a connection with this mitzvah. But that didn't stop the holy Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, the founder of hassidism to encourage us...outside of the Land of Israel, and without a Temple...to embrace the idea of first fruits. He taught, it is essential to pay attention to the firsts of each day: the first thought, the first word spoken, the first action.” This is why the tradition tells us that as soon as we open our eyes in the morning, the first word shouldn't be Oy, or Coffee, or I don't wanna get up, but instead: *Modeh ani lifanecha*...thank you God for breathing into me the breath of life on this new day.

In many ways this is a season of firsts...I have seen so many first day of school, first day on campus pictures on social media. Many people begin new jobs or new projects around this time of year. We are of course about to begin a new year, with so many hopes and possibilities for

ourselves, our families, our world. I think the Torah is encouraging us to not just let those first days and first experiences pass us by, but to dwell on them, and to recognize the exciting potential associated with each new experience in our lives. Although first things can be scary, uncertain, disorienting, when we locate those moments, like the arrival of first fruits, in the context of our life story, we can embrace them with gratitude for the journey we are on...how far we've come, and the direction we are traveling.

The words of our parasha are not just ancient history...they are a reminder to encounter every first experience in our daily lives positively, with hope and with profound gratitude. May God sanctify all of your firsts, and let them be a reminder of how blessed you truly are!