

Sermon | Parshat Ki Tavo
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Labor on the Bima

For many of congregation's youngest members and their families, this week had the potential to be exciting, or anxiety-producing, or both because this week was the first week back at school. The preparations for the first day of school are immense—administrators prepare their teachers and staff to welcome students back into their buildings; teachers prepare their classrooms to be welcoming and engaging environments; parents prepare their children materially and mentally for the transition back to school; and students prepare themselves to arrive with required materials in hand, and with a growth mindset for the year ahead. There is so much that needs to get done in order to make the enterprise successful. Sometimes we succeed, at other times we falter. I hope that everyone—parents, teachers, students, and administrators—all give each other grace during this time.

As we, here at B'nai Israel and in my home, made the necessary preparations for the return to school, I couldn't help but also think about the first *mitzvah* of Parshat Ki Tavo. The parsha begins with the commandment of *bikkurim*, the bringing of first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. The commandment is to bring the first fruits of one's harvest in a basket to Jerusalem and deliver them to the *kohen* at the foot of the altar, making a declaration that describes the history of our people and expressing our personal gratitude to God.¹

¹ Deuteronomy 26:5-10.

The Torah's description of the *mitzvah* is brief. Only in the Mishnah do we witness a fuller description of what bringing one's first fruits to Jerusalem actually entails. The third chapter of Mishnah Bikkurim describes an elaborate ritual whereby an entire city would gather in the evening and camp outdoors. At sunrise, a leader of the community would wake up the sleeping city with a quote from the prophet Jeremiah, קוּמוּ וְנַעֲלֶה צִיּוֹן אֶל בֵּית ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "Let us arise and go up to Zion, to the house of Adonai our God."² Thus the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would begin. An ox with horns overlayed with gold would march at the front, and musicians would perform alongside. Upon reaching the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, individuals would bring forward their baskets, whereupon they would recite the passage from our parsha, present their basket to the kohen, leave it at the foot of the altar, and depart.

The preparations for this journey to Jerusalem were immense. I imagine entire villages and cities making this journey to Jerusalem together, trekking with what must have looked like ancient "Edible Arrangements." I imagine the anxiety that people felt in the days leading up to the journey. Did they have enough fruit in their basket? Was their basket nice enough? And not only did they have to prepare to schlep to Jerusalem, but the city of Jerusalem also needed to prepare to receive these delegations of pilgrims. For a variety of reasons, this *mitzvah* is no longer operative, but I imagine that it felt something like getting ready to show up on the first day of school.

But just as not all backpacks or lunch boxes are the same, neither were the fruit baskets of the ancient Israelites. The Mishnah teaches:

² Jeremiah 31:5.

The wealthy (הַעֲשִׂירִים) would bring their *bikkurim* in baskets overlaid with silver or gold, while those who struggled with poverty (הַעֲנִיִּים) used wicker-baskets of peeled willow-branches, and their baskets and the *bikkurim* were given to the priest.³

The Talmud reads these last two clauses together and concludes that the poor would hand over to the Temple priests both their *bikkurim* and their baskets, whereas the wealthy would only give their *bikkurim* and kept their baskets ordained with silver or gold. The system was unjust. The wealthy kept their wealth, while the poor gave up everything. Explaining this the Talmud invokes an aphorism from its time, בְּתֵר עֲנִיָּא אֲזֵלָא עֲנִיּוּתָא, *poverty pursues the poor*.⁴ Suffering somehow seems to constantly find the ones who suffer. In Yiddish, we might call this person a *shlamazel*, one who is chronically unlucky—they just cannot catch a break.

But Judaism asserts that poverty is supposed to be a temporary state of being, not a permanent attribute tied to particular individuals. There are no inherently poor people, just people who are poor at a particular time. Those who are impoverished are not so because that is part of their very being. On the contrary, the Torah teaches us time and again that it is the responsibility of the community to help people who struggle with poverty, to build systems that enable them to eventually live independently and with dignity. Using the Talmud's aphorism or attributing to it any truth is dangerous because it perpetuates a sense of indifference to the suffering of others. It gives us permission to look the other way and say, "Why should I care if this is just the way of the world?" The Talmud's understanding of the Mishnah is not a particularly generous one because it assumes that the system was unjust.

³ Mishnah Bikkurim 3:8.

⁴ Bavli Bava Kama 92a.

But there is another way to read the text. Perhaps that final clause of the mishnah, “their baskets and the *bikkurim* were given to the priest,” refers both to the rich *and* to the poor—everyone handed over the *bikkurim*, in whatever basket was within their means, and the Temple accepted them all as sincere and generous donations. Each person brought forward only that which was within their means. Those who struggled with poverty were not expected to hand over quite as much as those who were wealthy. The Mishnah distinguishes between those who are blessed with wealth and those who struggle to put food on the table, let alone fruit in their unadorned wicker basket. The rich did not return home with their fancy baskets while the poor marched back empty-handed and ashamed. Everyone brought their *bikkurim*, in whatever basket they could reasonably afford, and everyone left their baskets as donations to the Temple. Everyone marched home as equals, filled with gratitude and joy for having fulfilled this obligation. Their hands weren’t empty, they were liberated and free.

You might anticipate that Jewish law would at least dictate a standard for the *bikkurim* themselves, a defined quantity that all are obligated to uphold. But the first Mishnah in Tractate Peah says exactly the opposite: first fruits are included in a list of things that have no definite quantity (אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור).⁵ There are things in Jewish life for which one is only obligated to do that which is within their means for it would be unjust to set a standard that everyone has to follow. First fruits, *bikkurim*, is one of those cases. Bring what you can. Offer what is meaningful for you, and that is sufficient; you have fulfilled your obligation. Judaism values equity. Judaism sees the individual and values them.

⁵ Mishnah Peah 1:1.

We no longer bring *bikkurim* to Jerusalem, but we can still uphold the values that undergird this practice. Historically, we have marked this Shabbat of Labor Day weekend as “Labor on the Bima Shabbat,” an initiative of Jews United for Justice since 1998 designed to encourage us to consider our sacred texts, our historical experiences, and the challenges that workers face in our community today. Labor Day weekend is, for some, associated with one last weekend at the beach. But for those of us who have gathered here on Shabbat, we take this opportunity to remind ourselves about the values of Labor Day and the unfinished work of ensuring that all of our community members are seen, heard, and valued. At B’nai Israel, we have tried to live these values more intentionally in the past few years, becoming official partners of both JUFJ and AIM, Action in Montgomery, through our SEA Change Coalition. Together, these groups have organized to advocate for affordable housing and promoting the rights of working people.

For some people in our community, participation in these efforts embodies the living out of their Jewish values. If you are curious and want to learn more, please let us know. At the same time, I recognize that for others in our community, it is *kashrut*, Shabbat, and adherence to the ritual laws of Jewish life that fulfill their yearning for Jewish spiritual nourishment. The Torah, however, does not distinguish between the ritual and the civic responsibilities of Jewish life. All are mitzvot of the Torah, and one does not rank above the other. True, we all pick and choose which to prioritize from time to time, but on this Shabbat of Labor Day weekend we are reminded to consider the workers in our midst, to advocate with them and alongside them to create a more just community and a more equitable society.