

Ki Tavo, 5780
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About a year or so ago, I recall being engrossed in conversation with someone in my kitchen. At some point in our conversation, I pulled a drinking glass from the cupboard and started pouring juice into it. As I was focusing on the person speaking to me, I did not notice that whoever had previously put the glass away in the cupboard had placed it upside down, and that I was therefore pouring onto an inverted glass, resulting in juice spilling everywhere except into the glass. I chuckled both at my clumsy obliviousness, as well as at the profound reminder that lay beneath this otherwise inconsequential event. In the kitchen and in life, our blessings are only as valuable as the vessel available to receive it.

While the Mitzvah of Bikkurim -- delivering one's annual first fruit to the Temple -- is inapplicable to fruit grown outside the Land of Israel, our Sages (Bikkurim 1:10) nonetheless debate whether the obligation applies to fruit grown in the Transjordan region. Although this region is technically not part of the classical Land of Israel, it does seem to possess a liminal, quasi-Israel status in respect to certain other aspects of Jewish law. As such, one opinion maintains that this region, unlike the rest of the Diaspora, is indeed obligated to bring Bikkurim. However, another opinion maintains that despite its special status, the Transjordan region is still exempt from the Bikkurim obligation, based on an exegetical inference: when a farmer brings his Bikkurim to the Temple and recites the standardized "Declaration of the Bikkurim," he thanks G-d for the fruit of "האדמה אשר נתתה לי" -- the land that You have given me. Picking up on this phrase, the Talmud (Yerushalmi Bikkurim 1:8) infers:

"אשר נתתה לי" לא שנטלתי לי מעצמי

"The land which you have given to me," and not (the land) that I have taken on my own

That is, although the Mitzvah of Bikkurim applies in the Land of Israel, which was "given" by G-d to the Jewish people, it does not apply in the Transjordan region, which was actively "taken" through the human efforts of the tribes of Gad and Reuven (see Bamidbar 32). Bikkurim, which is at its core an expression of gratitude and submission, simply cannot exist in a land that is rooted in a sense of one's own accomplishment. True gratitude can only exist in a land that is received, not a land that is taken.

The Land of Israel embodies, in its very essence, “the Land which you have given me.” It represents the absolute negation of ego or any vestige of a “land that I have taken on my own,” and rather exists as a pure Divine gift. One who “lives in the Land of Israel,” in the truest sense, is one who not only lives in a physical location, but also consciously experiences every blessing in his or her life as a loving gift. This is the deeper meaning of the Torah’s symbolic distinction between Israel and Egypt in Parashat Ekev. The Land of Egypt is a land of taking: man takes water from the Nile, irrigates his fields, and assumes credit for his efforts. The land of Israel, however, is a land of receiving, as water is received as a gift of rain from the Heavens (Devarim 11). Of course, even one who spiritually lives in the Land of Israel must work, invest, and develop, but this is done with the serene awareness that all of the efforts are purely means through which to receive the influx of Divine blessing, which is ultimately responsible for everything.

What is true of the Land of Israel in the realm of space is true of Shabbat in the realm of time. Shabbat is the time when we learn to receive rather than to take. As opposed to seeing ourselves as the creators of our own success and accomplishments -- a viewpoint that leads to pride and also to frustration over our shortcomings -- we instead realize just how very lucky we are to receive all that we have been given. It is not coincidental that we usher in Shabbat with the phrase of Lecha Dodi, “פני שבת נקבלה” -- “the countenance of Shabbat *we shall receive.*” Shabbat is not something that can be made, built, or taken; it can only be received. And in receiving Shabbat, we are reminded each week that everything we achieve, even under the guise of our assiduous efforts during the rest of the week, is ultimately nothing other than a gift received from G-d Himself. It is perhaps not coincidental that Tractate Shabbat symbolically begins with the scenario of a person receiving a loaf of bread from another in the context of the prohibition of transferring items on Shabbat. While the Mishnah teaches that *taking* or *giving* the loaf would constitute a Biblical violation of Shabbat, simply *receiving* the loaf into one’s hands incurs no such violation. The essence of Shabbat is to know how to receive.

The vessel through which we receive Divine blessing in our lives is consciousness. The more we recognize all that we have at every second as a gift, the more we receive these blessings. The more we remain mindlessly oblivious to all that we have, the more these blessings are missed, like juice poured onto an inverted glass. As I once read from Rabbi Levi Meir, in the Jewish view, a breath is not something to be “taken,” as the world states, but rather something to be “received.” Indeed, in moments of intense stress, rather than “taking a deep

breath,” perhaps we would do better to “receive a deep breath,” reminding ourselves of the loving Sustainer who provides us with the breath, and who is still with us even during the most challenging of moments. The same is true for everything in our lives, even the most basic of “our” possessions: our good ideas, our loved ones, and even our very lives themselves are all gifts that we can choose to constantly receive, or to simply ignore.

The more that we can learn to live a life of receiving as opposed to taking, of the Land of Israel rather than the Transjordan, of Shabbat rather than the workweek, the more we find holiness and peace. Consciousness molds our vessels to receive our blessings from G-d, and enriches our lives with patience and perspective, making us thankful for what we have as opposed to bitter for what we’ve lost. While it is certainly possible to take things for granted, it is intrinsically impossible to receive things for granted.