



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Ki Tavo

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Am Yisrael

By Barry Carron

The Torah mentions some laws more than once. In most cases, the repetition adds to our understanding by introducing new requirements, context, or parameters.

Ki Tavo begins with a detailed discussion of *Bikkurim*, the act of bringing the first fruits to the Temple. Many commentators note that this instruction was already given, so why, they ask, is it repeated here? How does the command in *Ki Tavo* differ from the command in *Sefer Shemot* (23:19) or *Sefer Bamidbar* (18:13)?

The answer lies in the new requirements and details that lead us to a new lesson on the importance of community. Consider the following:

The Context: We are preparing to enter the Land of Israel, where we will be an agricultural economy for the first time and active participants in the production of our own sustenance.

The Who: According to *Rabbeinu Tam*, to truly complete this mitzvah, one must do all parts of the mitzvah themselves. Each individual has an obligation to both identify the first fruits and to bring them to Yerushalayim.

What can we glean from the Ki Tavo iteration of Bikkurim?

The When: We are commanded to bring *Bikkurim* between *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*, making the summer months a joyful national movement.

The What: Not all fruits are included in *Bikkurim*; the *mitzvah* is limited to the seven species of the land (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates).

The How: First, as we are handing our basket to the *Kohen*, we are to recite a declaration (familiar from our seder tables), *Arami oved avi*, an Aramean sought to destroy our father (although as you will see, that is not the translation we will use). Second, while the *mitzvah* of *Bikkurim* is given to each individual, *Bikkurim* were not brought by an individual. In Temple times, entire communities would travel together, camp outside *Yerushalayim*, and proceed to the Temple together with great fanfare.

How are these things connected? What can we glean from the *Ki Tavo* iteration of *Bikkurim*?

The mitzvah of *Bircas Hamazon* teaches us to attribute the bounty we enjoy to *Hashem*, not simply to our efforts. *Bikkurim* takes that a step further by reminding us that we were given this specific land to uphold *mitzvot* and that our hold on the land depends on us living up to our end of the deal. It is not enough to make a statement of gratitude; we also have to take action

(in this case traveling to *Yerushalayim*). And limiting *Bikkurim* to the seven species of Israel further ties the *mitzvah* to the Land of Israel.

Given our history and, quite frankly, our personal failings in observance, it would be easy for us to despair and think that maintaining control of the Land of Israel is impossible. Our trek to the Temple is a physical reminder that God gave us this land and that no matter where we are living, we should be connected in a profound, generational way to the Land of Israel. Even as *Bnei Yisrael* descended to the lowest levels, *Avraham* and *Yosef* after him maintained perfect faith that *Hashem* would deliver the land to us.

When delivering our *Bikkurim* to the *Kohen*, the declaration we make is the same statement we analyze in the *Maggid* section of the *Pesach* seder. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch explains: he translates *Arami oved avi*, as our father was near ruin. That is, we had descended to the lowest levels of spirituality, and yet, by maintaining our language, dress, and family purity (as per the *Mesha Chachma*), we were distinguishable from the Egyptians and, therefore, we merited to be saved. We did it as a community. Together. We didn't forge a nation out of our individuality but rather through common practice — through community.

Today, we face both a diasporic existence and a pandemic as a community. We must apply that lesson of *Bikkurim* and face the challenge as a community. We share *smachot*, sadness, tragedies. That is what it means to be Jewish and to live in a community. And that is why on *Pesach*, the quintessential holiday that teaches about unity, we read *Arami oved avi* — this is the secret sauce of our longevity.

And that is why on Pesach, the quintessential holiday that teaches about unity, we read 'Arami oved avi' -- this is the secret sauce of our longevity.

We are commanded to remind ourselves from whom we come. *Bikkurim* drives home that our rights to the land come to us only through our forefathers — we didn't earn them by ourselves, and we cannot maintain them alone. We need both our past and our present to bring our dreams to fruition.

Barry and Ellen joined the YIS community in 1987. They were fortunate to share many years with Rabbi and Debbie Rubenstein; he impacted them deeply in their observance, love of Israel, and love of the YIS. As part of the Scarsdale Spiritual Safari, Barry traveled to Israel to learn with and from Rabbi Rubenstein many times. It is with the memory of the Rabbi, Debbie, and a safari brother, David Samot, in mind that these words were written.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

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