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***Ki Savo – I Have Not Forgotten***

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*“When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give [them] to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat to satiety in your cities. Then you shall say before the Lord, your God, ‘I have removed the holy [portion] from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, according to all Your commandment that You commanded me; I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten [them]’” (Devorim 26:12-13).*

The Torah commands us to distribute various tithes to the *Kohanim*, *Leviim*, and the poor. Different tithes apply throughout the seven-year agricultural cycle. In year three of this cycle, there is a process known as “*vidui maaser*,” *confession of the tithes*, during which the farmer “confesses” that he has properly distributed his tithes to the needy and tribe of Levi. Yet, there appears to be an extraneous phrase, “*Nor have I forgotten*.” What is the meaning of this statement? Is it not obvious the farmer has not forgotten? He just stated, “*I have removed the holy portion from the house, I have given it to the Levite, the stranger...*” What is the meaning of this phrase?

Rashi explains, “***nor have I forgotten***: to bless You [to recite the blessing (*beracha*) on the performance of the *mitzvah*] of separating tithes.” The great Kabbalist, Rav Yaakov Shaltiel, in his work titled *Emes L’Yaakov*, provides an incredible insight on this statement of Rashi. There are times when we are proficient in the mechanistic details of *Torah* and *mitzvos* yet fail to *feel*. We know what to do and how to do it, but we lack excitement and passion. Our Judaic obligations offer us an opportunity to connect to the Divine and establish a meaningful relationship with God. But that relationship only occurs if I serve and perform with meaning and devotion. This dynamic is encapsulated in a *beracha*. The Talmud explains that in most situations, “*berachos eynan mi’akvos*,” *failure to recite a blessing doesn’t compromise the validity or effectiveness of the mitzvah*. If you blow the shofar and fail to make a *beracha* beforehand, you have still fulfilled the *mitzvah*. If you light your *menorah* and neglect to make a *beracha* beforehand, you have still fulfilled your obligation. If so, then what is the role of a *beracha*? It is a preparatory act to create a sense of excitement for what is about to occur. I make a *beracha* and I say, “*Baruch Ata Hashem*,” *God, you are the source of all blessing*; “*Elokeinu Melech HaOlam*,” *My God, the King of the Universe...* With these words, I am acknowledging that through this act I have the privilege of connection. With this act, I can establish a relationship with Hashem. With this act, I can connect to the infinite holiness of my Creator. This realization creates an intense passion and longing and fundamentally transforms the *mitzvah* act from a mechanistic behavior to a service of devotion and excitement.

This is the deeper meaning of Rashi. The farmer says: *My God, I have done all you have asked me. I separated and dispersed the tithes, I took care of children as You asked me to. I have adhered to all the details as You have commanded. But I have not forgotten. In the flurry of details and obligations, I haven’t forgotten what this mitzvah and all other mitzvos are really about – connection. I made my berachos; I have served You with excitement and passion. I have continuously recognized the privilege I have to forge a relationship with You through the performance of Your mitzvos. I have adhered to the details but have never forgotten to simultaneously stoke the spiritual fire of excitement.*

These are exciting and overwhelming days. As one year comes to a close and another is poised to begin, we must introspect and examine our relationship with God. Too often, we only look at this relationship through the lens of sin and salvation. This is important but is not the totality of our relationship. Many of us go through life and miss out on the awesome opportunity to have a truly meaningful and deep relationship with God. Our Judaism must be more than just doing good deeds and avoiding sin (again, very important). It must be about creating relationships. It must be about making *berachos* and infusing passion wherever we can. The first step in the passion creation process is a *beracha*. A *beracha* forces me to pause before I act and allows me the time to contemplate what I am about to do. If it is a *beracha* before the performance of a *mitzvah*, I can think about how this *mitzvah* affords me the opportunity to connect with my God. If it is a *beracha* before I eat, I can think about my relationship to the material world and if I am using my material wealth to bring me closer to God and my fellow man. The *beracha* provides me with the few moments of contemplation which then creates the opportunity for excitement and passion.

May we be privileged to make the farmer’s statement, *I have done all You have asked me*, and may we be privileged to always say, *nor have I forgotten*.