



# YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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## The Parsha in Practice

### It's The Thoughts That Count

Our Parsha begins with the law of how the Jewish pomologist (a farmer who cultivates orchards, and I didn't know that either) would be required to annually deliver his first fruits (known as Bikurim) to the Beit Hamikdash. Once there, he would recite the paragraph of Arami Oved Avi, a summary of the Jewish story from the time of Yaakov through the present day. This retelling of Jewish history is well-known as it is famously deconstructed in the Pesach Hagaddah and is one of the very few pieces of "liturgy" that the Torah itself requires us to ever recite.

Remember it's the thought that counts as you finish reading this free ecard.



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The process of choosing these "first" fruits was tedious. The farmer would go out into the field early in the season and would tie a reed around the first buds he would see (of the seven species of the land) and would verbally declare them to be first fruits. These specific fruits would then be ceremoniously brought to the Beit Hamikdash sometime between Shavuot and Chanukah.

While the process involved in bringing them, and the text were highly regulated, there was one important element of the Bikurim process that was left open to the farmer: how many fruits he would actually designate as Bikurim and bring with him. As the Rambam says (Laws of Bikurim, 2:17):

הבכורים אין להם שיעור מן התורה אבל מדבריהם צריך להפריש אחד מששים והרוצה לעשות כל שדה בכורים עושהו.

*The Torah provides no minimum to Bikurim, rather the Rabbis required one to separate at least one-sixtieth. One who wants to bring their entire field as Bikurim may do so.*

According to Torah law, it would have been sufficient to bring even a single grape to fulfill this mitzvah! Isn't it strange that such an elaborate process was created to designate the fruit, bring the fruit, and a specific text was even created to read when bringing this fruit, all without any real requirement to bring any significant amount of fruit? Such hoopla over a single grape? Seems like much ado about nothing!

Of course, we can point to the fact that there are no minimums as to when we are required to have gratitude, but I'd like to focus in a different direction.

In explaining why this specific mitzvah has a liturgical component, the Sefer HaChinuch explains:

משרשי המצוה, לפי שהאדם מעורר מחשבותיו ומצייר בלבבו האמת בכח דברי פיו, על כן בהיטיב אליו השם ברוך הוא ובברכו אותו ואת אדמתו לעשות פירות, וזכה להביאם לבית אלהינו, ראוי לו לעורר לבבו בדברי פיהו ולחשוב כי הכל הגיע אליו מאת אדון העולם, ויספר חסדיו יתברך עלינו ועל כל עם ישראל דרך כלל, ועל כן מתחיל בענין יעקב אבינו שחלצו האל מיד לבן וענין עבודת המצריים בנו והצילנו הוא ברוך הוא מידם, ואחר השבח מבקש מלפניו להתמיד הברכה עליו, ומתוך התעוררות נפשו בשבח השם ובטובו זוכה ומתברכת ארצו, ועל כן ציונו ברוך הוא על זה כי חפץ חסד הוא.

*It is from the root of the commandment [that it is] since a man arouses his thoughts and draws the truth in his heart with the power of the words of his mouth. Therefore, in that God did good to him, and in that He blessed him and his land to bear fruits, and he merited to bring the fruits to the House of our God; it is appropriate for him to arouse his heart with the words of his mouth and ponder that everything arrived to him from the Master of the universe, and he recounts His kindnesses, upon us and upon the people of Israel, more generally. Therefore, he begins with the subject of Yaakov, our father, whom God rescued from the hand of Lavan, and the subject of the slavery of the Egyptians over us and His, blessed be He, rescuing us from their hand. And following the praise, he requests from Him to eternally bestow the blessing on him. And from the arousal of his soul with the praise of God and His goodness, he will merit that his land be blessed. Therefore, God commanded us about this, since He desires kindness.*

The Sefer HaChinuch understands that it is the words we say that inspire the thoughts that we are to consider as we perform this mitzvah. It's not about gratitude alone, it's about historical appreciation and the understanding that this farmer's first fruit is just one more chapter in the story of G-d's involvement in the overall history of the Jewish people and in our private lives. To the Sefer HaChinuch, this mitzvah reminds us that literally, it's the thought that counts, not the amount that we bring, and that if this text successfully focuses our thinking in the right direction, it doesn't matter how many actual fruits we've shlepped. He concludes:

ומן הענין הזה יש לנו ללמוד בתפלותינו ותחנונינו לפני השם ברוך הוא לדקדק מאד ולהזהר בלשון שלא לומר דבר לפני השם כי אם בדקדוק גדול

*And from this matter we should learn to be very exacting, and to be careful about the language in our prayers and supplications in front of God, blessed be He - not to say anything in front of God without great precision.*

We usually know that we are not only to judge our effort by amounts: the size of the gift we give, or the time we spend on an activity. It's our intentions that matter and the thoughts behind our practices that count. But how do we cultivate those thoughts? How do we guarantee that even if our actions are broad and superficially significant, that there is real meaning to them?

As the Chinuch writes, the answer is found in the text, the liturgy, the prayers, and the blessings that have been created for these mitzvos. As the Torah displays with the mitzvah of Bikurim, it doesn't really matter how much you bring when you have said - and thereby thought - the correct things. We often think that these texts are extra, and are simply an additive to a powerful act. Bikurim teaches us that concentrating on these texts is what provides the act its power. Understanding the berachot we make and the Tefilot we say might even allow us to do less, by meaning more.

As I discussed last night, this year, our Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur davening will likely be more concentrated and more focused. Although we might think that we're getting gypped in some way, remember that Bikurim teaches how it's not about how many fruits you bring, it's what you mean when you bring them.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach