

CONNECTING TO THE TZADDIKIM OF THE GENERATION

Our parsha begins with the passage describing the duty to bring bikkurim (first fruits) to the Temple. When we look at the verses of this parsha more closely, we see some profound principles that can serve as a model for personal conduct, rules by which to live our lives. However this only applies when we infuse these principles into our hearts, which in turn will be our reward. What is the mitzvah of bikkurim? When a person goes into his orchard and sees a ripened fig or pomegranate, he must attach a string to them and declare that they are bikkurim for the priests of the Temple. This means that he collects the fruits he has worked several years to grow and designates them for the priests. However this doesn't happen every year, since the fruits produced by a tree in its first three years are deemed orlah, and during the fourth year there are restrictions on how they may be eaten (their designation being neta revai). When a person can finally eat a tree's fruits, it is a mitzvah to bring its first fruits to the priests of the Temple. This principle shows us the paramount importance of having faith in G-d. Thus without saying a word in protest, a person must refrain from eating the fruits of his trees for four entire years. Even afterwards he has to have faith in G-d and His mitzvot, bringing his first fruits to the priests in the Temple. In this way a person also demonstrates his faith in the tzaddikim of the generation – the priests – otherwise he wouldn't agree to bring his produce to them.

We discover another thing in the passage regarding the bikkurim. When a person utters his vidui (confession) upon bringing his first fruits, he is forbidden to say it softly. Instead he must raise his voice and speak loudly, as the Sages have said concerning the verse, "You shall call out and say" (Deuteronomy 26:5). What exactly does a person say? As the Sages have stated, to prove that we are not ungrateful he says, "Now I have brought the first of the fruits of the ground..." (v.10). We shall discuss this later on in more detail.

We discover something else at the end of the passage on the bikkurim. After his confession, a person states: "Look down from Your holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless Your people

Israel..." (v.15). This is difficult to understand, for the person in question has just brought the first of his fruits – not the fruits of his neighbor – to the Temple. It would therefore seem appropriate for him to ask Hashem to look down from Heaven and bless him and his family! How could this be the right time to request a blessing for the entire Jewish people?

If we were to look at the subject more closely, however, we would see a connection between these three principles: Having faith, showing gratitude, and praying for the entire Jewish people. It is precisely by doing these three things that a person can and should live his life. The Sages have said that whoever brings a gift to a talmid chacham is considered to have brought bikkurim (Ketubot 105b). We need to understand this, for what connection is there between a gift offered to a Torah scholar and first fruits? A gift to a Torah scholar is a form of tzeddakah, yet what connection does that mitzvah have with the mitzvah of bikkurim? Perhaps we could understand the connection if the Sages had said than one who brings fruits to a Torah scholar is as if he had brought first fruits. Yet as it stands, what connection is there between the mitzvah of giving tzeddakah to a talmid chacham and bringing bikkurim?

It is in man's nature to live life with a sense of confidence, thinking that nothing bad will happen to him. Because people believe they know how to live their lives, if they ever have to make concessions to others or diminish their own importance, it seems catastrophic to them. However this is not the case for a person whose actions are all done for the sake of Heaven. Such a person constantly tries to better himself and come closer to Hashem.

Consequently, when a person sacrifices something he possesses and brings a gift to a talmid chacham, he demonstrates just how much confidence he has in his Creator and the tzaddikim of the generation. By doing so he proves that he is offering bikkurim to Hashem, for he wants to have faith in Him, observe all His mitzvot, and follow His ways. Therein lies the connection between a gift given to a Torah scholar and the bringing of first fruits.

It sometimes happens, however, that a person encounters the tzaddik of the generation but does not notice any effect from his blessing. This is because such a person has acted improperly and is not worthy of his blessing. The tzaddik then tells the person that he cannot help him, and that he has to address himself directly to the Creator. At that point a great deal of patience is required of a person, especially with regards to not showing ingratitude. He must not say, "If the tzaddik couldn't help me, it's because he's useless." Absolutely not! It's forbidden to be ungrateful, for the tzaddik also wants the good of people!

The tzaddikim of the generation make the connection between us, insignificant as we are, and the Holy One, blessed be He. It is very difficult to truly arrive at the Throne of Glory, and the tzaddikim of the generation intercede on our behalf to help us in everything we do, as Rabbi Shlomo Hacohen of Radomsk Zatzal said in his book Tiferet Shlomo (Parsha Nitzavim). If a person is ungrateful and does not acknowledge the greatness of the tzaddik of the generation, the latter cannot help him.

Above all, the tzaddik intercedes for the entire Jewish people as a whole. He desires the good of the community as much as the good of the individual. Hence when a person brings his bikkurim, he must say: "Bless Your people Israel." He must include himself in the entire community in order to benefit from the blessing of the tzaddik of the generation. If he says that they are of little concern to him and that only he himself counts, he will benefit from no blessing whatsoever.

Thus the passage on the bikkurim teaches us the proper guidelines to follow in life. It teaches us just to what point we must cling to the tzaddikim of the generation, since every favor we grant them is returned a hundred times over, bringing us good in every possible way. Let us cling to the tzaddikim of the generation and demonstrate our faith in them, just as the verse states: "They had faith in the L-RD and in His servant Moses" (Exodus 14:31).

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

A Numb Heart is Life Threatening

It is written, “The L-RD will strike you with madness, blindness, and confounding of the heart” (Deuteronomy 28:28).

One of the worst curses to appear in our parsha is a numb heart, which the Torah calls a “confounding of the heart.” The Alter of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv Zatzal, explains that this expression means a numbing of the heart, as if a person had been overtaken with lethargy, as if anaesthetized for an operation and plunged into so deep a state of unconsciousness that he doesn’t feel the scalpel cutting into his flesh. Similarly, the heart of a person who is struck by numbness does not awaken, even when his spiritual life is threatened. This is why it is so dangerous.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler Zatzal said, “Everyone knows just how the great Torah figures trembled at the approach of Elul. But what happens to us? Our hearts are completely numb, without the least bit of fear. However we should fear, and all the more so because of the bitter situation we’re in, one in which we’ve lost all sense of feeling. Regrettably, having lost this feeling means that we have reached the lowest possible level.” As the Gemara states, “A fool is not assailed...the dead flesh in a living person does not feel the scalpel” (Shabbat 13b).

We must awaken ourselves that much more because of the approaching days of judgments, days in the presence of Hashem Himself. It is easier to wake up at this time than at any other time of the year. Even our material situation should help to awaken us from our spiritual slumber, for we know that everything we need is determined on Rosh Hashanah, and our case will be evaluated in light of how we prepared ourselves for the day of judgment. Despite all this, if we still sense no awakening inside, it is solely due to a lack of sensitivity. It is due to the numbing of our hearts, a condition that we have been afflicted with.

The Gemara recounts that because of the impending judgment on the day of death, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was seized with tremendous fear. The reason for this is clear: Great Torah figures have a finely tuned sense of awareness. They are fully cognizant of the terrible fate of one who fails to comply with Hashem’s will. With regards to a great man, one on whom the Shechinah abides, the slightest imperfection is even more noticeable. This is frightful, for Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was a teacher of the Mishnah’s fathers, and in fulfilling G-d’s will he neglected absolutely nothing – large or small – as he said in tractate Sukkah. His disciples called him the “lamp of Israel, pillar of the right hand, mighty hammer” (Berachot 28b). Yet despite all his greatness, he was seized with incredible fear upon falling ill. The Gemara states, “Is it not enough for the wicked that they do not tremble and are not grief-stricken before the day of death, but their hearts are as firm as an edifice?” (Shabbat 31b). This is the very lowest level possible. This indifference does not come as a result of negligence or a lack of knowledge, for there are people who explicitly and consistently say that they have to spiritually stir themselves, yet it does not happen in their hearts. Therefore the fear of the day of judgment is not awakened in them. We can only acquire it through deep reflection and the constant and diligent study of Mussar. It is in this way that we can bring down the barrier that separates us from our Creator.

I Have Now Come

It is written, “[You shall say,] ‘And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O L-RD.’ ...You shall rejoice in all the goodness that the L-RD your G-d has given you and your household – you and the Levite and the sojourner who is in your midst” (Deuteronomy 26:10-11).

What is the meaning of the expression, “You shall rejoice in all the goodness”? What goodness is being discussed here? The Ohr HaChaim

Hakodesh said, “There is no other good but the Torah, as it is written: ‘I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah’ [Proverbs 4:2].” If people only knew and sensed the sweetness and pleasantness of the Torah’s goodness, they would pursue it like madmen. All the gold and silver in the world would be worthless in their eyes, for the Torah contains all the good of the world.

The Rav of Ponevezh cites an incident, described in tractate Megillah, in which an angel appeared to Joshua during the conquest of Jericho and reprimanded him for negligence in nightly Torah study and a failure to bring the regular afternoon sacrifice (Megillah 3a). Joshua wanted to find out for which of the two sins he was being held accountable, so he asked: “Are you for us [lanu] or for our enemies?” (Joshua 5:13). Tosaphot link the word lanu to the verse, “The Torah that Moses commanded for us [lanu]” (Deuteronomy 33:4). In other words, Joshua was asking the angel: “Have you come on account of a negligence in nightly Torah study?” The angel replied by saying, “Now [ata] have I come” (Joshua 5:14), which Tosaphot link to the verse: “Now [ata] write this song” (Deuteronomy 31:19), a reference to the Torah. The Ponevezher Rav asks why the angel used such an obscure reference, rather than explicitly telling Joshua, “I have come because of your failure to study Torah.” Furthermore, the Ponevezher Rav asks what exactly was the criticism leveled at Joshua and the people, for they were presently in the middle of a war, and it is impossible to study Torah while engaged in battle. The Rav of Ponevezh answers: “If the Torah is a yoke or duty that we must fulfill and be done with, then the criticism cannot be justified. However if the Torah is a song and represents all that is sweet in the world, then is it really impossible to sing while fighting?” This is what the angel told Joshua: You’re asking a question concerning a commandment? You’re inquiring about the Torah that was commanded to you? For a command I would not have come. Instead, I have now come for “this song.”

How Not to Forget

It is written, “Then you shall say before the L-RD your G-d: ‘I have removed the holy things from the house, and I have also given them to the Levite, to the stranger, to the fatherless and to the widow, according to all Your commandments which You commanded me. I have not deviated from Your commandments and I have not forgotten’ ” (Deuteronomy 26:13).

People came to see the gaon, the author of Ta’ama DiKra, and said to him: “Rabbi, mice are eating what we have in the house!” He told them, “The problem is that you’re not taking ma’asser. If you were to take ma’asser, the mice would stop coming.” In fact that is precisely what happened. The Rav said, “This is explicitly stated in a Midrash on Parsha Eikev: People came to find Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair and told him that mice were devouring everything in the vicinity. He said that if people were to separate the ma’asser in the proper way, there would be no more mice, which is exactly what happened [Devarim Rabba 3:3]. This means that when a person takes ma’asser, mice no longer come into his home.” Similarly, it is written that consuming food from which a mouse ate causes a person to forget things. Hence when a Jew takes ma’asser in the proper way, mice will not eat from his harvest and therefore he will not consume anything that a mouse has eaten. Hence he says in the verse above, “I have not forgotten.”

A Dreadful Punishment

It is written, “Cursed is he who dishonors his father or his mother” (Deuteronomy 27:16).

The Rambam states (Hilchot Mamrim 5) that whoever scorns his father or mother – even if only indirectly – is cursed by G-d. As the verse states, “Cursed is he who dishonors his father or his mother.” Moreover it is written, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns a mother’s accumulated teachings – the ravens of the stream will gouge it out and the young eagles will eat it”

(Proverbs 30:17). If a person mocks his father or mother, the verse says that birds of prey will tear out his eyes and devour his flesh. Furthermore, the court may impose beatings on him for this sin.

Blessed in the City and the Field

It is written, "Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field" (Deuteronomy 28:3).

What is the meaning of this verse? There are three explanations:

1. According to the Gemara, the priestly blessing is useful for people who are in synagogue facing the priests. However those behind the priests do not come within the scope of the blessing. The Gemara asks how the people working in the fields could therefore benefit from the blessing. It replies that those working in the field are obligated to be there, hence they do indeed come within the scope of the blessing. However those who are not forced to be outside synagogue do not benefit from the priestly blessing (Sotah 38b). All this applies to the blessings of men. However when a blessing comes directly from Heaven, it does not differentiate among people, as it is written: "All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you" (Deuteronomy 28:2) – whether you find yourself in the city or the field.

2. Our father Isaac blessed Jacob, after which Esau came to Isaac and also received blessings. Esau was a man of the field, whereas Jacob dwelled in tents – living, as it were, in the city. The verse is therefore saying that the Children of Israel receive a blessing, be it that of Jacob or Esau.

3. Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz explains that there are advantages to living in the city or the countryside. Insofar as the blessings are concerned, however, we shall receive one just as we receive the other.

Evil and Faithful Illnesses

It is written, "Then the L-RD will strike you and your descendants with unimaginable plagues – great and faithful plagues, and evil and faithful illnesses" (Deuteronomy 28:59).

What exactly are "evil and faithful" illnesses? To whom are they faithful? The Gemara recounts the following story: "Zunin said to Rabbi Akiva, 'We both know in our heart that there is no reality to an idol. Nevertheless we see men entering [an idolatrous shrine] crippled and coming out cured. What is the reason for this?' He replied, 'I will give you a parable: To what is this like? It is like a trustworthy man in a city, and all his townsmen used to deposit [their money] in his care without witnesses. One man, however, came and deposited [money] in his care with witnesses. Yet on one occasion he forgot and made his deposit without witnesses. The wife [of the trustworthy man] said to him, "Come, let us deny it." He answered her, "Because this fool acted in an unworthy manner, shall I destroy my reputation for trustworthiness!" It is similar with afflictions. At the time they are sent upon a man, an oath is imposed on them: "You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him except on such and such a day, at such an hour, through the medium of so and so, and through such and such a remedy." When the time arrives for them to depart, the man happened to go into an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, "We should not leave him and depart. Yet just because this fool acts improperly, shall we break our oath?" ' This is similar to what Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of, 'Evil and faithful illnesses'? 'Evil' in their mission and 'faithful' to their oath" (Avodah Zarah 55a).

– Aish Dat

Life, Not Death

There are 676 words in the section dealing with the curses, 676 being the numerical value of the word *raot* (evil).

Hashem's Name has a numerical value of 26, and it appears in this parsha 26 times. Thus the product of Hashem's Name and its frequency in the parsha (26x26) also gives us the same numerical value as the word *raot*, namely 676.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Enjoyment, Not Debased Pleasure

It is written, "You shall rejoice in all the goodness" (Deuteronomy 26:11) and, "Because you did not serve the L-RD your G-d amid gladness and goodness of heart" (ibid. 28:47).

We often hear youngsters as well as older people voicing the same complaint: "The Torah accords value to material goods by commanding that we should rejoice in them. We have to recite blessings when we derive pleasure from something, and we have to praise G-d for all the good that He grants us. Therefore why are we told to distance ourselves from the desires of this world? On the contrary, we're not harming anyone by enjoying ourselves. Therefore let's enjoy things and praise G-d!" It is said that when Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal was a boy, his mother scolded him for some childish thing he had done. After a moment, the rooster that was near their home did the same thing, yet that elicited no response from his mother. The young Eliyahu asked his mother, "How is it that you don't scold the rooster – which isn't your son – but you don't seem to mind scolding me?" His mother replied with a short question: "Do you want to be like that rooster?" We understand the lesson here. Obviously each pleasure we enjoy is worth something. However there is a difference between the pleasure of a rooster and that of a human being. A person can learn to derive pleasure from almost anything. There are murderers who find it very difficult to commit their first murder. However once they repeatedly commit such acts, not only do they enjoy it – they find it difficult to stop! There is also the opposite. It is said that the Beit Halevi of Brisk, Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zatzal, reached such a level that he was incapable of sinning because transgressions were so abhorrent to him. He took such pleasure in performing mitzvot that he suffered when he could not do them. This does not mean that he suffered when he ate, let's say, a delicious meal. On the contrary, he would recite a blessing and thereby experience even greater pleasure than someone who was enslaved to his appetite and completely engrossed in satiating his desires. That person is truly like a rooster. The enjoyment experienced by the Beit Halevi represents the greatest degree of pleasure that a person can enjoy, that being the endless pleasure of living life according to Hashem's will. There are indeed people whose pleasure seeking does not harm others, but it does harm them!

Students who are far from this level of spirituality hope to eventually attain it. By observing their teachers who follow the path that leads to this level, and by performing mitzvot with joy and satisfaction, they will also feel its effects.

On the verse, "If you do not hearken to the voice of the L-RD your G-d, to observe, to perform all His commandments and all His decrees...then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you" (Deuteronomy 28:15), the Midrash cites the following: "Many are the *raot* [afflictions] of the righteous, but the L-RD saves him from them all" (Psalms 34:20). What is the connection between this verse and the previous one? There are 676 words in the section dealing with the curses, and we read that if we do G-d's will, all these curses will be transformed into blessings. In that case the righteous – who have many afflictions – will have just as many blessings, for the curses will be transformed into blessings by the power of Hashem's Name.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Following Hashem's Ways

It is written, "If you observe the commandments of the L-RD your G-d and you walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

The Me'am Loez states, "This verse contains a positive mitzvah of the Torah. It commands us to perform all that we do in a good and upright manner, as much as our abilities and strength allow. All our dealings with other people should be with kindness and compassion. This is the way of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it is what He wants of His creatures so they may merit His goodness, for He desires kindness."

The Gemara states, "Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so too must you be gracious and compassionate" (Shabbat 133b). Similarly, the Sefer HaChinuch says that just as Hashem is righteous, so too must we be righteous, and just as He is holy, so too must we be holy. This teaches us to perform good deeds and acquire desirable character traits so we may experience His dealings with us in the same manner. In short, we must learn to act as Hashem does.

Rabbi Yaakov Neiman explains that many people are under the impression that only certain exceptional individuals can cleave to Hashem. The source of this mistaken and widely held belief is the notion that cleaving to Hashem can only be achieved through austere measures and fasts. However not everyone can do such things. Just how amazing are the words of the Sages, who taught that every Jew can arrive at the extremely lofty level of walking "in His ways," namely by cleaving to Hashem (Deuteronomy 10:20). This mitzvah is just like all the rest, which were given to everyone without exception. Hence every Jew can accomplish it. How does a person do this? As we mentioned earlier, "Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so too must you be gracious and compassionate," the main thing being to emulate Hashem's conduct. It is in this manner that we will be able to walk in Hashem's ways and cleave to Him, for Hashem, the Torah, and Israel are one. Therefore if a person cleaves to each Jew and fulfills the mitzvah, "You shall love your fellow as yourself," he will also be connected to the Holy One, blessed be He. The Torah states that Hashem "made man in His image" (Genesis 1:24) and that He "blew into his nostrils the breath of life" (ibid. 2:7). Now since a person's breath emanates from within him, when G-d blew a soul into man, He blew a godly soul into him. Hence there is a bit of G-d in everyone. Therefore when a person walks in Hashem's ways and loves his fellow Jew, he automatically cleaves to Hashem. This makes it easier for him to spiritually elevate himself.

The Alter of Kelm explains the statement made by Rabbi Akiva, namely that: "You shall love your fellow as yourself" is a great principle of the Torah." The Alter said that in saying this, Rabbi Akiva is teaching us that one who has negative character traits cannot fulfill the entire Torah. This is why we must all put an effort into walking in Hashem's ways and emulating His conduct, for this is a prerequisite for success in Torah and attaining a fear of Heaven.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Abstaining from Speech

When a person wishes to fast for repentance, abstention from speech is preferable to abstention from food. This method is better for both body and soul. In his Iggeret HaGra, the Vilna Gaon wrote: "Man must deprive himself until he dies, not by fasting or asceticism, but by controlling his mouth and desires. This is teshuvah." It is important to reflect upon this, for many people believe that the best way to repent is to abstain from food. However the Vilna Gaon tells us that there is a better kind of fast, a "fast" from speech, which is effective in helping a person to wholeheartedly repent.

A TRUE STORY

Praying with a Minyan at All Costs

It is written, "Then we cried out to the L-RD, the G-d of our forefathers, and the L-RD heard our voice" (Deuteronomy 26:7).

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Herman was very careful to always attend synagogue even under the most trying of circumstances, whether it be illness, cold, heat, rain or snow. Nothing prevented him from praying with a minyan, and he overcame great obstacles in doing so. He thereby demonstrated his tremendous courage and determination.

Rabbi Herman was once traveling in Europe, visiting the great Torah figures of the generation at their homes. Among other places, he wanted to travel to London, yet he realized that if he didn't get there by plane, he would miss praying Arvit with a minyan. He therefore decided, at the last minute, to travel by plane. Now at that time traveling by plane was very expensive and dangerous. Nevertheless he boarded an airplane and quickly flew to London. He then made it to the home of Rabbi Dessler and knocked on his door. Rabbi Dessler asked what he could do for him, and Rabbi Herman asked if he could organize a minyan for Arvit. Thus Rabbi Dessler went from door to door until he was finally able to assemble a minyan. After praying, Rabbi Herman said to him: "Rabbi Dessler, you have shown me true hospitality!" He was ready to sacrifice everything to pray with a minyan.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen of Radin – The Chafetz Chaim

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen was born on Shevat 11, 5599 in the small town of Zhetel, Poland. The son of Rabbi Aryeh Zev Hachohen, the young Israel Meir studied Torah in Vilna, and after his marriage he settled in the small town of Radin. It was there that he devoted himself day and night to the study of Torah. His wife opened a general store while he spent his time in the Beit Midrash, including most of his nighttime hours. In fact the majority of his day was devoted to studying Torah.

Already by the age of 30, Rabbi Israel Meir began to write his book Chafetz Chaim, which organized all the laws regarding forbidden speech. He wrote the book anonymously and it quickly spread, today being found throughout the Jewish world. In 5635 he finished writing his second book, Shmirat Halashon, which emphasized the importance of guarding one's tongue from an ethical perspective. From that time until the present day, myriads of Jews have studied these sacred works, which have become the cornerstone for studying the laws regarding speech.

At the same time, Rabbi Israel Meir composed his great work Mishnah Berurah on the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim. It too can be found throughout the Jewish world. At the same time as he was composing Mishnah Berurah, Rabbi Israel Meir also wrote many other books that demonstrated his greatness in Torah. Despite all this, the Chafetz Chaim (as he became known) never accepted official rabbinical positions, and he was always involved with the people. Public officials viewed him in a positive light, and he was often appointed to head delegations sent to the authorities to annul government decrees that threatened the Jewish people. On Elul 24, 5693, at the age of 94, the Chafetz Chaim left this world for the celestial academy. He is buried in Radin (present day Belarus). May his merit protect us all.