

The Path To Follow

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The Meaning of the Mitzvah of Bikkurim

It is written, "It will be, when you enter the land that Hashem your G-d gives you as an inheritance...that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground... You shall come to the kohen who will be in those days.... The kohen shall take the basket from your hand" (Devarim 26:1-4).

These verses describe the mitzvah of bikkurim (first fruits). According to this mitzvah, after the land has been conquered and distributed among the Children of Israel, every year we must bring the seven types of fruit that are the glory of Eretz Israel. And not just any fruits, but the first fruits – the ones that appear first on a tree.

Sefer HaChinuch discusses the reasons for this mitzvah: "The profound significance of the mitzvah lies in placing Hashem's word at the top of our joy. We must remember and know that every blessing in the world comes from Him. We have received the commandment to bring to those who serve in His House the fruits that have ripened first on His trees. We do this in recalling and accepting the yoke of His kingdom, and by thanking Him for these fruits and for all the other good things we receive from Him. We will then be worthy of a blessing, and there will be a blessing on our fruits" (Sefer HaChinuch 91).

This seems to contain something that requires additional thought. Pride is among the worst sins, and it can make a person lose his share in this world and the World to Come. Our Sages warn us about this in the Mishnah, stating that "Envy, lust, and honor-seeking drive a man from the world" (Pirkei Avot 4:21). In the Gemara they go into greater detail: "Rabbi Elazar said, 'Every man in whom there is pride deserves to be cut down like an Asherah [object of idolatrous worship]. ... Every man in whom pride dwells, his ashes will not arise [in the resurrection]' " (Sotah 5a). This means that the proud deserve death in this world and are not worthy of being resurrected in the future. The Sages add, "Rabbi Chisda – according to another version it was Mar Ukba – said: Every man in whom pride dwells, the Holy One, blessed be He, declares: 'I and he cannot both dwell in the world' " (Sotah 5a). G-d cannot, so to speak, dwell in the same world as him, the reason being that He detests every heart that is filled with pride, as it is written: "Every haughty heart is an abomination to Hashem" (Mishlei 16:5). Mussar books such as Sha'arei Teshuvah by Rabbeinu Yona and Messilat Yesharim by the Ramchal go into great detail on this subject.

Although the sin of pride is unfortunately widespread, being found among many people, the prevalence of pride is even greater among those who sow and harvest their fields. This can almost be expected, given that these people go to the trouble of working the earth all year round by watering and tilling it, along with all the difficulties that this entails. Hence it is natural that after so much effort, when such a person finally sees the result of his work, he will likely attribute it to his own efforts. He will consider it a personal achievement, a private success, and he will be inclined to think that "I put in the effort. I did all the work."

It is therefore possible that the goal of the bikkurim is to teach us that we must eradicate such thoughts from our heart. Hence as soon as it is possible – as soon as the first fruits begin to grow and emerge on a tree – we are obligated to mark them off with some reed rope, as mentioned in the Mishnah, and say: "Let these be bikkurim" (Bikkurim 3:1).

That is why this order was given precisely at the time of the Children of Israel's arrival in Eretz Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey, and described as "a land where you will eat bread without poverty; you will lack nothing there" (Devarim 8:9). It is precisely at such a moment, when a person is sitting beneath his vine and fig tree, that such abundance may lead him to pride, as the verse states: "Yeshurun grew fat and kicked" (ibid. 32:15).

Thus when a person would present his bikkurim, he would utter a vidui (confession) by recalling all the kindnesses of the Creator: "My father was a wandering Aramean" (Devarim 26:5). This teaches us that everything we have received, the land and its magnificent fruits, only comes by the merit of our holy Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They served Hashem with devotion by humbling and annulling themselves, and it was by their merit that we were able to escape from Egypt, from the house of slavery, and enter Eretz Israel. Nevertheless, everything was on condition that we study Torah and observe mitzvot, otherwise the Holy One, blessed be He, would exile us from our land, as it is written: "Let the land not vomit you out" (Vayikra 18:28). (Note: This may be the meaning of the expression ki tavo ["when you enter"], which has a numerical value of 403. It corresponds to the 400 years of exile and the three patriarchs, for it was by means of these two things – the Patriarchs and the hardships of exile – that the Children of Israel received the land.)

Reflecting further, I found other things that may also be explained in this way. Thus the Ohr HaChaim pondered the meaning of the phrase, "and you shall speak" (Devarim 26:5) and commented: "It may be that the term ve'anita ['and you shall speak'] actually comes from the root oni ['poverty']. It is like a crude man for whom the king has done a great favor, and who comes before him like a beggar, pleading with a broken heart. Likewise it is fitting to humble oneself before Hashem." Now this is clearly what it means, for the mitzvah of the first fruits consists of the fact that a person recognizes the greatness of the Creator and feels insignificant for having received such great kindness, like a poor man standing at the door. At that point, no pride is liable to enter his heart.

There is something else here, which Sforno notes in examining the words "the kohen who will be in those days." It means, "Even if he is not great in wisdom, it does not prevent you from addressing him with respect." In other words, even if you know that you are greater than the kohen, you must still humble yourself before him and bring him the bikkurim. That is what Sforno states.

Yet because of our many sins, we have been exiled from our country and find ourselves far from our land, no longer being able to bring bikkurim to Jerusalem and the Temple. Yet we learn something amazing in this week's parsha, something that can help anyone who wants to avoid being infused with pride, given that it can make a person lose his portion in the world: It consists of reflecting upon the kindnesses of the Creator and His generosity towards him. When a person perceives the greatness of G-d, coupled with his own insignificance, a spirit of humility will infuse the deepest parts of his being.

What follows is an excerpt from the Ramban's famous letter to his son: "And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the kingdom of Hashem, for he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written: 'Hashem has reigned, He has donned grandeur' [Tehillim 93:1]. Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? 'Hashem impoverishes and makes rich' [I Samuel 2:7]. Is it because of honor? This belongs to Hashem, as we read: 'Wealth and honor come from You' [I Chronicles 29:12]. Therefore how can a person adorn himself with Hashem's honor? One who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem 'removes the speech of assured men and reasoning from the elders' [Job 12:20]! We therefore see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since He lowers the proud in His anger, and when He wishes He raises the low. Therefore lower yourself, and Hashem will lift you up!"

The Fruit of the Ground

It is written, “You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground” (Devarim 26:2).

In his book *Rosh Yosef*, Rabbi Yosef of Seltz Zatzal notes that although most of the seven species are fruit, the verse states “fruit of the ground” for the following reason: The Rambam writes that according to the Halachah, we first place barley, followed by wheat, followed by figs, and then pomegranates in a basket.

Hence we first place the “fruit of the ground” in a basket, which is what the verse means by stating: “You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground.”

Not By An Emissary

It is written, “Behold, I have brought the first fruits of the ground” (Devarim 26:10).

On the verse, “You shall bring the first of the first fruits of your land to the house of Hashem your G-d” (Shemot 34:26), the Midrash states: “You yourself, not an emissary.”

The Chida cites Rabbi Yehuda Briel of Mantua in writing, “It may also be that sustenance comes directly from Hashem alone, not from an emissary, as the Gemara states: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, retains three keys in His own hand, not entrusting them to the hand of any emissary: The key of rain...’ [Taanith 2a]. Now as we know, sustenance is included in the concept of ‘rain.’”

Therefore just as G-d Himself – not an emissary – provides us with sustenance, likewise the first fruits, by which we ask for sustenance (“bless the earth...”), must also be brought by us – not by an emissary.

To Better Serve G-d

It is written, “You shall rejoice in all the goodness that Hashem your G-d has given you and your household” (Devarim 26:11).

This is surprising: Why does the Torah feel the need to command us, in the passage on the first fruits, to “rejoice in all the goodness”? In general, a person who experiences goodness does not need to be told to rejoice, for he will do so on his own! In that case, why does the Torah command us: “You shall rejoice in all the goodness that Hashem your G-d has given you and your household”?

In his book *Maskil el Dal*, Rabbi Rahamim David Coscas Shlita answers this question by stating that a person may sometimes have an abundance of things and lack nothing, yet still be unhappy with his lot, as the Sages have said: “He who has one hundred seeks two hundred” (*Kohelet Rabba* 1:32). In fact there could be other reasons for a person’s sadness, such that his wealth and all the good things he possesses will not make him happy. Hence the Torah felt the need to warn, “You shall rejoice in all the goodness that Hashem your G-d has given you and your household.” In other words: From all the good things you possess, rejoice and experience only happiness, so you can better serve your Creator.

Words of Consolation

It is written, “All these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (Devarim 28:15).

Someone once asked, “Why are no words of consolation included among the curses mentioned in Parsha Ki Tavo, as they are among the curses mentioned in Parsha Bechukotai?”

This is what the Radbaz replies:

“It seems to me that there is no need for words of consolation in Parsha Ki Tavo, for a consolation is already included. There is no verse [among the curses] that does not contain Hashem’s Name, which demonstrates mercy. This tells us that these curses occur through the attribute of mercy, as in: ‘He wounds, but His hands heal’ [Job 5:18]. There is no greater consolation than this” (Responsa Radbaz 769).

We may also explain it by noting that Parsha Nitzavim is connected to Ki Tavo, and this is part of the covenant. It contains words of consolation at its conclusion, throughout the end of the parsha.

Guard Your Tongue!

I’m the One at Fault

In *Sefer Chassidim* (ch. 22) we read: “If one is among a group of people, and something improper has occurred but no one knows who did it, he should say: ‘I’m the one at fault,’ even if that is not the case.”

– Chafetz Chaim

Seeing Open Miracles, As in the Time of the Prophets

The promise of Heavenly blessings made in this week's parsha is closely connected to the observance of Hashem's mitzvot and complete obedience to the voice of the Creator, without veering to the right or left of all His laws and statutes. Thus a Jew who cleaves to the holy Shechinah and does the will of the Creator, in joy and goodwill, receives a Divine promise that he will experience an abundance of good and find favor in the eyes of the Creator.

When someone reaches the point at which he finds favor in the eyes of G-d, writes Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein Shlita in his book *Barchi Nafshi*, the kindness that he is shown greatly surpasses the level and magnitude of his deeds. Indeed, he can reach the highest heights when he finds such favor, even in our generation!

In reality, we must realize that finding favor in Hashem's eyes generally occurs by working on one's middot. This also applies to a generation as lowly as our own, even among people as insignificant as ourselves. Now the Holy One, blessed be He, does not ask the impossible of man. In regards to his level, if a person can conquer his desires – even if not on a regular basis, but just sometimes – it means that he has already found favor in Hashem's eyes. In that case, great miracles may occur for him.

Our Fathers Have Already Told Us

In the book *Ben Yehoyada* (Tractate Taanith, ch 3), we find an extraordinary story cited in the book *Admat Kodesh* (on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Choshen Mishpat*). The details of this story and the miracle that it describes resemble what happened to the wife of Ovadia, according to the account of the prophet (II Kings 4).

This is what happened:

Two Jews became partners in a business venture and invested their money into purchasing merchandise and various products which they hoped to resell for a profit. In the contract which they wrote, it was explicitly stated that all their profits would be split equally between them. However if one of them discovered a bargain, it would be for him alone, with no need to mention it to the other partner.

Now among the products which they purchased was olive oil, and since they found a merchant who was selling it at a good price, they purchased it in large quantities. All this oil was placed in containers, which they stored in the warehouse of one partner.

One day, the wife of the warehouse owner entered the area where these containers were stored. She was stunned to see that one of the containers was cracked and leaking oil without stop. Yet the container remained full!

The owner's wife felt that this was a miracle, and she brought empty containers and filled them with the leaking oil until there were no containers left. It was exactly like what had happened to the wife of the prophet Ovadia – an incredible miracle!

The author of *Admat Kodesh*, Rabbi Moshe Mizrachi, was asked by the owner of the warehouse if his partner had a right to any part of this extra oil. Although they had mutually agreed that if one partner discovered a bargain, the other partner would have no share in it, yet in this case – since oil was flowing from containers which they had purchased together – was it possible for the other partner to also have a right to it? Conversely, was it possible to think that the surplus oil constituted a bargain, in which case all the containers filled with such oil belonged to the partner who owned the warehouse, not to the other partner?

In his decision, the *Admat Kodesh* noted that he had heard a similar story: "Our fathers have already told us...of a similar miracle that occurred to a Jew who was close to us, in a courtyard that carries his name to this day, Rabbi Eliezer Bonji. A miracle occurred through his wife."

In other words, if it weren't enough that these business partners experienced a miracle, the *Admat Kodesh* recounted a similar miracle that took place in a certain courtyard with the discovery of a container from which oil was miraculously flowing. The woman had filled many jars from it, and from that jar there was nothing lacking.

This is precisely what happened to the wife of the prophet Ovadia: "They brought [vessels] to her and she poured. When all the containers were full, she said to her son: 'Bring me another vessel.' He said to her, 'There is no other vessel'" (II Kings 4:5-6).

Regarding the miracle which the *Admat Kodesh* described, he recounted that when the woman in question realized that a miracle was taking place before her very eyes, she decided that since Heaven was only showing it to her, she was apparently forbidden to reveal it to anyone. Hence she didn't even tell her husband about it.

The *Admat Kodesh* concluded in saying that this woman "used the oil to see to the needs of her home for 14 years." If we can imagine the amount of oil corresponding to the money needed to sustain a family for one month, we should multiply that by 12 to obtain what is needed for an entire year, and then multiply that result by 14!

In other words, the amount of oil flowing from that container was enough to feed her family for 14 entire years!

Without a doubt, this was a phenomenal amount of oil, given that it could feed an entire family for such a long period of time.

As we have already said, such miracles occur to people who find favor in the eyes of Hashem.

For the Hilloula of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol

Descending in Order to Ascend

Our teacher Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita has spoken and written on numerous occasions about the great power of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol, may his merit protect us. We can clearly see miracles and wonders on the day of his Hilloula, which brings deliverance and great success to all Jews who come and pray by the grave of this tzaddik, as well as to everyone who asks for a blessing by his merit. As the Sages say, "The tzaddikim are greater in death than in life."

We shall recount a few stories in honor of the tzaddik, may his merit protect us, in order to strengthen our faith in Hashem and His tzaddikim. During his eulogy for the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, the gaon Rabbi Shalom Messas Zatzal, our teacher Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita told the following story:

One day during Chol HaMoed, I received a telephone call from France. It was from a great Rav, a tzaddik and friend of the Pinto family, the gaon Rabbi Shalom Messas, the Av Beit Din of Jerusalem. He urgently wanted to speak to me.

I took the receiver and began by greeting Rabbi Shalom Messas. The Rav told me that he wanted a blessing for his wife. Doctors had discovered that she was gravely ill, and she was scheduled to undergo an operation on the following day.

I immediately expressed my great surprise to the Rav: "I'm insignificant, but you're a great Rav! Who am I to give you a blessing?"

However Rav Messas replied, "I am who I am, but you have the great merit of your ancestors. We all know who Rabbi Haim Pinto was. That's why I want you to awaken Heaven's compassion for my wife. We believe in the merit of Rabbi Haim Pinto and in the merit of your holy ancestors, which is why I'm asking you to awaken the merit of your ancestors and to pray for the complete healing of my wife."

I simply replied, "Since the Rav is older than me, and he has nevertheless negated himself before me, it means that he is much greater than me. Because the Rav is addressing someone who is insignificant, Hashem will provide his wife with an immediate healing."

I added, "I remember what Hashem told Moshe: 'Descend towards the people' – a descent required for an ascent. Likewise the Rav is descending from his greatness and asking for things from those who are smaller than him. By this merit, Hashem will help you."

Afterwards, Rabbi Yehoshua told me that he knew that Rav Messas' wife was ill. However a great miracle occurred. She was operated on the following day, and to the doctors' great surprise, they found nothing wrong with her! This was despite the fact that prior tests had clearly shown that she was gravely ill. At that point everyone realized that her healing had occurred by the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto.

Soul-Searching

A wealthy Jew from France had a large clothing store. He lived at ease and his business flourished, until one bitter day when a group of masked robbers entered his store. They attacked him with a hammer and seriously injured him, then stole an enormous quantity of merchandise before fleeing.

When he was brought to the hospital, the doctors examined him and said that his situation was so hopeless that it was pointless to actively treat him. His head had been severely injured, and there was almost no way to heal his wounds. Furthermore, his heart had been damaged, and it wouldn't be long before it stopped beating.

The doctors therefore hooked him up to a respirator as a last resort. They

asked his family to remain by his bedside, for they thought that he would die in a few minutes, or possibly a few hours.

More than several hours later, the injured man was still showing signs of life. Yet according to doctors, he was still hovering between life and death.

His family members surrounded his bed, constantly imploring Hashem for the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto to protect and lead him from death to life. Furthermore, the man's other family members went to find our teacher Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita in order to receive a blessing for him. The Rav told them that they had to do teshuvah, to search their souls and strengthen themselves in Torah and mitzvot.

The brother of the injured man flew from Miami to meet the Rav, asking that he come to the hospital to see his brother. However the Rav declined to go, later explaining his reasoning as follows: "I thought to myself, 'What good will it serve for me to go?' I was also very afraid of a Chillul Hashem, for if this man were to die, his family would say: 'The descendant of a tzaddik came to visit him, but he couldn't do anything to heal him.' That's why I told the family: 'Let's wait a week or two and see what happens.'"

A month passed, and the man was still alive, attached to a respirator. It was then that the Rav decided to visit him in the hospital.

A few people got together to escort the Rav to the hospital, among them being Reb Avraham Knafo. Everyone began reading tehillim around the man's bedside. At that point the Rav began encouraging the members of his family, saying: "Given that he's still alive a month after all the doctors lost hope, it means that there are still improvements that are possible and even necessary."

The Rav then told them what improvements they had to make, such as in the area of family purity and the like. These things were beneficial for the family, and even more for the patient. As he said this, he stressed: "If you truly commit yourselves to improving these areas, the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto will protect you, and he will be healed."

Several doctors from the hospital team were standing by the patient's bedside at that point. They heard the conversation between the Rav and the family, and one doctor approached the Rav and asked: "Do you really think that prayer will help?" The Rav responded, "Why do you ask?"

The eminent doctor explained: "Look Rabbi, according to the patient's prognosis and our medical expertise, he should have died a long time ago. From the time that he's been injured until now, his situation has been regarded as hopeless."

Our Rav seemed satisfied by what the doctor was saying, "It's a sign that his healing is not in the hands of doctors, but in the hands of G-d. Doctors can only heal the sick when G-d desires. If not, then doctors can do nothing, in which case they are not good messengers. Since the patient has survived until now, it means that this is what G-d wants. If his family members correct all that is needed, you doctors will be good messengers."

One such doctor, who was a Jew, heard these words and said: "Amen."

In fact 15 days later, the patient opened his eyes and, B'ezrat Hashem, the doctors began to actively treat him. They took new CT scans of his head and discovered that his brain was intact, having suffered no permanent damage. Furthermore, on Elul 25 (the day before the Hilloula of Rabbi Haim Pinto), the family telephoned our Rav to tell him with great joy that he had already left the hospital.

The great miracle in all this was that the doctors, in their medical assessment, had explicitly stated that the patient was clinically dead upon arriving at the hospital. In fact the decision had been taken not to actively treat him, but instead to simply place him on a respirator. Despite all this, it's astonishing that he survived and emerged in perfect health, something that the doctors have been unable to explain to this day.

It was solely the merit of the teshuvah to which his relatives had committed themselves, and the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto, which protected and allowed him to escape death and emerge towards a good life.