



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת כי תבוא תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Ki Savo

## BIKKURIM, BERACHOS, AND THE WORLD

At first glance, the mitzvah of *bikkurim* (first fruits) seems straightforward enough. In this week's *parshah* (*Devarim 26:1-11*), the Jewish residents of Eretz Yisrael are instructed to take a sampling of the first fruits of their land and bring them to the Sanctuary in Yerushalayim.

### GALA AFFAIR

We find, however, that the *bikkurim*-bringing procedure is quite an elaborate production. The Mishnah in Bikkurim (3:2-4) describes the process as the multitudes gather to transport their fruits to Yerushalayim:

... הָיָה הַמְּמַנֶּה אוֹמֵר, קוּמוּ וְנַעֲלֵה צִיּוֹן אֶל בַּיִת ה' אֶלְהֵינוּ... הַקְּרוֹבִים מִבְּיָאִים הַתְּאֵנִים וְהָעֵגְבִיּוֹת, וְהַרְחוֹקִים מִבְּיָאִים גְּרוֹגְרוֹת וְצִמּוּקִים. וְהַשּׁוֹר הוֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם, וְקִרְנָיו מְצַפּוֹת זָהָב, וְעֵטְרָה שֶׁל זֵית בְּרֹאשׁוֹ. הַחֲלִיל מִכָּה לִפְנֵיהֶם... הַגִּיעוּ קְרוֹב לִירוּשָׁלַיִם... הַפְּחוֹת, הַסְּגָנִים וְהַגְּזָבְרִים יוֹצֵאִים לְקִרְיָתָם... וְכָל בְּעָלֵי אֲמֻנִיּוֹת שְׁבִירוּשָׁלַיִם עוֹמְדִים לִפְנֵיהֶם וְשׂוֹאֲלִין בְּשִׁלּוּמָם, אֲחֵינוּ... בְּאֵתָם לְשִׁלּוּם. הַחֲלִיל מִכָּה לִפְנֵיהֶם עַד שֶׁמִּגִּיעִין לְהַר הַבַּיִת... נוֹטֵל הַסֵּל עַל פְּתָפוֹ וְנִכְנָס, עַד שֶׁמִּגִּיעַ לְעֶזְרָה.

“... The appointee would announce: ‘Let us arise and ascend to Zion, to the House of Hashem, our G-d,’... The pilgrims living close to Yerushalayim would bring their (fresh) figs and grapes, while those coming from far away would transport them in the form of dried fruit and raisins.

“Walking at the front of the procession was an ox, with gold-plated horns and crowned with a garland of olive-branch. They traveled to the musical accompaniment of flutists... Upon arriving in the vicinity of Yerushalayim... the city and Temple officers came out to greet the assemblage... All of the

city craftsmen would stand in their honor and inquire of their welfare: ‘Our brothers... have you arrived peacefully?’ The flutists continued to play until the procession reached the Temple Mount... Then, each individual would carry his basket of fruits and enter the area, until he came to the inner courtyard.”

Contemplating this spectacle, we are prompted to ask: What exactly was it about this seemingly uncomplicated ritual – presenting some fruits in the Beis Hamikdash – that warranted such pomp?

This question actually has a very simple answer: the sheer importance of this mitzvah is enormous. As Chazal tell us: “The world was created on account of *bikkurim*,” (*Alshich, parshas Ki Savo*, quoting the *Bereishis Rabbah*).

Apparently, *bikkurim* is something to get plenty excited about. But this point itself begs clarification: What is it about *bikkurim* that commands such (literally) universal importance?

To uncover the essence of this mitzvah, the *Alshich Hakadosh* (*beginning of this week's parshah*) portrays the following scenario:

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

A certain individual who was quite desperate for a job and some sustenance happened upon the field of an extremely wealthy landowner. He offered his services to the rich man, hoping to be hired as a sharecropper. When the owner consented, the supplicant was both relieved and grateful. He immediately set about working the fields.

The sharecropper was quite excited over the prospect of having found employment. Although he would be producing a lot more than he would be allowed to keep for himself, he was still quite pleased that he had what to eat. He eagerly waited for his labor to come to “fruition.”

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One day, he spotted the first ripe cluster of grapes. Before taking any for himself, he decided to present these fruits to his gracious host and employer. He felt that doing so would be a most appropriate demonstration of gratitude. Placing them in a respectable container, he brought them to the landowner. "See how robust your crops are? I did not want to take for myself before delivering some to you," he said.

The rich man was quite touched by this gesture. In contrast to previous employees of his, this one didn't act like he owned the place or complain about the wages. Instead, he was compliant, respectful, and grateful. "You know what?" he said to his worker. "Feel free to keep whatever you produced. The gratitude you have shown is more than enough for me."

As the Alshich explains, the act of bringing *bikkurim* accomplishes a similar purpose. Hashem grants us so much. Yet people have a tendency to forget who the true Owner of everything really is. They can mistakenly begin to believe that it is through their own efforts that they acquired bounty. The results of this attitude can be quite disastrous. For when a person starts to think that, "It is the power and strength of my hands that has yielded me all of this wealth" (*Devarim 8:17*), Hashem may respond by rescinding this abundance.

What is it that Hashem asks for in return for all He has granted? Not very much, explains the Alshich. In fact, all that Hashem desires is mere acknowledgement – a simple recognition on our part that we are aware from whence our blessings came. It is for this purpose that He created the world in the first place: so that man will recognize the Creator and thank and praise Him.

This acknowledgement is accomplished through the offices of *bikkurim*. In the same manner as the grateful sharecropper, the Jewish people take a small sampling of the first fruits and present it – in the Holy Temple – to the true Owner of the fields, the land, and everything else: the Creator and Master of the

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Universe. In so doing, they fulfill the very purpose for which the world was created. And as a result of their responding properly to the bounty with which they were blessed, Hashem allows them to retain the rest.

In a sense, the mitzvah of *bikkurim* performs a function similar to that of another familiar institution: *berachos* (blessings on food). We find two verses in Sefer Tehillim that seem to contradict each other. One states clearly: "The earth and its fullness belong to Hashem," (*Tehillim 24:1*), while the other verse seems to attribute ownership of the earth to mankind: "The heavens... belong to Hashem, but He has granted the earth to man," (*ibid 115:16*). The Gemara (*Berachos 35a*) resolves the contradiction. When does the earth belong exclusively to Hashem? Before a person makes a *berachah*. Once he recites the proper blessing over the yield of the land, then Hashem allows him to keep it: "He has granted the earth to man."

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