

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

Ki Tavo

The parasha opens with:

When you come into the Land that ... G-d gives you as an inheritance... you shall take of the first fruits of the earth... and place them in a basket, and go to the place which... G-d will choose to place His Name. You will respond and declare, "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with a few people, and he became a great nation there... The Egyptians... imposed hard labor on us ... We cried out to G-d... and He heard... He brought us out from there... to this place... a land flowing with milk and honey... Behold! I have brought these first fruits..." (26:1-10).

This declaration is the first formal one in the Torah that may be pronounced by any Israelite. Why, out of all the Temple offerings, did the Torah select the first fruits for a ceremony with a standard formula? Why did the Torah not leave its exact wording to the discretion of the person bringing the first fruits?

Furthermore, the actual text of the declaration seems to be out of tune with the bringing of the first fruits. It does not say, as might be expected, "Thank you G-d for enabling me to grow these fruits", or "Thank you for

giving me safe passage to Jerusalem." Instead, it expounds on the painful and miraculous transformation of the Patriarchs, though generations, into the Israelites nation.

The Chinuch explains the mitzva of Bikurim in the framework of what might be called HAKARAT HATOV, the gratitude due to G-d for making it possible for the farmers of Am Yisrael to successfully farm their lands and enjoy their produce. In enjoying the Land's latest yield, those bringing Bikurim to the Beit HaMikdash see themselves at the advancing end, as part of the latest event of a long series where G-d's helps them, with the current Bikurim declaration as the latest station in past experiences of divine intervention. It is thus an occasion to declare and recall G-d's protecting Ya'akov Avinu from his pursuers and from his enemies, of His enabling him and his children to prosper in Egypt, of His staying by His descendants who by then had become a nation during the dark times in Egypt, of His employing a series of spectacular miracles to take them out of slavery, and finally of His settling them into the Land that He promised to their ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. The Bikurim declaration thus declares the latest station of joy in enjoying G-d's latest round of help. It was the latest link that extended yet again the lengthening chain of gratitude.

In addition, it may be suggested that the Bikurim declaration is one of rejoicing in that G-d has helped the Israelites to live a secure and settled lifestyle and grow their own food. In not having to move from place to place, exposed to the elements in herding cattle. And their Bikurim experience contrasts with previous experiences. Kayin's attempt at farming was to meet with disaster. So was No'ach's. The next farmer in our line of ancestry was Yitzchak. Although initially very successful, his jealous neighbors prompted him leave it all behind and move on, several times. Ya'akov did purchase some land at Shechem, but also found himself leaving in a hurry. His descendants through the children of Ya'akov Avinu would eventually meet disaster: they acquired land in Egypt (B'reishit 47:27, Ibn Ezra), and sooner or later found themselves as slaves, possibly on the very lands they once owned. The rest of the time both the antecedents and successors of the "wandering Aramean" (Ibn Ezra), Ya'akov Avinu, were of no fixed address but earned their living in shepherding flocks and cattle, migrating through common lands. As did Avraham and Yitzchak. As were his descendants to do likewise when Yosef introduced them to Par'o: they declared that being pastoral nomads was their way of life. As Moshe Rabbeinu was to spend much of his

life doing. No settled life, no security, no crops to look forward to, always on the move with their animals...

That is what the Bikurim declaration celebrates: gratitude for G-d's continued blessing from having gone from insecure nomads to prosperous landowners and farmers in the Land that G-d has chosen to give them.



These Divrei Torah are written in loving memory of my dearest Mother, Harabanit Devora Solomon ztl. who ascended to the Yeshiva Shel Ma'ala on Shabbat Ki-Tavo, 26 years ago. May her memory be blessed, and be a source of blessings.