

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

KI TAVO 5784

Our Parsha, with its horrific tochacha curses, certainly is one alarmingly stark but necessary means to prepare for the Days of Awe. Frankly put, there are consequences for our religious and moral delinquencies. And to this, attention must be paid as we approach the Yom HaDin - the Day of Judgment. Accordingly, the Talmud (Megila 31b) records that Ezra enacted the tochacha to be read prior to Rosh HaShana, with Tosafot (ad loc, s.v. K'LALOT) adding that we introduce a buffer Shabbat between Ki Tavo and Rosh HaShana (Nitzavim or Nitzavim/Vayeilech) so as not to allow the harsh and frightening maledictions of our Parsha to abut with the festivity of the New Year with its mitzva of simcha.

But our Parsha also provides, as Chazal would say, a REFU'AH KODEM LAMAKA, a measure of succor and support to rescue us from the looming and threatening "strike". Thus, Ki Tavo begins with a discussion of the mitzva of Bikurim, the farmer's bringing and offering of the first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash. Let us attempt to find in this remarkable ceremony - for it was that and much more - a message which can act as a firewall against the

tochacha, and also meaningfully connect us to the Yamim Nora'im.

At first blush, it would appear that Bikurim has little to do with the coming holidays. The mitzva is generally associated with the festival of Shavuot, which is also denominated as Chag HaBikurim. But, upon closer inspection, we soon discover some unusual attributes of this commandment. The Midrash comments (Yalkut, B'reishit 2) that the world was created in the merit of Bikurim. Quite a statement given the fact that it shares company with Torah and Yisrael who are accorded a similar lofty status. And when we consider that Rosh HaShana celebrates the creation of the world, it is reasonable to conclude that there exists some intrinsic relationship between this holiday and Bikurim.

To mine one these connections, let us examine the profound message found in the following Midrash. First, the context: After the farmer recites the Bikurim passage, he declares,

And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the ground..." (26:10)

On the opening three words of the declaration, the Sifrei (D'varim 26:10, #301) states:

V'ATA - and now - right away,

HINEI - B'SIMCHA (with joy),

HEIVEITI - I have brought of my own.

Clearly, the central theme of the Yamim Nora'im season is the mandate to do T'SHUVA. But there are many resistances that attempt to convince us that repentance is all but futile and even impossible. Chief among them is our past. Either our age, as we grow older, persuades us that we're simply too much the senior to change and, at any rate, we're not so terribly bad after all, so why bother. Or, we imagine that our past misdeeds and blunders are so horrendous, making any possibility of absolution hopeless. In a word, we're a lost cause, so why even try. To this excuse of the past, Chazal declare, "And now," and they add elsewhere: EIN V'ATA ELA T'SHUVA - 'And now' connotes repentance" (B'reishit Rabba, 21:6). It were as if our Sages were admonishing: "Forget, for the moment, your past and embrace your now." As the often worn - but true - cliché has it: "Let today be the first day of the rest of your life." Let your now be today, and make your today, everyday! Regardless of past mistakes or failures, never mind age or mental acuity, today, right now, immediately, you can make a new start! (V'ATA - MIYAD)

A wise woman (Eleanor Roosevelt) once quipped: "The past is history, tomorrow's a mystery, today is a gift which is why it is called 'the present'"

Ah, but you say, "What can I now bring to the table; begin with what?"

To this, the Midrash asserts, "Bring whatever you have now, as long as it's yours." When even the poor farmer brought his paltry selection of first fruit in a simple wooden basket, he was accorded the same honor and celebratory greeting by the Temple prelates as the rich farmer. As the Talmud (B'rachot 17a) categorically declares - One who brings a substantial [sacrifice] and one who brings a meager one [have equal merit], as long as he directs his heart towards Heaven." And everyone has something, else your existence, in the Eyes of your Maker, would have no purpose. All HaShem wants of you, as you begin your now, is to come with whatever you've earned by dint of your own efforts. Never yield to the YEITZER HARA temptation to compare your own special something with others, those who may appear to have a something far more abundant and consequential. It's only yours that matters! (HEIVEITI - MISHELI).

Thus, if, in going forward, you can believe in and embrace your now, and do so without diminishing or devaluing one iota from whatever you've accomplished, utilizing whatever talents HaShem has blessed you with, then how can you not proceed with simcha, a genuine revitalization of your mission and purpose in life. (HINEI - B'SIMCHA)

And so, we read the chapter of Bikurim before the birth of the New

Year, reminding each of us that we can surmount and even leapfrog over the curses of the tochacha when we successfully engage in the T'SHUVA of now with whatever we have and do so with the confident optimism that HaShem will reward our faith and determination with His promise of a healthy and joyous shana tova!

No wonder the universe was created with Bikurim in mind; for without this powerful message of Bikurim, how could the world and man ever move beyond its imperfections into the bright dawn of a new beginning... again and again! 🙌