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Gratitude, Humility, Bikkurim, and Moshe Rabbeinu's Legacy

Introduction

The mitzvah of Bikkurim obligated the Jewish farmer to bring the first fruit of his harvest to the Kohanim in the Bais HaMikdash. He would express his thanks to Hashem for the land and its produce. He concluded the mitzvah by, "וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לְפָנָי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ", bowing before Hashem. As a reward, he will "Rejoice with all the טוב, goodness that Hashem gave him³."

טוב, the Midrash¹ explains, refers to the Torah as there is no טוב other than Torah. What is the connection between Bikkurim and Torah?

The Midrash¹ connects the words, "וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לְפָנָי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ", with the verse in Tehilim, "בְּאוֹ נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה, וְנִכְרַעַה, נִבְרָכָה לְפָנָי ה' עֲשׂונו"², 'Let us bow, prostrate, and kneel before Hashem our maker.'

Why does the verse say וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה and נִבְרַכָה - bowing and kneeling - if they are included in the act of נִכְרַעַה - prostrating?

The verse uses three separate words in order to allude to the three daily prayers that Moshe Rabbeinu rectified. Moshe perceived through prophecy that the Bais HaMikdash would be destroyed, and that the Mitzvah of Bikkurim would be discontinued. Therefore, he rectified the three prayers, as they are more valued by Hashem than all of the sacrifices.

This Midrash is very puzzling. What is the connection between the mitzvah of Bikkurim and this verse of Tehilim? Also, was it not the patriarchs who established the three daily prayers? Furthermore, how does bowing, kneeling and prostrating allude to Moshe's rectification of prayer?

The Entire Torah is Engraved upon Eretz Yisrael

During the early conquest of Eretz Yisrael, the Jewish people had difficulty conquering Kiryas Sefer until Asniel Ben Kenaz captured the city.¹

From here the Gemarah infers that Asniel Ben Kenaz rediscovered three thousand halachos that had been forgotten after Moshe's passing.¹ How does the Gemara deduce that Asniel restored these halachos from his having conquered a city in Eretz Yisrael?

The Arvei Nachal explains: The entire Torah is engraved upon Eretz Yisrael. Each area of the land corresponds to a different section of the Torah. The city of Kiryas Sefer corresponds to these three thousand halachos. Therefore, when Asniel conquered Kiryas Sefer, he simultaneously rediscovered these halachos.

Each Jew has a Part in the Torah that Corresponds to his Portion in Eretz Yisrael

Each Jew has a part in a letter of the Torah that is uniquely his. This letter corresponds to a Halacha, Mitzvah, or specific task that his soul is particularly connected to. The lot he was assigned in Eretz Yisrael corresponds to his particular portion in the Torah.

Land in Eretz Yisrael was distributed according to, "פְּקֻדֵי הַיָּד". In Tehilim, the Mitzvos are referred as "פְּקֻדֵי הַיָּד". Each man received a portion in Eretz Yisrael according to פְּקֻדֵי - the Mitzvah his soul was rooted in.

פְּקֻדֵי is also similar to תַּפְקִיד, task. Each person's lot in Eretz Yisrael corresponded to the unique task he was assigned in life.

Aside from the general prohibition of theft, there is a specific prohibition of stealing territory in Eretz Yisrael. Stealing land in Eretz Yisrael is much more severe than assigning real estate to a non-rightful owner. One who takes land in Eretz Yisrael away from a Jew, deprives him of his portion in the Torah!

In addition to the prohibition, the Torah specifically cursed one who moves the fence bordering his property in order to usurp territory from his neighbor, "אָרוּר מְסִיג גְּבוּל רֵעֵהוּ".

The first letters of these words spell גמרא. By taking land in Eretz Yisrael he steals part of his neighbor's unique perspective in the Torah, and ability to originate Torah ideas. Also, the last letters of these words spell גורל, lots. The land in Eretz Yisrael was distributed by lottery.¹

The Fruit of Eretz Yisrael Contained Torah

Contained within the fruits of Eretz Yisrael, are the unique Torah ideas of its owner. One who passes the field of a farmer who is planting, harvesting or reaping should bless him, "בִּרְכַת ה' אֵלֵיכֶם בְּרַכְנוּ אִתְּכֶם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם", 'The blessing of Hashem should be upon you, we bless you with the name of Hashem.'²

This blessing is gematria "תורתך שלמדנתו", "We thank you Hashem for the Torah you taught us (they both equal 1856). The foremost blessing for a farmer in Eretz Yisrael is that his produce will be replete with Torah."³

¹ The connection that each soul has to the Torah, through his Mitzvah or Halacha is beyond our comprehension, explains the Tanya (אגרות סימן ז') ... An example of a phenomenon in this world that we cannot understand is גורל.

If a person works hard, we realize that he deserves money. We can also understand that a person can inherit riches; as the closest relative, he is part of the deceased. However, no one can explain why someone should win a lottery - it is above our understanding.

The lot of each Jew in Eretz Yisrael - which contained his Mitzvah/Halacha, and specific task - was distributed by Gorel. The connection between a Jew and his portion in the Torah cannot be comprehended by anyone other than Hashem himself.

² There are people who King David refers to as "שונאי ציון", those who hate Tzion. These people refuse to recognize the tremendous value of Eretz Yisrael. They think Eretz Yisrael is a national homeland, not a holy land which contains the entire Torah. King David discusses the lot of such an individual. His harvest will not succeed and passersby will not bless his field with this customary blessing.

³ In essence, the food every Jew eats contains sparks of Torah uniquely pertaining to his soul. If a Jew eats the way he should; he washes his hands according to halacha, pronounces the blessings with concentration and joy, and eats for the right reason - to maintain a healthy body, he will comprehend this Torah. Therefore, in the Blessing after meals we thank Hashem for the Torah.

In fact, there are even opinions among the halachic authorities that one who forgets to mention the Torah in the blessings after a meal has not fulfilled his obligation of thanking Hashem for his food! Such is the primacy of the inner content of a Jewish meal.

When a farmer brought his fruits to the Bais HaMikdash, he was actually bringing capsules of his original Torah perspectives. Hashem directed each of the multitudes of parcels of produce to the specific Kohen who had a connection to the Torah it contained. The Kohanim who ate these fruits grasped the Torah contained in them.

The Torah appropriately blesses one who fulfils the mitzvah of Bikkurim, "You should rejoice with the טוב - the Torah - which Hashem has bestowed upon you." Rejoice with the Torah inspiration that Hashem has planted in the produce of your field in Eretz Yisrael.

Torah and Eretz Yisrael are Merited through Humility

The prerequisite for understanding Torah is not intellectual prowess or good memorization skills; it is humility - a sense of one's nothingness in the face of the Almighty G-d. Torah is compared to water which will always pool at the lowest point. Torah will find its home in the hearts and minds of the most humble of people.

Eretz Yisrael, likewise, is the heritage of the unassuming, as King David states in Tehilim, "וְעֲנִיִּים יִרְשׁוּ-אֶרֶץ", 'the humble will inherit the Land.'

In a letter, R' Avraham Kalisker zt"l connects the verse "טוֹבָה הָאֶרֶץ מְאֹד, מְאֹד" 'The land is very, very good', with our sages exhortation to, "מְאֹד, מְאֹד הוּא שֶׁפֶל רוּחַ" 'Be very, very humble'. The former is acquired through the latter.

Merely residing in the state of Israel does not mean that one possesses Eretz Yisrael. A person can live in Israel all his life, but his soul can be completely disconnected from the Holy Land.

Bikkurim – A Mitzvah which Teaches Gratitude

The Mitzvah of Bikkurim teaches gratitude¹⁰. By bringing the first product of his labor to the house of Hashem, the Jewish farmer expressed his conviction that his successful crop was due to the blessing of Hashem.

Gratitude is a product of humility. A humble person feels he deserves nothing. Everything he has in life is a bonus! He is filled with an overwhelming sense of wonder and joy at all the undeserved goodness he has in his life. By Modim, the prayer of gratitude, we bow before G-d. Through self-effacement we endeavor to arouse our feelings of gratefulness to Hashem.

A farmer who feels smug because of his ability to produce a luscious crop through his superior farming techniques will hardly feel the need to express gratitude to G-d for the results of his labor. He will feel that he deserves his success, and perhaps his efforts warrant him even more than he had received.

The attitude Bikkurim engendered is encapsulated in its conclusion; "וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ." "לקני ה' אלוקיך". Bikkurim teaches us to nullify ourselves before G-d and to recognize that

we deserve nothing. Thereby, we are filled with feelings of gratitude for the goodness he has bestowed upon us.⁴

The Descendants of Yaakov are Referred to as 'Yuden'

Although not the first-born tribe, Jewish kings descend from Yehuda. To understand how Yehuda is suitable for the task of kingdom, let us study his origin.

The Matriarchs were aware that Yaakov would have twelve tribes. Since he had four wives, they understood that each of them would give birth to three tribes. When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, Yehuda, she knew that she had received more than her share. She was filled with humble gratitude and named the infant "יהודה", which is similar to "אודה", I thank. This humility was transmitted to Yehuda and his descendants for all time.

A king must be the humblest of men. There is a special commandment incumbent upon him, "לבלתי רום לבבו מאחיו"⁴, he should not feel superior to his brethren. If while traveling in royal grandeur, the king should chance upon a disheveled beggar inhabiting a ramshackle cottage, in a backward town, bordering the very edge of the country, he must not feel superior over him!

This is a feat only a man descending from Yehuda – whose mother's humble gratitude was planted in his being - would be capable of doing.⁵

The Israelite people are universally referred to as Yuden, or Jews, even though we do not all descend from Yehuda. This is because, essentially, all Jews are blessed

⁴ The topic immediately preceding the mitzvah of Bikkurim is the commandment of remembering how Amalek attacked the Jewish People. This serves as a stark contrast to the message of humility and gratitude the Mitzvah of Bikkurim teaches.

Amalek is the archetypical egoist. Even the word עמלק hints at his bursting sense of self; עמלק is gematria רם, haughty, (they both equal 240).

In the prayer recited after the reading of the Megillah, we accuse Haman the Amaleki of being ungrateful to King Shaul who spared the life of his ancestor, Agog. Ingratitude would seem to be an inconsequential flaw in a man who was ready to commit genocide!

R' Yerucham Levovitz explains the significance of Haman's ingratitude. He had everything a person could possibly want. Wealth? Check. Prestige? Check. Power? Check. Family? Check. But to the ultimate egoist even everything is too little. If he is missing even the tiniest drop, he becomes obsessed about it.

Therefore, when Haman saw that Mordechai didn't bow to him, he had to have him killed. But of course it would seem petty to start up with one man alone, so Haman felt the need to kill the entire Jewish Nation. His arrogant ingratitude was the catalyst of his genocidal plans.

⁵ A king cannot be judged, or serve as a judge (סנהדרין דף י"ט ע"א). This is because King Yanai (who reigned during the Second Temple Era and was not from the tribe of Yehuda) was once required to stand and testify regarding his slave, but felt it beneath his dignity to stand. Therefore kings are not judged, and since only one who can be judged may judge others, kings also cannot serve as judges.

However, the Kings of Yehuda are not included in this rule because due to their innate humility they do submit themselves before a Torah court case. King David mentions this in Tehilim, "עמדות היו" רגליו בשערות ירושלים... כי שמה ישובו כסאות למשפט כסאות לבית דין"⁵ We **stood** at the gates of law ... there were court houses of David. Because the Kings of Yehuda stood in deference to the honor of the judges, they were also able to serve as judges.

with an innate humility, "כי-אַתֶּם הִמָּעֵט מִכָּל הָעַמִּים"⁶ Hashem explains that He chose the Jewish People because they are small – they humble themselves. We do not take credit for the good that Hashem bestows upon us, to the contrary, we humble ourselves further. We know that our success is not due to our efforts.⁶

Humility is a Prerequisite to prayer

Proper prayer requires that we visualizing ourselves in Eretz Yisrael, then in Yerushalayim, in the Bais HaMikdash, in the Kodesh Kodoshim, and between the two rods of the Aron – the gateways to heaven. Our souls are actually transported to where our minds focus, the Baal Shem Tov teaches.

However, in order to be able to enter Eretz Yisrael, we need to be humble. The soul of an egocentric person will be expelled from the courtyard of G-d and he will be unable to visualize himself in the Holy Land.

Moshe Imbued us with Humility

There are seven Ushpizin – spiritual shepherds - of the Jewish People: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef and David.

The Ushpizin impacted the entire Jewish nation. We all pray three times daily because it was Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov who instituted the prayers.

Moshe Rabbeinu also influenced all of the Jewish People. He was the כלל "דיהודאי," he encompassed and had an effect on every Jew.⁷

Moshe Rabbeinu's contribution to the collective consciousness of Jewish People was his hallmark humility. Although all of our great men were humble - Avraham compared himself to dust and ashes, King David referred to himself as a worm – Moshe Rabbeinu was especially so. He referred to himself as absolutely nothing - "ונחנו מה"⁷.

Moshe Preserved Our Ability to Pray

Now, we can understand the Midrash with which we began.

Bikkurim had imbued the Jewish people with humility and gratitude. Thereby, they were able to connect to the essence of Eretz Yisrael and pray properly.

Moshe Rabbeinu perceived that the mitzvah of Bikkurim would be suspended with the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash. From where would the Jewish people now derive the humility necessary to spiritually transport themselves to the Kodesh Kodoshim for the daily prayers?

Moshe Rabbeinu imbued them with his trait of modesty, so that they would be able to pray. The verse "בואו נשתחוה" is from the eleven chapters in Tehilim that Moshe Rabbeinu composed. The threefold expressions of bowing correspond to the three prayers we merit due to the humility Moshe infused us with.

⁶ Interestingly, in Megilas Esther the Jewish People are exclusively referred to as Yehudim. This name highlights their humble gratitude in contrast to Haman's arrogant ingratitude.

⁷ Each of the Ushpizin corresponds to a different part of the body. Moshe corresponds to the thigh/leg which kneels in deference to the Almighty.

If we examine the words of the Midrash closely, we see that it does not say that Moshe Rabbeinu established the prayers, only that he rectified them. The patriarchs instituted the daily prayers; Moshe Rabbeinu only ensured that we would always be able to pray.

"ונשתחוה ונכרעה נברכה" is gematria "והשתחוית לפני ה' אלקיך" (they both equal 1347). When we do not have the Mitzvah of Bikkurim which teaches us humility, we can still pray because of the modesty Moshe imbued us with.

Rosh Hashanah; a Day of Submitting to Hashem

On Rosh Hashana, Hashem is re-established as King. The theme of Rosh Hashana is to subjugate ourselves to the grandeur of His reign. The first paragraph of Malchius (part of the Musaf prayer of Rosh Hashana) where we express the absolute sovereignty of G-d, is "עלינו לשבח" – it is incumbent upon us to praise the Master of everything. Its theme is "ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחוים ומודים" - we prostrate, bow and thank.

Nullifying oneself before the greatness of G-d is the most pleasurable activity a person can engage in and requires much effort and Divine assistance.

The Imrei Pinchas advises that during the last Shalosh Seudah of the year, a person should beg Hashem that he merit humility on Rosh Hashana. A generation like ours had better get a head start and already begin preparing to nullify ourselves before Hashem.

Humility is acquired by relinquishing jealousy, pettiness and forgoing our rights in order to preserve peace. The attitude of a humble person is: 'Everything I have been given is more than I deserve.' Hashem forgives the sins of anybody who forgoes his entitlements in order to avoid bitter feelings.

Moshe Rabbeinu beseeched G-d to forgive the sin of the Golden Calf during the forty days from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur. He succeeded, not only in achieving forgiveness for the sin, but also in establishing these days as a period of Divine benevolence for all the generations.

Moshe Rabbeinu did not omit a corner in heaven where he did not beseech Hashem to forgive the sin of the Golden Calf. The Sefas Emes explains that this means that during this period, Moshe touched every Jewish soul.

"יזכנו השי"ת לשוב בתשובה שלימה והעיקר לגאולה קרובה, ובספר חיים ברכה ושלוה ופרנסה טובה וגזירות טובות ושיעות ונחמות וכו"

'May Hashem help us repent fully and most important, we should merit the complete redemption. May we be inscribed in the book of life, blessing, peace, a good livelihood, good decrees, salvation and consolation.'

^א דברים כו:י

^ב כו:יא

^ג תנחומא ראה פרק י"א

^ד תנחומא כי תבוא א'

^ה תהלים צה:ו

^ו שופטים א:יג

^ז תמורה דף טז.א

^ח במדבר כו:נג

^ט תהלים יט:ט

דברים כז:יז^א
תהלים קכ"ט^א
תהלים לז^ב
במדבר יד:ז^ג
מסכת אבות ד:ד^ד
רמב"ם^ט
דברים יז:כ^ט
זוהר שמות - ח"ב דף קצ"א ע"ב^י
שמות טז:ד^י