

PARASHAS KI SAVO

Gratitude, Jewish Style

The gnawing cold of the winter has faded from the farmer's memory. He watches the warm spring sun awaken the slumbering fields. He watches the young shoots sprout and bloom and the tiny buds ripen into fruit bursting with the juices of life. And his own heart also fills to bursting with the joyous surge of new vitality, the aura of irrepressible hope and promise, the sense of being blessed with gifts from the secret treasure houses of the earth. At this transcendent time of the year, the Torah instructs him to share his innermost feelings with his Creator through the performance of the mitzvah of bikurim. He is to take the first fruits of the land, bring them to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and declare his joyous gratitude to the Master of the Universe, the Source of all goodness in the world.

This joyous declaration of gratitude, however, begins in a very puzzling way. It recalls the litany of tragedy and misfortune that characterizes Jewish history. It recalls the duplicitous Lavan's attempt to destroy our forefather Jacob and the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt. It recalls the enslavement of the fledgling Jewish nation by the cruel Egyptians and the suffering inflicted upon them until they cried out in anguish to G-d. It recalls that God heard the voices of the oppressed Jewish people, and with a great display of wonders and miracles, He liberated them from their Egyptian bondage and brought them to a land of milk and honey. What is the connection of all these memories to the simple act of thanking G-d for the first fruits of the harvest?

The answer to this question reveals one of the central elements in the character of the Jewish people. The Jewish farmer who has been blessed with a new harvest does not see himself as an independent individual living in the enclosed world of his own life experiences. He sees himself in the broader historical context of the Jewish people and their developing relationship with G-d. In his mind, the harvest in a small field in a remote corner of the Galilee is directly connected with cosmic events that took place hundred or even thousands of years earlier. He sees himself as part of that continuum and the blessing he has been granted as an extension of the kindness G-d has shown the Jewish people in taking them from slavery to freedom, from misery to joy. Therefore, his expressions of gratitude must also extend to events that happened in distant times and distant places, because in reality, they all part of one continuous pattern of divine benevolence to the Jewish people.

There is also a powerful symbolism in the parallel drawn between Jewish history and the annual harvest. As we celebrate the passing of the cold and dark winter and the rejuvenation of the land, we are bidden to view our history from a similar perspective. We are shown that the cold, dark winters of our people's past also led to a springtime of rejuvenation and growth, and we must strengthen our faith in G-d and believe that our present suffering is not without purpose and not without end.

Finally, the recollection of the tragedies of our past gives added depth and meaning to our expressions of gratitude.

Let us for a moment imagine two young men who purchase cars at the same time. One of these young men is from a poor family. He had to struggle to make a career for himself, and he worked hard for everything he was able to accomplish. Now, after saving and scrimping, he finally has accumulated enough money to buy a brand new car. The other young man is a pampered child of rich parents. His father handed him his American Express card on the way to lunch and told him to go get himself a car. Which of these young men will derive greater pleasure from his new car? The answer is obvious.

Here, too, stands the Jewish farmer. He recalls the hardships and the struggles of his ancestors that brought him to this cherished plot of land in Israel, and therefore, each fruit that he plucks from the ground is immeasurably sweeter because of the memories. In this frame of mind, his expressions of gratitude to G-d go far beyond the fruits in his basket. They encompass all the unending benevolence and providence that are manifest in this incredibly precious little bundle of fruit.