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Healthy Happiness

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Our emotional experience sometimes seems to come out of nowhere. When we try to understand what makes us feel a certain way, we are sometimes left with more questions than answers. Varying theories exist to explain how and why we experience emotions. One such approach, which is gaining popularity in the field, is referred to as the cognitive theory of emotions. In short, emotions are generally based on appraisals and are tied to goals. Positive emotions, such as happiness, derive from an assessment, either consciously or unconsciously, that I am moving towards accomplishing a goal. Negative emotions, such as sadness or regret, are generated when a goal is blocked.

One of the reasons presented for why the horrible curses delineated in Parshat Ki Tavo could befall Bnei Yisrael is “Because you did not serve the L-rd your G-d with joy and with goodness of heart when you had an abundance of all” (Devarim 28:47). Rabbeinu Bechaye and others understand this as highlighting the essential element of joy that should be present when serving G-d. Being happy while performing mitzvot is a vital and necessary component. This can be understood from a cognitive perspective, as being happy when following the Torah is a signal that our appraisal and goal systems are aligned with G-d’s commandments.

Yet, there are two strong arguments against such an understanding of the pasuk. First, as Rabbi Moshe Alshich contends, this doesn’t fit within the broader explanation for the curses that permeates the chapter. The reason given for the curses is that Bnei Yisrael wouldn’t be serving G-d at all, not that they were serving Him, but just didn’t enjoy the experience. Second, the punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. If Bnei Yisrael are keeping all of the mitzvot, but are just not happy while doing so, does it really make sense to punish them with such harsh curses?

Perhaps because of these questions, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk understands the pasuk differently. The pasuk is not indicating that the punishment will come for not serving G-d with joy. The punishment will come for not serving G-d at all. Instead, the pasuk is explaining how Bnei Yisrael would devolve to a place where they wouldn’t be serving G-d, namely, because of the joy and happiness they were experiencing due to their material wealth and abundance of physical good. In a similar twist, the Yehudi HaKadosh of Peshischa also argues that not only would Bnei Yisrael not serve G-d at all but they would enjoy not doing so. The fact that they would enjoy a lifestyle not aligned with G-d demonstrates that their goals and appraisals would be distorted and misplaced.

Commenting on the joy Bnei Yisrael experienced while sinning with the golden calf, Rabbi Moshe Alshich argues that it is one thing to violate commandments, but it is much worse to be happy about it. Ideally, he writes, by referencing the aforementioned pasuk, we should serve G-d with joy. If we do sin, the proper emotional response should be sadness and regret. Our goal is to serve G-d, and when we do, we should experience positive emotions. If we fail in our goal, we should feel a healthy amount of negative emotions to motivate us to fix the problem. Someone who is happy when sinning has no chance of repenting.

As we continue to traverse the month of Elul and progress towards the Yamim Noraim, we would do well to reflect on whether our goals are aligned with the Torah’s. If they are, we should experience joy and happiness that we are living a life of Torah and mitzvot. If they are not, we should feel a healthy amount of sadness and regret that should motivate us to try harder and improve our relationship with G-d.

Living with Material Wealth

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The opening section of Parshat Ki Tavo is framed by the encounter with financial success. Having cultivated a successful harvest, a person presents his finest fruits to the Mikdash amidst fanfare and festivity. The Mishnah describes actual parades which spontaneously assembled to accompany rural farmers on their celebratory journey to Yerushalayim. Exquisitely decorated baskets carrying succulent Israeli fruit were hoisted upon happy shoulders as a religious “carnival” erupted. Another year and another successful harvest promised a comfortable winter period with the availability of well-stocked resources.

Yet a strange recital sits at the heart of this celebration – the recital of the four verses known as “Arami Oved Avi”. These four verses – recited during the Pesach Hagaddah-succinctly summarize the story of our Exodus. This brief section delineates the descent to Egypt, followed by the harsh enslavement, our prayers for rescue and, ultimately, the verses describe our miraculous Divine Redemption. Their recital on Pesach- the actual night of our Exodus- is appropriate. Their recital during the ceremony of Bikkurim is more curious. Amidst the euphoria and joy surrounding financial success the ancient history of Egyptian redemption is reviewed!!

Rabbi Soloveitchik described this historical context as a strategy for avoiding the egotism and self-absorption which often follows financial success. Our commitment to a broader historical agenda assures that our personal triumphs serve some larger and more dignified purpose. By invoking Jewish history and the struggle of a Jew, personal comfort is lent a more “idealistic” function. If we are granted health and prosperity we can dedicate greater energy to a historical and religious community and its tasks. This week many Americans mourned the death of former Senator John McCain. Many have cited a quote of his about living a life of idealism: “Nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you but is not defined by your existence alone”. For a Jew, the most compelling “cause” and the one which best liberates us from our egocentrism is the history of a people challenged to both represent God in our world as well as broadcast His message from the land of Israel. By returning to the genesis of Jewish

history and the first phase of this multi-generational struggle, a Jew casts financial wealth or affluence within this ‘larger cause’. Material comfort is transformed from a potentially hedonistic and self-serving condition to a state which enables the dedication of resources toward that grander cause. The insertion of the Exodus story within the Bikkurim celebration unshackles us from our own selfish interests and casts our monetary success in the context of a larger historical narrative. Divinely-enabled financial success carries expectations. In adopting those duties and expectations, wealth is merely an additional “tool” or resource to advance Jewish History and to amplify the Divine presence in this world.

Our generation has been awarded unprecedented financial comfort. Most of the past 2000 years of Jewish history has been characterized by poverty and financial instability. Constant expulsion and the accompanying forfeiture of financial wealth repeatedly depleted Jewish financial abilities. Remarkably, in the aftermath Holocaust and the shocking plundering of Jewish wealth, we have, by and large, recovered our communal wealth. Understandably, we have little to no “tradition” of how to integrate this experience of affluence within our overall religious experience. We have no books or seforim which provide guidelines for living with wholesale affluence. The sustained condition of communal wealth was unimaginable to previous generations and to their thinkers. Some, today, are bashful at the prospect of wealth, almost ashamed to acknowledge affluence in light of the financial struggles of previous generations. Others completely divorce the experience of wealth from religious consciousness and moral considerations. This dangerous “disconnect” often can lead to a slippery slope and yield morally inappropriate behavior. Wealth can certainly fuel behavior which, if not in violation of actual Jewish law, certainly contravenes both our Jewish value system and general human moral instincts.

Our wealth, in part has been delivered to advance our stage of Jewish History- the resettling of our land. It is hard to imagine a more impressive international philanthropic project than the rebuilding of our State. Over the past 150 years how many funds and how many resources have been directed to our beloved State from Jews across the

globe? Rabbi Herzog, the original Chief Rabbi of Israel, once overheard an anti-religious person mocking the “kollel” culture of depending upon the financial support of others. He rebuffed that “the entire State of Israel is one large Kollel” highlighting the financial dependency of the fledgling state. For years the entire country of Israel resembled one large “Kollel” being supported heroically by the combined funds and resources of an entire people. B”h we have witnessed the development of Israel as a financial superpower but without question this evolution was fueled by phenomenal Jewish philanthropy. Who would have imagined that the post-Holocaust generations would be capable of accomplishing the ambitious project of constructing a modern Jewish State?

Additionally, our wealth must be cast in broader historical terms – even broader than the construction and refurbishing of our Modern State. As History surges to its conclusion we anticipate and expect the general improvement of the human condition. We believe that religious experience and human welfare overlap, and if we dream of a world of universal recognition of Divine authority we expect that world to enjoy general human welfare. Without question the past 400 years have witnessed significant improvements in almost every sector of human experience: from politics to the economy and from science to medical treatment. These events – which have become more dramatic over the last century- cannot be “regarded” independent of a historical framework. The advance of human experience should echo the religious evolution toward a state of universal recognition of one God.

If these “universal” improvements to humanity at large augur the end of history, the progress in the Jewish world should certainly indicate that history is coursing toward its inevitable conclusion. As the vanguard of

humanity, our national trajectory both reflects and impacts the general unfurling of the human spirit. The Jewish world has never enjoyed the type of financial capabilities it currently possesses. For the first time in centuries Jews can afford to build robust institutions and stout communities. Moshe Moshkowitz – a member of the original Israeli pioneering generation, and a living legend in Israel has been instrumental in spearheading the revival of Jewish population in Yehuda and Shomoron (along with initiating dozens of other national projects). He steered the establishment of the city of Efrat and launched Yeshivat Har Etzion (where I teach). Forty five years ago, as the palatial Beit Midrash of our Yeshiva was being constructed he was challenged: “Why are you installing marble floors, vaulted ceilings and a fish pond? Is this a movie theater or a museum?” To which he replied in surprise: “A museum deserves such majesty and a Beit Midrash doesn’t”? For centuries, economic constraints and socio-political discrimination prevented us from building truly spectacular palaces of study and worship. We have now achieved these capabilities and we honor religion by fashioning these “monuments”; their construction reflects our newly-achieved economical ability and, of course, our reconstructed Jewish pride and freedom. Instead of shying away from our financial success we should interpret it as a historical warrant and as an indicator that we are living through a transitional period in history with newly formulated opportunities and responsibilities. Our wealth can either be turned ‘inward’ to selfish and self-aggrandizing experiences or can be employed to advance history and our people. Our Parsha and the framing of material success within Jewish History should inspire us to accept our luxury, but view it as a challenge and a demand rather than an indulgence merely for personal gratification.

Reflections

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This week’s parsha, Parshas Ki Savo, opens with the mitzvah of Bikkurim, the bringing of the first fruits of the shivas ha’minim up to the Temple. In a most beautiful and moving passage, the verses describe the process of the Bikkurim offering, as well as the text that is recited by the farmer (landowner) who offers his first fruits to the kohen in the Temple (Devarim 26:1-11).

The Mishnah (Bikkurim 3:1-4) elaborate on many details of the wonderful procession of landowners who go together up to Tzion, with baskets of fresh and dried fruits, and an ox with gilded horns and olive wreath ahead of their procession. In addition, there is the musical accompaniment of a flute along their journey, as they ascend to the House of G-d.

When the landowners arrive with their fruits baskets to the Temple Courtyard, the Leviim sing: אָרוֹמְמֶךָ ה' כִּי דָלִיתָנִי - I will extol You, O Lord, for You have raised me up, and You have not let my enemies rejoice over me (Ps.30:2).

The mitzvah of Bikkurim is so important that the Medrash teaches us that the whole world was created for Bikkurim! The opening words of Torah are בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ, which can be explained as: For Hashem created the heavens and the earth. What is 'for ראשית'? Explains the Medrash: אֵין רֵאשִׁית אֶלָּא בְּכוּרִים - First, ראשית, is none other than Bikkurim (Bereishis Rabbah 1:4).

For Hashem created the world, and this is for the sake of Bikkurim, which are called ראשית.

וְלָקַחְתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית כָּל-פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר תְּבִיא מֵאֶרֶץ, and you shall take from the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land (Devarim 26:2).

At face value, it is difficult to understand what is so fundamentally important about this mitzvah, that the sages teach that for this alone, Hashem created the world.

A well known explanation is that the mitzvah of Bikkurim represents the middah of hakaras ha'tov, recognition of the good that Hashem bestows upon us, and for this middah alone, it was worthy for Hashem to create the world. When the farmer goes down to his field and sees the fig beginning to ripen, he ties around it a גומי, a reed, and declares, "Behold this (fruit) is Bikkurim" (Rashi to Devarim 26:2). The bounty of the earth does not grow by the might and power of our hand, but by the benevolence of G-d. It is the process of Bikkurim that expresses our recognition of this good, and our thanks to Hashem.

In fact, Rashi (to Devarim 26:3) teaches that when the landowner arrives in the Temple and recites the required passage before the Kohen, as he offers his first fruits, he is showing טובה כפוי שְׁאִינֶךָ כָּפּוּי, that he is not unappreciative.

With this week's dvar Torah, I do not offer any insights that solve the mysteries or perplexities of the Torah, nor do I offer a unique or novel he'orah. As 5780 comes to a close, and 5781 is soon to be ushered in, I simply offer reflections related to this unique Elul and the parsha.

Who could have imagined, last Tishrei, what this year would bring to the world? Who might have fathomed a world pandemic that changed the way we live, interact, react, work, study, celebrate, and shop? Who would have

envisioned the batei k'nesios and batei medrashos having to close their doors for months - the sounds of tefila b'tzibur and Torah learning having ceased from their holy abodes? Who would have imagined the lives lost, R"L...

For Bikkurim the world was created. For the person who is makkir tov, who recognizes the good in his life, and expresses thanks to Hashem, the whole world was created.

When life becomes more challenging, confusing and confounding, when no one seems to have the right answers or solutions and we are all faced with the reality of this world, the עולם, where so much is נעלם, hidden from us, it is important to remember the mitzvah, and purpose, of Bikkurim. We must always search for the blessings in life, for the goodness that Hashem bestows upon us, and for the recognition of that good.

Miriam Peretz, mother to two IDF soldiers killed in battle [Uriel (1976-1998) and Eliraz (1978-2010), HY"R], writes: "There's nothing worse than losing two sons. Yet I, who experienced the worst that could possibly happen, am busy all day long finding G-d's kindness. One day I decided to do an exercise. I took a piece of paper and drew two columns. At the top of the first I wrote "List of my complaints to G-d," and for the second, "List of G-d's Kindnesses." The first list was short: Uriel, Eliezer [Miriam's husband, Eliezer, died at the age of 56 between the deaths of her sons], and Eliraz, who were all taken from me before their time. The second list was practically endless: my daughter Bat-El got married, little Gili danced and sang at the wedding. Uriel's friend came to visit, my daughter-in-law Shlomit invited me to spend Shabbat at their home, despite a slipped disc I can still go up the stairs and climb up to my children's graves, I can open my eyes, stand on my feet, enjoy the blossoming of the trees, laugh with my grandchildren and the list goes on and on.

"My dance with G-d has become a daily event. I feel a deep connection to Him... I say, 'Thanks for what I have right now.' Not for the good that might come tomorrow or the next day, but for now. I say, 'Thanks G-d, for not forgetting me, for never being too busy for me. You're always available to listen to my pain'" (Miriam's Song, p.375-376).

As we usher out a complex, challenging, and trying year, let us pray that the new one brings only blessings upon our people, our Land and this world. And while we yet long and pray for better days and times, let us remember that when we offer our first fruits, we must surely count our blessings. For for Bikkurim, the whole world was created.

Upholding and Upkeeping

Mrs. Shira Smiles • Adapted by Channie Koplowitz Stein

As Bnei Yisroel is about to enter Eretz Yisroel, Moshe continues with his final message to the Nation. Putting half the people on Har Grizim and the other half on Har Eival, Moshe proceeds to first tell the people all the blessings they will receive for following Hashem's commands. He then follows by cursing those who transgress specific commands, concluding with, "Accursed in the one who will not uphold/yakim the words of the Torah to perform them." If this is merely a summary of all the concluding verses, it would be redundant, and the Torah only adds words when there is an additional message to be learned. So what are we to extrapolate from this "redundancy?"

Rav Reiss in Meirosh Tzurim offers an explanation focusing on the mindset of the sinner. Since we are all human, we are subject to err and to sin. However, when we sin purposely, in defiance of Hashem's command, rather than through error or through human frailty, this curse will apply. Further, continues Rabbi Reiss citing the Malbim whose ideas develop in the backdrop of the Enlightenment, the curse also applies to upkeep/lekayeim the laws of He Who is Chai Vekayom/eternally alive and relevant, in contradistinction to those who would say some of the mitzvot do not apply "in this day and age."

In a related vein, Rabbeinu Yonah explains that there are people who are generally very observant, who do teshuvah when they sin, but cannot accept one particular mitzvah or prohibition. To the Chofetz Chaim, a common area of faltering is in the laws of Shemirat Haloshon/guarding one's tongue against improper speech, especially about others. If one denies the importance of this or of any mitzvah as either irrelevant or just impossible to maintain, one is "throwing off the yoke of Heaven," rebelling against God, and incurring this curse.

In this month of Elul, our minds go to the acronym of (E)Ani Ledodi (U)Vedodi Li/I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me. But our relationship to Hakodosh Boruch Hu must be more than just feeling the love. As Rabbi Meir Chodosh cited in the Ohel Mosh says, it must include a sense of responsibility to serve Hashem as his Master. One is not free to merely try. One must commit, even with the possibility of failure.

This idea of submitting to Hakodosh Boruch Hu in all

areas runs counter to man's general psychological bent, writes Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz citing the Chazon Ish. Man wants to be free and unrestrained. But we must learn to do what Hashem wants and to live by His rules. After all, even an exclusive country club has clearly defined rules for membership. If you do not abide by those rules, your membership will be revoked. And we are members of a very exclusive club, the only Nation that Hashem chose and designated for membership. This is what Elul and the shofar are for, to wake us up so that we want to follow the rules because we love being part of this membership. And if I mess up, I will apologize, do teshuvah, immediately to remain in good standing, for only a fool would delay and incur the possibility of suffering the consequences, adds Rabbi Beyfus.

In this month of Elul, when we try to improve our character and reinforce our relationship with Hashem, we may want to start by going through each moment of our day to see how our performance could improve, whether in our interactions with our family and friends or in our mitzvah observance, suggests Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz in Tiv Hamoadim. In the process, though, be aware to avoid an all or nothing attitude. Start with a small, easy step and build on that, teaches us Rabbi Wagschall.

Life is full of challenges. We will undoubtedly fall, but we must be involved in the process and continue in our struggle, for ultimate success is a gift only Hakodosh Boruch Hu can grant, adds Rabbi Lugassi in Mimayanei Hayeshuah. Rabbi Lugassi here refers to a "vort" from Rabbi Biederman. We are called Yisroel because Yaakov Avinu struggled with the angel/soriso im E-lokchim, not because Yaakov succeeded, the concluding phrase, vatuchol. A tzadik will fall seven times. He is called a tzadik/a righteous one because after each fall, he rises and tries again. Real victory, as the Steipler Gaon tells us, is in the determination to get up in spite of the fall. If what you have undertaken proves too difficult, start with an even smaller step. After all, our verse says, "Cursed is the one who will not yokim/raise up, the Torah, and himself to perform its mitzvot." Your attitude may not be, I will observe the mitzvot I would like to perform, those that I find easy. That is not the attitude of a true servant, certainly not of a true servant of Hashem. Elul is the month of

trying, of pushing ourselves to observing the 613 rules that constitute the bylaws of our “club.”

The Ramban offers an additional perspective on the pivotal word *yokim*. Ramban translates the word as “to establish, to fortify.” He explains that if one has the opportunity to strengthen the Torah observance of another Jew, to teach him and help him and others and influence them toward Torah or mitzvah observance, and he refuses to do so, he has transgressed this command. As Rabbi Scheinerman points out in *Ohel Moshe*, each of us has a sphere of influence that extends beyond an immediate family or classroom. People observe us wherever we are, in a supermarket, on public transportation, entering a restaurant, and take their cues from what we do and how we act. We must recognize the impact we may have on others wherever we are. [IE. It must be kosher; it’s in her shopping cart, etc. CKS] A loyal servant works diligently and urges others to do so, even as they are slacking off. Writes Rabbi Lopian in *Lev Eliahu*. Are you working for your own benefit, or for that of your Boss?

There are many ways we can return “lost souls” to their rightful Owner, to Hashem. Rabbi Frand points out that during the time the Mishkan in Shiloh was the center of Jewish life, Elkanah would go up to Yerushalayim for the festivals, each time taking a different route so that he could influence others to join him. For this devotion in publicizing the mitzvah and urging others to perform the mitzvah, Elkanah merited the son, the Prophet Shmuel. The obligation to support Torah observance and learning extends to supporting Torah institutions and Torah students as well, adds the *Ohel Moshe*. You can help others to learn through using your body (tutoring, helping with fund raising activities), your soul, as well as with your money. In this context, Rabbi Reiss makes an interesting observation. Our Sages note that a person is known by [how he acts] with his cup [when he’s had too much to drink], with his “pocket,” and when he’s angry. We can tell a lot about a person’s values by observing what he spends his money on. Supporting Torah financially tells everyone that you value Torah.

Ramban offers another, literal, explanation of this verse. “Whoever does not stand up or raise up the Torah” is subject to this curse. This is the *posuk* the Gemorrah Yerushalmi cites as the source for the Chazan (or designated member of the community) to lift up to Torah in shul after the Torah reading for all to see its writing, men and women, people on the right and on the left. And

the Congregation should give the Torah proper honor by standing and not speaking at this time, instructs us Rabbi Reiss.

Mizkeinim Esbonan explains why Hagbeh/lifting up the Torah scroll is so important. This act signifies the centrality of Torah in our lives. It is raised from the Bimah traditionally located in the center of the shul and raised to all sides equally, signifying that the people at front of the shul are no more important than those in back or on the sides, no more important than the women and children in the *Ezras Noshim*. [In 2016, I visited the Cochin Synagogue in Moshav Nevatim with the Eretz Yisroel Movement. The shul, a copy of their shul in India and including many of the original, physical structures of that shul, features two bimahs. The one in the center of the men’s section is where the chazan stands to lead the congregation in prayer. But there is a second bimah higher up, right near the women’s section. After the Torah is removed from the Ark and is carried through the men’s section, the Torah is carried up to the second bimah where the women will clearly hear the Torah reading and see the Torah. CKS] Further, the Torah should be central not only physically, but in every stage of a Jew’s life. A Jew connects to the Torah by getting an aliyah at each milestone and significant time in his life, from Bar Mitzvah, to marriage, to becoming a father, to the *yahrtzeit* of his loved ones.

There are two types of people, notes Rabbi Grosbard. There are those who are *yirei Hashem*/God fearing. When a mitzvah opportunity comes their way, they immediately commit and start doing it. They are written in God’s Book of Remembrance. In contrast, are those who are *choshvei Shemo*/think of His Name and admit the opportunity, but do not begin executing it. Here the *yetzer horo* has the opportunity to step in and deflect the person from completing the mitzvah. While there is some merit in thought, it is the fulfillment, the *yokim*, that merits the full reward.

It is important to think of ways to increase *kavod haTorah*/honor of Torah and to actualize the potential of our Torah and mitzvah intentions, writes Rabbi Wolbe. And the month of Elul, adds the Tosher Rebbe, is the time with greater power to uphold and establish *Torat Hashem*.

The Superiority of Tefilah

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

As we get closer to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the theme of tefilah, prayer, weighs on our minds. When looking through the Torah portion of Ki Tavo, we come across a verse that seemingly has nothing to do with tefilah, and yet, through a cryptic Midrash, highlights some of the fundamentals how we should relate to God.

The Torah highlights a special day, “this” day, in the following verse (Devarim 26:16):

“This day, the Lord, your God, is commanding you to fulfill these statutes and ordinances, and you will observe and fulfill them with all your heart and with all your soul”

What is “this” day referring to? For many of the commentaries, it was the day Moshe completed teaching the commandments to the Jewish people. This seems like a reasonable approach. The Midrash offers a more challenging explanation. There is a verse in Tehilim which states (95:6):

“Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker”

The Midrash questions the use of both the term “prostrate” and “bow”, as they are both contained in each other (one could ask about the strength of this question, but that is for a different time). What is the idea here? Moshe had a prophecy that revealed the future destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the bringing of the bikurim (first fruits). He reacted by instituting the obligation of the Jews to pray three times a day. Why? The Midrash answers that tefilah is “more beloved” to God than both good deeds and sacrifices. The Midrash then brings a proof. God punished Moshe by not allowing him to continue his mission into the Land of Israel. Moshe, who personified the performance of good deeds, prayed to God to be allowed to see the land. God responded by permitting Moshe this opportunity, thus demonstrating the tremendous love God has for tefilah.

There are some clear problems with this Midrash. Moshe’s prophecy was both about the destruction of the Temple and the stoppage of the bikurim. Thematically, one can understand the mention of the bikurim, as this is the focus of the Torah in the previous verses. However, we should still ask why the issue revolves around these two specific events. As well, the comparison of tefilah to

both good deeds and sacrifices is difficult to comprehend. For one, the idea of tefilah being more “beloved” in comparison to these two other concepts is an odd description. Why should this be the case? Furthermore, there are many references throughout the Talmud as to the primacy of the sacrificial system. In fact, the termination of the sacrifices, at least according to some in the Talmud, was what led to the very development of reciting tefilah three times a day. Yet the Midrash seems to view tefilah as “superior” to the sacrifices.

Moshe’s prophecy is the catalyst to the introduction of tefilah as we commonly know it today. Putting aside its historicity, we can understand fairly easily the concept of the destruction of the Temple and its impact on tefilah. The Temple was the focal point of the worship of God. It functioned as the objective representation of how mankind should serve God, and the workings of the Temple reflected the nature of the Divine relationship to mankind. The system of tefilah, then, was to be found in the Temple. Naturally, its destruction would require some type of replacement. Why specifically the bikurim, when there are so many other lost commandments that emerged throughout our history? We are aware of the various commandments associated with giving up a percentage of our produce to the Temple and its various “employees”. The concept on a basic level is the clear recognition that while much human effort went into the process of planting to harvesting, our control is more limited than we want to believe. We do not have complete knowledge of the natural world, nor can we know with any true degree of certainty how any agricultural process will turn out. As such, giving up a percentage of our produce indicates our attitude that we are ultimately dependent on the Creator when it comes to success in our endeavors. The bringing of the bikurim personify this ideal, as an individual attaches a greater degree of significance to that which first emerges from his crops. To give up the first of anything truly expressed a person’s internal acceptance of his relationship with God. Thus, we can now take a step back and see the two components fitting together nicely. The Temple represents the system of Divine relationship to mankind, while the first fruits capture the attitude of one’s relationship with God. Tefilah would need to be available to the Jews, as it

encompasses both the ideal of the Temple and the mindset of the bikurim. The Jewish people had to know this “alternate” system was in existence.

Why, then, does tefilah occupy a high perch in the eyes of God? Let’s look at the contrast with sacrifices and good deeds. As mentioned above, worship in the Temple was personification of objective worship. The systems of sacrifices were the method one engaged in to access this type of worship. While this method was the greatest expression, it was also centralized and occasional. A person could not bring a sacrifice wherever and whenever. Tefilah, though, lends itself to a more flexible expression. When we think of good deeds, we think of humans invested in the fate of other humans, selfishness pushed to the side for the sake of his fellow man. Good deeds are the core of ben adama lechavero, the way one treats another. The result

of properly being involved in good deeds is the correct viewpoint of the self in relation to others, comprehending that we are all equal existences. Tefilah raises us to an even higher level. When a person prays, and understands he is a dependent existence, the effect is to create the ideal psychological state in the individual. He truly understands who he is in relation to God. While good deeds capture all that ben adam lechavero is about, tefilah guides us down the path to a deep understanding of ben adam lamakom, man’s relationship to God. The method of tefilah expands the boundaries of the system of sacrifices while also bringing man to the greatest realization of who he is in relation to God. Understanding how tefilah works would seem to be a critical component as we prepare ourselves for the coming days ahead.

Law at First Sight

Yonatan Kurz

During the third aliyah of this week’s parsha, (Devarim 26:16) we see Moshe admonishing Bnei Yisrael to safeguard the mitzvos of Hashem.

At the start of the aliyah, he says that today is the the day that Hashem is commanding them to observe the commandments. This brings up a huge question: Today is the day that they were commanded to do mitzvos? Have the commandments at Har Sinai been forgotten?

Rashi gives a simple yet beautiful answer from the Tanchuma this means the mitzvos should be regarded every day as branded new in a person’s eyes and are seen as if it was on that day that they had been commanded to do those mitzvos.

Rabbeinu Bechaye elaborates on Rashi’s answer and provides further insight, explaining that the idea that mitzvos should be new in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael as if they had seen it for the first time on that day can also be found in the pasuk in Shema of היום מצוך היום. אשר אנכי מצוך היום. Rabbeinu Bechaye also says that the reason why the pasuk starts with “היום הזה” and ends with “ובכל נפשך” is to instruct a person to be moser nefesh (give over their soul) on all of the mitzvos as if it is the day of Matan Torah itself. Just as the people were moser nefesh on that day itself when they

saw the האותות והמופתים and the אש האוכלת בראש ההר, they should also give themselves over at all times now, בכל נפשך, ביום הזה.

At times, we take mitzvos for granted and don’t fully appreciate both the importance that they carry. There is a mishnah in Pirkei Avos (2:1) which says, “והוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצוות והוי מחשב הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה - Be as careful with a light mitzvah as with a more serious one, since you do not know the reward for mitzvos. Consider the reward you shall receive versus any loss you may incur by performing a mitzvah and think of the retribution you shall receive versus the pleasure you had from committing an aveirah.”

As we inch closer to Rosh HaShana, the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, and Yom Kippur, it is important to remember the significance of each mitzvah and how special it is for Klal Yisrael to specifically be commanded to do such acts of Avodas Hashem. We should be zocheh to act on each chance to do a mitzvah with the same vigor and זריזות as we would have at Har Sinai, and that this upcoming year should be full of such opportunities that we can grab ahold of.