**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Ki Savo – Vol. 12, Issue 45**

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**ולקחת מראשית כל פרי האדמה אשר תביא מארצך אשר ד' אלקיך נתן לך**

 **ושמת בטנא והלכת אל המקום אשר יבחר ד' אלקיך לשכן שמו שם (26:2)**

 Parshas Ki Savo begins with the mitzvah of bikkurim (26:1-11), which requires a farmer to bring the first ripened fruits of the seven species for which Eretz Yisroel is praised to the Temple as an expression of gratitude to Hashem for giving him a successful harvest. Rav Yisroel Reisman points out that while the parsha begins with the first mitzvah that a farmer does with his produce, it is followed by the final commandment that he performs with his crops, which is known as viduy maaser (26:12-15). Following the three-year cycle of tithes that a farmer is obligated to separate from his crops, this mitzvah entails him reciting a passage in which he declares that he has properly observed the laws governing the separation and distribution of the tithes, concluding, “I have done all that You commanded me.”

 However, there is a significant contrast between these two mitzvos. The Mishnah in Bikkurim (3:3) teaches that as the farmers approached Jerusalem with their bikkurim, they were greeted by a flute playing in their honor and dignitaries coming out to welcome them. As they traversed the streets of the city, the local artisans stopped working in order to stand up and greet them. However, while a great fuss was made to honor those who were engaged in the mitzvah of bringing bikkurim, no parallel requirement exists for those who were reciting viduy maaser, nor for those who came to Yerushalayim to do other mitzvos. What is so unique about the mitzvah of bikkurim that warrants such special treatment?

 Rav Reisman explains that Chazal understood the importance of beginnings and the need for new endeavors to start out with excitement. Even though these feelings may not last forever, they set the appropriate tone and create enthusiasm for a project that will enable it to prosper and flourish. Because bikkurim is the first mitzvah that a farmer performs with his new produce, it calls for a celebratory environment that will inspire him to continue down this path even after he returns home. This cycle is completed three years later when he recites the viduy maaser declaration in the privacy of his own home, without any pomp and fanfare.

 Rav Reisman adds that this message is particularly appropriate for this time of year, as we prepare for Rosh Hashana. The lesson of bikkurim is that the outcome of a new undertaking is heavily influenced by the passion and zeal with which it is begun. Even though this excitement does not last forever, it provides the spark and energy that enable it to be successful. As we work to make meaningful kabbalos (resolutions) to help ourselves become better Jews and better people, we must begin our years by imbuing our “bikkurim” with enthusiasm and fervor so that we too can look back at the end of the year and declare, “I have done all that You commanded me.”

**וענית ואמרת לפני ד' אלקיך ארמי אבד אבי (26:5)**

 A farmer is required to bring bikkurim, the first ripened fruits of the seven species for which the land of Israel is praised, to the Beis HaMikdash. There he presents them to a Kohen as a sign of gratitude to Hashem for giving him a successful harvest. He then recites a declaration of appreciation for Hashem’s role in Jewish history. Rashi writes that this proclamation is made in a raised voice. Why does the Torah require the farmer to make this statement in a loud voice?

 The Chanukas HaTorah notes that the farmer bringing his first-fruits begins his review of national history by noting ארמי אבד אבי – an Aramean (Lavan) attempted to destroy my ancestor (Yaakov). Rashi explains that this was Lavan’s intention when he set out to pursue the fleeing Yaakov, but Hashem was aware of his malicious idea and warned him in a dream against pursuing his plan (Bereishis 31:23-24). Although Lavan was thwarted from executing his evil scheme, Hashem punishes non-Jews not only for their wicked deeds, but also for their thoughts.

The Gemora in Berachos (31a) derives from the prayer of Chana that one is required to pray quietly. The Gemora (Berachos 24b) explains that a person who prays loudly is demonstrating a lack of faith in Hashem’s ability to recognize the intentions of his heart and to hear him if he whispers. Included in the declaration made by the farmer is a public confirmation that Hashem knows not only the words that a person speaks, but even the thoughts that run through his mind. By proclaiming Hashem’s knowledge of the unspoken, there is no longer any fear that the farmer will be viewed as questioning Hashem’s ability to hear us when we speak quietly, and he may therefore express his gratitude in an appropriately loud voice.

**ובאו עליך כל הברכות האלה והשיגך כי תשמע בקול ד' אלקיך (28:2)**

 Parshas Ki Savo is known as a parsha of tochacha (rebuke), but before discussing the unspeakable punishments that will befall those who flout the Torah’s laws, it first lists a number of berachos (blessings) that are promised to those who heed Hashem’s commandments. However, in introducing these berachos, the Torah uses an unusual expression, stating that they will come upon you והשיגך – and catch you, implying that the person is running away from them. Why would somebody run away from Hashem’s blessings, such that they need to overtake him?

 The conventional explanation given is that many times, Hashem showers us with blessings, but from our narrow perspective, we are unable to recognize them as such and attempt to run away from them, until they ultimately catch up to us and we recognize that what we initially viewed as undesirable was in reality a beracha in disguise.

 While this is certainly a true and valid interpretation, Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin cites a novel explanation from the Kotzker Rebbe, who cryptically remarked that the Raavad’s disagreements with the opinions of the Rambam in Mishneh Torah are referred to as השגות. By describing these blessings using the similar term והשיגך, the Torah is telling us that they will present questions and difficulties. What does this mean?

 Rav Zevin explains that when a person finds himself in difficult circumstances, such as a painful illness or challenging financial straits, he has a mitigating excuse if he is unable to properly dedicate himself to Torah study and prayer. However, when a person who is blessed with success and bounty struggles to make it to his regular minyan or shiur, he has no defense. When life is going well, a person should naturally feel a desire to show his gratitude to Hashem by strengthening his mitzvah observance. Therefore, when somebody is blessed with simchas, wealth, and good health, yet fails to express his appreciation, there is a puzzling question, no less mystifying than the השגות raised by the Raavad: How can somebody take Hashem’s blessings and not use them to come closer to Him?

Living today in a generation that enjoys unprecedented material prosperity, we must take this lesson to heart and ensure that our good fortune does not come to us in the form of והשיגך – perplexing difficulties – but rather as means that enable and inspire us to redouble our commitment to learning Torah and doing mitzvos.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. A farmer is required to bring bikkurim – the first ripened fruits of the seven species for which the land of Israel is praised – to the Temple. The Medrash teaches (Bereishis Rabbah 1:4) that the world was created in the merit of three mitzvos, one which is bikkurim. Why is this mitzvah so great that it justified the creation of the entire universe? (Alshich HaKadosh)
2. After the Jewish people initially accepted the Torah while standing near Mount Sinai, why were they required to reaccept it by standing on top of (27:11-26) Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival? (Rav Eli Munk quoted in Peninim Vol. 6)
3. The Torah teaches (28:47) that the terrible curses described throughout the parsha will come as a result of not serving Hashem with gladness. If this is indeed such a terrible sin, why is there no commandment to do so? (Yad Av)
4. Rashi writes (29:12) that Moshe threatened the Jewish people with a total of 98 different curses if they fail to observe the commandments. Why did he specifically mention this number of punishments? (Tosefos Rid, Yad Av)

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) The **Alshich HaKadosh** explains that the mitzvah of bringing bikkurim to the Beis HaMikdash teaches the concept of הכרת הטוב – feeling and expressing appreciation for all of the goodness and bounty that Hashem bestows upon us. The need to recognize that everything that we have comes from Hashem and to transform this intellectual understanding into emotional feelings of appreciation is such a fundamental and essential concept that it justified the entire Creation.

2) **Rav Eli Munk** distinguishes between the initial giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, where the Jewish people were commanded to stand at the bottom of the mountain, and the reaffirmation of their commitment at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, where they were specifically commanded to ascend and stand on top of the mountains. The change in their positions vis-à-vis the mountain wasn't coincidental. Symbolically, it alluded to the fact that their original acceptance of the Torah was passive in nature, as they didn't yet know what was contained in the Torah. While important and necessary, this level of acceptance was insufficient. At this point, they had studied the Torah and its laws and were commanded to actively reaccept the Torah in order to transmit it to the next generation, as symbolized by their positioning on top of the mountain. Rav Munk adds that this paradigm is a metaphor for the Torah study of every individual Jew, as he initially begins by learning the Torah's laws and inculcating them within himself. However, there must eventually come a time when he progresses to the higher level of accepting a responsibility to actively teach and share his knowledge with others in order to ensure the continual and eternal transmission of the Torah.

3) In his sefer **Yad Av**, Rav Doniel Yehuda Bloch argues that this question is mistaken in its premise, as the very complaint against our performing the mitzvos without happiness is that joy should be an automatic byproduct of serving Hashem. He compares this to a case of somebody who gives an incredibly valuable gift to his friend, who will naturally rejoice upon recognizing what he has been given. It would be inappropriate and superfluous to add a request that he enjoy the present. Similarly, if we truly appreciated the value of all that Hashem has given us, we would automatically serve Him with joy, and for not doing so we are punished severely.

4) The **Tosefos Rid** notes that the numerical value of the word Gehinnom (גהנם) is 98. Therefore, Moshe threatened the people with 98 curses in the hopes that these 98 punishments would exempt them from having to experience the actual Gehinnom. Alternatively, **Rav Doniel Yehuda Bloch** suggests that the 98 curses correspond to the 98 spiritual levels through which a person can climb or, G-d forbid, fall. When the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt they were on the 49th level of spiritual impurity, and during the ensuing seven weeks they extricated themselves and ascended to the 49th level of holiness prior to the giving of the Torah. In order to remind us of our constant obligation to grow and climb the spiritual ladder and of the danger of falling to the greatest depths imaginable if we fail to do so, Moshe specifically mentioned 98 different curses, one for each level of spirituality.

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