Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ki Tavo

Remember to be Grateful

At the beginning of this week's portion, Ki Tavo, the Jewish people are commanded to bring the first fruits of each year's harvest to Jerusalem as an offering. This commandment is known as *bikkurim*, a word related to the Hebrew term for "firstborn." When presenting the fruit, the farmer also recites a special declaration.

דברים כו:ג-י (ג) וּבָאתָ֙ אֶל־הַכֹּהֵ֔ן אֲשֶׁ֖ר יִהְיֶ֣ה בַּיָּמִ֑ים הָהֵ֗ם וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ אֵלָ֔יו הִגַּ֥דְתִּי הַיּ֛וֹם לַיהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ כִּי־בָ֣אתִי אֶל־הָאָ֑רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֨ר נִשְׁבַּ֤ע יְהוָה֙ לַאֲבֹתֵ֣ינוּ לָתֵ֖ת לָנוּ׃ ... (ה) וְעָנִ֜יתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ לִפְנֵ֣י	יְהוָ֗ה אֱלֹהֶ֙יךָ֙ אֲרַמִּ֣י אֹבֵ֔ד אָבִ֖י וַיֵּ֣רֶד מִצְרַ֑יְמָה וַיָּ֤גָר שָׁם֙ בִּמְתֵ֣י מְעָ֔ט וַיְהִי־שָׁ֖ם לְגֹ֣וי גָּד֑וֹל עָצ֥וּם וָרָֽב׃ (ו) וַיָּרֵ֤עוּ אֹתָ֙נוּ֙ הַמִּצְרִ֔ים וַיְעַנּ֖וּנוּ וַיִּתְּנ֥וּ עָלֵ֖ינוּ עֲבֹדָ֥ה קָשָֽׁה׃ (ז) וַנִּצְעַ֕ק אֶל־יְהוָ֖ה אֱלֹהֵ֣י אֲבֹתֵ֑ינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַ֤ע יְהוָה֙ אֶת־קֹלֵ֔נוּ וַיַּ֖רְא אֶת־עָנְיֵ֥נוּ וְאֶת־עֲמָלֵ֖נוּ וְאֶת־לַחֲצֵֽנוּ׃ (ח) וַיּוֹצִאֵ֨נוּ יְהוָ֜ה מִמִּצְרַ֗יִם בְּיָ֤ד חֲזָקָה֙ וּבִזְרֹ֣עַ נְטוּיָ֔ה וּבְמֹרָ֖א גָּדֹ֑ל וּבְאֹתֹ֥ות וּבְמֹפְתִֽים׃ (ט) וַיְבִאֵ֖נוּ אֶל־הַמָּק֣וֹם הַזֶּ֑ה וַיִּתֶּן־לָ֨נוּ֙ אֶת־הָאָ֣רֶץ הַזֹּ֔את אֶ֖רֶץ זָבַ֥ת חָלָ֖ב וּדְבָֽשׁ׃ (י) וְעַתָּ֗ה הִנֵּ֤ה הֵבֵ֙אתִי֙ אֶת־רֵאשִׁ֣ית פְּרִ֔י הָאֲדָמָ֖ה אֲשֶׁר־נָתַ֣תָּה לִ֑י יְהוָ֔ה...	**Deuteronomy 26:3-10** (3) You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that God swore to our fathers to assign us." ... (5) You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. (6) The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. (7) We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. (8) God freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, (9) bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (10) And so I now bring the first fruits of the soil that You, O Lord, have given me"...

- **Why do you think the declaration accompanying the *bikkurim* offering connects the first fruits to the story of the Jewish people's descent into Egypt and their redemption from it?**
- **In a sense, this passage tells the Jewish family story. When did you last tell**

someone your own family history? What was the context, and how did it influence what you chose to include or leave out?

The medieval scholar Maimonides connects the *bikkurim* passage to the value of humility. Perhaps the greatest intellectual and spiritual figure of post-Talmudic Judaism, Maimonides wrote works of Jewish law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation. His *Guide for the Perplexed*, framed as a letter to one of his students, explores the philosophical ideas underlying many of the Torah's commandments.

מורה נבוכים ג:לט מתן ראשיות – מקרא ביכורים: ענווה והכרת הטוב אשר למקרא בִּכורים – יש בו גם מידת הענווה, כי הוא אשר לוקח סל על כתיפו. ויש בו הכרה בחסדי האל וטובותיו, כדי שהאדם ידע שחלק מעבודת ה' הוא לזכור בעת רווחתו את מצבי מצוקתו. עניין זה מודגש רבות בתורה: "וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ [בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם]" (דברים ה,יד). כי החשש הוא מן המידות הנפוצות אצל כל מי שגדל בחיי רווחה, כוונתי ליהירות ולזחיחות ולהזנחת הדעות הנכונות.	**Guide for the Perplexed 3:39** The reciting of a certain portion of the Law when the first-fruits are brought to the temple, tends also to create humility. For he who brings the first-fruits takes the basket upon his shoulders and proclaims the kindness and goodness of God. This ceremony teaches man that it is essential in the service of God to remember the times of trouble and the history of past distress, in days of comfort. The Law lays stress on this duty in several places; comp. "And thou shalt remember that thou hast been a slave," etc. (Deuteronomy 5:15). For it is to be feared that those who become great in riches and comfort might, as is generally the case, fall into the vices of insolence and haughtiness, and abandon all good principles.

- **Maimonides suggests that remembering past hardships can keep us humble when life becomes comfortable. When can remembering hardship help us, and when can it hold us back?**
- **Can you think of a difficult period in your past that significantly shaped who you are today?**

Rabbi Ari Kahn, a Jewish studies lecturer at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, further develops the idea that *bikkurim* is meant to cultivate a particular attitude. He explains

that bringing the first fruits fosters gratitude by reminding the Jewish people that the land of Israel is a gift from God, not something to which they are inherently entitled:

Rabbi Ari Kahn, *Gratitude*
Appreciation for what God does for us is the foundation of religious life. Appreciation for what other human beings do for us is the foundation of decency and, by extension, a decent society. The greatest enemy of this sort of decency is the overdeveloped sense of entitlement from which modern man too often suffers. It blinds us to the wonderful gifts God gives us, deludes us into thinking that this is God's responsibility, His "job description." Similarly, we are often guilty of belittling or taking for granted what other people do for us, even when, and especially when, it is in their "job description." We expect service because we "deserve" it, but are we appreciative when we get it? Do we express that appreciation? Do we allow the other person to feel our appreciation?
…The fruit of the Land belongs to God. We are given sustenance as a gift from His hand. The farmers who toil in the Land of Israel are allowed to partner with Him in this holy endeavor, but they must never forget the true source of our sustenance. The *Bikurim* ritual, and the joyous way in which it is performed, allow us to thank God… for our bountiful, miraculous sustenance.

- **Rabbi Kahn argues that gratitude is especially important when someone is simply doing their "job." Do you agree? Should we feel grateful for something we have a right to expect? Why or why not?**

Ki Tavo is not the only place where the *bikkurim* passage appears. Its verses also form a central part of the traditional Passover Seder, where they help fulfill the obligation to retell relive the story of the Exodus in every generation:

הגדה של פסח, מגיד בְּכָל־דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יְיָ לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם. לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בִּלְבַד גָּאַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, אֶלָּא אַף אוֹתָנוּ גָּאַל עִמָּהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם, לְמַעַן הָבִיא אוֹתָנוּ, לָתֵת לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ.	**Passover Haggadah, Magid** In every generation, each person must see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt, as it is said: "And you shall tell your child on that day, 'Because of this the Lord acted for me when I came out of Egypt.'" It was not only our ancestors whom the Holy One redeemed; He redeemed us too along with them, as it is said: "He took us out of there, to bring us to the land He promised our ancestors and to give it to us."

- **The Torah tells the story of the Exodus in several places. Why do you think this particular version was chosen for the Passover Seder?**
- **What might it mean to say that Jews living today were saved from Egypt "along with" their ancestors?**

Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon, a contemporary Israeli rabbi, draws a connection between the two settings in which the *bikkurim* verses appear. He suggests that their inclusion in the Passover Seder teaches us what true gratitude on Passover should look like:

Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Arami Oved Avi: Why is the Bikkurim Proclamation Recited in the Haggada*

At first blush, it would seem that the book of Shemot [Exodus] would be the best way to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt…While it is true that the text regarding the first fruits is much shorter than that in Shemot, the former text does not look only at the Exodus from Egypt by itself like the latter one does. The recitation upon bringing one's first fruits also looks backwards, beginning the description of the redemption from the time of Yaakov [Jacob]. One thanks God by examining the course of history of the Nation of Israel… The Exodus from Egypt serves as the paradigm of how God has helped Israel historically throughout the generations, and we thank Him on the seder night for all of His help throughout time.

This principle of the importance of reviewing the past in order to thank God at present, is manifest not only in the proclamation recited on bringing the first fruits, but it is indeed implicit in the very notion of the first fruits. The first fruits are the first crops, "the first fruits of the land." The first fruits return the person to his beginnings, to the source. The person takes the first fruit which reminds him to think about his primary principles, his foundation, and he thus begins to think of the beginnings of the Nation of Israel, the forefathers of our nation, and the good which God granted to them and to us. One may combine the last two ideas mentioned in the verses about the first fruits: the thankfulness brought out in this commandment, and our examination of the past. Thankfulness causes us to thank God for all the good He is giving us right now, but at the same time, when we look back to the past we are grateful to Him for all that He has done for the Nation of Israel, from its founding until now.

- **Based on Rabbi Rimon's analysis, what are some qualities of an ideal expression of gratitude?**
- **Rabbi Rimon writes that bringing the first fruits returns a person "to his beginnings, to the source." Can you recall an experience that brought you back to your roots, whether intentionally or unexpectedly?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Rabbi Kahn presents the *bikkurim* ritual as an opportunity to express gratitude to God. What are the advantages and disadvantages of expressing gratitude through a set ritual rather than spontaneously?
2. The sources on this sheet have focused on how the *bikkurim* verses inspire gratitude. What other emotions might these verses evoke?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stay with you? What question are you left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Shoftim, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Ki Tavo page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find sources on Sefaria's Ki Tavo topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Gratitude, Humility, Bikkurim, Exodus from Egypt, and Passover.

If you would like to read the full article the third source is excerpted from, where Rabbi Kahn develops a parallel between *bikkurim* and the Garden of Eden, you can find it at this link.

Bikkurim is one of many agricultural commandments that can be found in the Torah. Some others can be found in last week's portion, Ki Teitzei, where farmers are commanded to leave forgotten produce for the poor, and in Leviticus 25, which details the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.

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