

Our *Parashah* opens with the *Mitzvah* of *Bikkurim* / taking the year's first fruits to the *Bet Hamikdash* and giving them to a *Kohen*. The *Mishnah* (*Bikkurim* 3:2) relates that this *Mitzvah* was performed with great fanfare. Groups would be formed to travel to Yerushalayim together, and musicians playing instruments would lead the groups. In each town through which the travelers passed, craftsmen would interrupt their work to greet them.

R' Chaim Zaichyk z"l (1906-1989; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Bet Yosef-Novardok in Buchach, Poland; later in Haifa, Israel) asks: Why, of all *Mitzvot*, was this one performed with such fanfare? He answers: Anything that is "first" has a special place in people's hearts. For example, parents have a special feeling for their firstborn, because their firstborn made them parents. Before the firstborn, parenthood was only something to be imagined or speculated about; afterward, it is real. Likewise, the first fruits are what gives the farmer the feeling that all of his hard work was for a purpose. That is cause for celebration!

Midrash Rabbah teaches that the world was created in the merit of three things: *Ma'aser* / tithes, *Challah* / the piece of each batch of dough given to the *Kohen*, and *Bikkurim*. Why? Because the Torah begins, "*Bereishit*," and each of these things is called "*Reishit*" / "the first." Notably, R' Zaichyk observes, each of these three things is given away to *Hashem's* servants (*i.e.*, a *Kohen* or *Levi*). This teaches that one should always direct that which is most dear to him to help those who serve *Hashem*. (*Ma'ayanei Chaim*)

Tefilah

This year, we will *iy"H* devote this space to discussing various aspects of our prayers. This week, we continue discussing the thirteen types of prayer identified in *Midrashim*.

R' Shimshon Dovid Pincus z"l (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel; died 2001) writes: "*Chilui*" (חילוי) refers to a prayer that includes arguments why the prayer should be accepted. For example, we read (*Shmot* 32:11-13--after the sin of the Golden Calf), "*Va'yechal* / Moshe pleaded before *Hashem*, his *Elokim*, and said, 'Why, *Hashem*, should Your anger flare up against Your people, whom You have taken out of the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand? Why should Egypt say: "With evil intent He took them out, to kill them in the mountains and to annihilate them from the face of the earth?" ... Remember for the sake of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yisrael.'" Likewise, the *Gemara* (*Berachot* 31b) relates that the childless prophetess Chana prayed: "*Hashem!* Everything that you created serves a purpose. Why do I have organs to nurse a child if you will not give me a child?" [*Hashem* answered her prayer, and she gave birth to the prophet Shmuel.]

However, there is a mystery here whose resolution is beyond us, continues R' Pincus. If the arguments being made are valid, why must they be made at all? *Hashem* already knows them all! On the other hand, if they are not valid arguments, why would *Hashem* listen to them? Nevertheless, this is the system *Hashem* created in the world: He wants us to make solid arguments to "persuade" Him to answer our prayers.

It should be noted, R' Pincus continues, that we are best off using the "arguments" formulated by our Sages and predecessors--for example, the words of *Tehilim* and of *Shemoneh Esrei* and the other prayers composed by the Men of the Great Assembly. We can apply to this the verse (*Kohelet* 5:1), "Do not be rash with your mouth, and do not let your heart be hasty to utter a word before *Elokim*; for *Elokim* is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore, let your words be few." Rather than composing our own arguments, we should learn the meanings of those composed by our Sages and King David and recite them with real feeling.

(*She'arim B'tefilah* p.114)

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“Because you did not serve Hashem, your Elokim, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant.” (28:47)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; first *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: A person gets pleasure and joy from his actions only when he understands their purpose. The more one knows the good that will come from his actions, the more he will be happy doing them. Indeed, the happiness and satisfaction that a person gets from his actions is the greatest catalyst to continue doing them, because a human being's nature is to pursue pleasure and run from disappointment. This is why we are commanded to perform *Mitzvot* with joy.

Know, however, continues R' Kook, that the Torah is not simply commanding us to acquire the trait of performing *Mitzvot* joyously. Rather, implied here is a command that we actively take steps to learn what the *Mitzvot* are meant to accomplish. This is similar to the commandments to revere and love Hashem. We are not expected to force ourselves to have these feelings just because we are told to. Rather, we are expected to study the Torah and to know Hashem's ways and His traits, and then we will develop reverence and love for Him. (Otzrot Ha'Rayah II p.492)

R' Noach Weinberg z"l (1930-2009; founder and *Rosh Yeshiva* of *Aish Ha'Torah*) writes: The source of all joy is the holy Torah, because the Torah teaches us that our lives have meaning.

He adds: There is a special joy that comes from gaining wisdom. Even if you cannot immediately put what you have learned into practice, you still have gained something. Nevertheless, whenever you do learn something new, examine how that new information can improve your life in a practical way. If you would find a diamond and appreciate its worth, you would dance all the way to your safe deposit box. On the other hand, if you find a diamond and use it to play marbles, it probably will end up abandoned in a hole in the ground. Remember that every bit of Torah wisdom you gain is a diamond, and value it as such!

(48 *Derachim L'chochmah* p.112)

R' Eliyahu de Vidas z"l (*Eretz Yisrael*; 1518-1592) quotes the *Zohar*: “The *Shechinah* resides only in a place that is whole--not a place that is lacking, a place that is damaged, a place that is sad--only in a place that is proper, [which is] a place of joy. That is why the *Shechinah* did not rest on Yaakov Avinu all the years that Yosef was separated from him.”

How can a person attain happiness? By reflecting on the good that Hashem has done for him.

(*Reishit Chochmah: Sha'ar Ha'ahavah* ch.10)

“Hashem will confirm you for Himself as a holy people, as He swore to you--if you observe the commandments of Hashem, your Elokim, and you go in His ways.” (28:9)

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes: This verse contains a *Mitzvah* to emulate Hashem as much as possible, as is written, “You [shall] go in His ways.” Our Sages explain: Just as Hashem is called “Compassionate,” so you shall be compassionate; just as He is called “Giving,” so you shall be giving; just as He is called “Righteous,” so you shall be righteous; just as He is called “Pious,” so you shall be pious. The general idea is that we should imitate those good actions and worthwhile qualities that we ascribe to Hashem.

(*Sefer Ha'mitzvot: Aseh* #8)

R' Avraham ben Ha'Rambam z"l (son of Maimonides; Egypt; 1186-1237) was asked: Why does *Rambam* interpret “you go in His ways” as a commandment when, according to the *P'shat* / straightforward reading, it appears to be a condition, not a *Mitzvah*?

R' Avraham answers, in defense of his father: How could it be a condition if it were not also a *Mitzvah*? If Hashem says, “I will reward you if you do 'X',” clearly Hashem wants 'X' to be done!

Moreover, R' Avraham continues, what distinguishes us from the Karaites--a heretical sect that was active in *Rambam's* time--is that we do not look only at the *P'shat* when interpreting a verse. Rather, we interpret verses based on the *P'shat* coupled with the traditions received from our Sages. *Rambam's* interpretation of “you go in His ways” to mean “you shall go in His ways” is, indeed, the interpretation received from our Sages.

(*Teshuvot Rabbeinu Avraham ben Ha'Rambam* #63)

“Hashem shall give you bountiful goodness, in the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your animals . . .” (28:11)

The *Gemara* (*Ta'anit* 8b) relates that there once was a famine and a plague simultaneously. The sage Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said, “One cannot pray regarding two troubles [*i.e.*, famine and plague] at once. Pray that the famine end because Hashem will not send plenty only to have it go to waste. When He sends plenty, He necessarily will give life also.” [Until here from the *Gemara*; see *Hamaayan* for *Parashat Devarim* of this year.]

R' Yaakov Yisrael Halevi Stern z"l (18th century; *maggid* /preacher in Kremenets, Volhynia, now Ukraine) writes that, in this light, we may understand our verse as follows: “Hashem shall give you bountiful goodness.” And, in order that that bountiful goodness not go to waste, he also will bless “the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your animals,” etc.--more than you asked.

(*Sefat Emet: Mishlei* 10:20)