

The Mitzva of Bikkurim

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. SHARED AND UNIQUE ASPECTS OF BIKKURIM

At first glance, it would seem that the mitzva of bringing the bikkurim (first fruits) to the Temple belongs to the category of mitzvot of "reishit" (first) – a category which includes teruma, terumat ma'aser, challa, the first fleece, the firstborn of animals, the redemption of firstborn children, etc. The commentators who offer reasons for the mitzvot – e.g. Rambam (Moreh Nevukhim III:39) and Sefer Ha-Chinukh (mitzva 91) - agree on a common reason for all these mitzvot: the offering of the "first" of everything that one has represents one's recognition of the fact that God is Master of ALL our possessions, and that He is the source of our bounty.

However, the mitzva of bikkurim (Devarim 25:1-11 and elsewhere) is unique among the mitzvot of "reishit" owing to a few of its important details, and we must seek an understanding of this particular mitzva that addresses these details:

i. The mitzva of bringing bikkurim is accompanied in our parasha by another mitzva, the "bikkurim declaration." When bringing the bikkurim, one is obligated to recite the formulation stipulated in verses 3 and 5-10. The other "first" mitzvot have no requirement for any accompanying declaration (other than the "vidui ma'asrot," recited "at the end of three years").

ii. The first fruits must be brought to the Temple: they are a 'mincha' offering. In fact, Chazal teach that "the bikkurim are brought only before the Temple (i.e., when the Temple stands)." The other "first" mitzvot applying to the individual have no such connection with the Temple. (Although ma'aser sheni and the firstborn of pure animals are brought to Jerusalem, the obligation of this mitzva is not cancelled in the absence of the Temple.)

iii. The obligation of bikkurim applies to the "seven species" of Eretz Yisrael (Mishna Bikkurim 1:3). In this it is different from the terumot and ma'asrot which, by Torah law, apply to grain, wine and oil, and which are extended by rabbinical law to include all produce from the land (according to the opinion of most of the Rishonim). The obligation of bikkurim is not extended by

Chazal any further than the seven species. The obligation of bringing bikkurim of the seven species is not even an absolute requirement, as is the case in terumot and ma'asrot: bikkurim are brought only from produce of the choicest quality (Mishna, *ibid.*; Rambam, Bikkurim 2:3).

iv. The obligation of bringing the first fruits applies to the owner of the land in which the fruits were grown. Thus, someone who buys one tree in a field that belongs to someone else does not bring bikkurim, since the land is not his (Mishna Bikkurim 1:6). Similarly, leaseholders and tenants do not bring bikkurim (*ibid.*, mishna 2). The other "first" mitzvot pertaining to agricultural produce apply to fruit that grows in Eretz Yisrael, no matter who the land belongs to.

II. BIKKURIM AS THANKS FOR THE LAND, NOT THE FRUIT

The explanation for the uniqueness of the mitzva of bikkurim should naturally be sought in the bikkurim declaration which accompanies their presentation. We would expect to find, in this declaration, words of thanks to God for the fruits which have ripened and for God's mercy in providing rain. But, in fact, the bearer of the bikkurim thanks God for His mercies as demonstrated in the history of Am Yisrael, from the time of the forefathers until the inheritance of the land. What is the connection between this historical review and the bringing of bikkurim?

Martin Buber, in his article "Bikkurim" (in "Darko shel Mikra," pp. 82-87), provides a beautiful explanation, part of which we shall quote here:

"Gifts offered to the gods from the first of the harvest are a familiar phenomenon of all cultures... as are prayers... thanking the gods for the blessing of the land... and asking them to ensure that the land remains fertile. But of all these types of prayers in the world, I know of only one in which the worshipper praises God for having given him a LAND.

The opening already points to this: 'And it shall be when you come to the land which Hashem your God gives you'... Only the beginning of the mitzva speaks to Am Yisrael (in the verse quoted above), while all the other verbs ('you shall take, you shall say,' etc.) ... are quite clearly addressed not to the nation as a whole but rather to the individual... The condition for the mitzva is collective, but the

obligation is individual. Furthermore, the condition is a one-time historical phenomenon, while the obligation applies on a yearly basis...

Even in later generations, the bearer of the bikkurim is not to say, for example, 'My forefathers came to the land,' but rather, 'I have come to the land.' Here the two entities addressed by the Torah, the nation and the individual, come together. 'I have come to the land' means, first and foremost, 'I – the nation of Israel – have come to the land.' The speaker identifies with Am Yisrael and speaks in the name of the nation...

The speaker does not say merely 'I have come to the land,' but rather he states that he 'declares' to God that he has come to the land. The significance of this is as follows: I testify and identify myself as a person who has come to the land... He does this because he has to say, 'Not only the nation of Israel, but also this man who stands here has come to the land. I, the individual, identify myself as someone who has come to the land, and from time to time, when I bring the first of its fruits, I recognize this fact anew and declare it anew...' Every farmer in every generation of Israel thanks God when he brings his bikkurim for the land to which He brought HIM."

Thus we learn that the unique reason for the mitzva of bringing bikkurim is to serve as an opportunity for every owner of land in Israel to thank God for the gift of the land – that historical phenomenon which took place in the past and which continues and is relived until the present moment when the Israelite farmer stands in the Temple, his basket of bikkurim in his arms. Let us refer once again to Buber:

"This 'bringing' of the bikkurim and that 'bringing' to the land are included together in the prayer with a covert parallel (9-10): 'And He BROUGHT us to this place... and now I HAVE BROUGHT the first of the fruits of the land...' What is expressed here is the mutual interaction between God and His nation. 'I was brought by Him to this fertile land,' says the farmer, 'and now I am bringing Him some of its fruit.' This conveys more than just gratitude. The entire land is given to the nation by God's hand; the produce which the man who is brought there brings from the ground is likewise from God's blessing and His actions; one cannot GIVE Him something of it, but one may BRING Him something – the choicest of the first fruits as a symbol and as sanctification."

The root "b-o-a" (to come, to bring) appears six times in the parasha of bikkurim, in two groups of three. The parallel between the two groups indicates the two major movements of

the parasha (God bringing man to the land, and man bringing bikkurim to God) and the relationship between them.

But there is another root used in this parasha that serves to indicate the unilateral action of God towards Israel – the root "n-t-n" (to give). God, Who BROUGHT Israel to the land, also GIVES it to them. By contrast, the root 'n-t-n' is never used in conjunction with the bringing of bikkurim. This verb appears seven times in the parasha, hinting to the reader that this "giving" is the crux of the parasha. As Buber notes, in the first three and the last three appearances of "n-t-n," this word refers to God's gift to Israel, while in the center (the fourth appearance) we find a strange "giving" - "and they [the Egyptians] gave upon us hard labor." This incongruous use of "n-t-n" illustrates most tangibly the negative contrast with the Divine giving. Furthermore, Buber continues,

"God's great gift to Israel is the land; this is impressed in our minds with a five-fold repetition [of 'n-t-n']. Finally (25:11), this root is used in a more general way in order to leave no room for mistake: 'You shall rejoice in ALL THE GOOD which Hashem your God has given you' – not only the land itself but also its yearly produce comes as a gift from God's hand."

III. THE BIKKURIM DECLARATION

In verses 5-9, the bearer of the bikkurim reviews the history from the period of the forefathers up until the inheritance of the land. This review is characterized by the fact that the bearer of the bikkurim speaks of Israel in the first person plural: "They were evil towards us... and we cried... and He took us out... and He gave us," unlike the declaration in verse 3, in which he speaks in the first person singular: "I declare... I have come." At the conclusion of his historical review the bearer of the bikkurim returns once again, in verse 10, to the present, and speaks again in the first person singular: "And now, behold, I HAVE BROUGHT the first of the fruits of the land which God HAS GIVEN TO ME."

The content and structure of the historical speech in verses 5-9 is reminiscent of another speech, which we have discussed in the past: that of God at the beginning of parashat Va'era. The similarity between the two is not coincidental: God's speech represents His undertaking to fulfill that which He promised to the forefathers: that their descendants would be taken out from the Egyptian slavery, that they would be brought to the land and that He would give it to them. The speech by the bearer of the bikkurim is the human confirmation made by the descendants, testifying to the fact that God has fulfilled His promise to the forefathers: He indeed took their descendants out of Egypt, brought them to the land and gave it to them.

Let us analyze the structure of this declaration and see what we may learn from it. The speech is comprised of two equal parts, with verse 7 serving as a central axis between them.

PART 1:

(5) "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and dwelled there few in number, and became there a great, mighty and populous nation.

(6) And the Egyptians were evil towards us and afflicted us, and placed upon us hard labor."

PIVOTAL AXIS:

(7) "And we cried to Hashem, the God of our fathers, and God heard our voices and saw our affliction and our labor and our oppression."

PART 2:

(8) "And God took us out of Egypt, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and with wonders.

(9) And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

What distinguishes each half from the other? The answer is quite obvious: the first half describes HUMAN ACTION – God is not mentioned in this half. The second half describes DIVINE ACTION: the exodus from Egypt, God's leading of Israel "to this place," and His giving it to them.

What is the meaning of the absence of God's name from the first half of the speech? The first half describes the historical events as being of the type in which God's presence is hidden, where even Israel do not perceive His hand. The descent of Ya'akov and his family to Egypt and what happens there to his descendants, both for the good (the miraculous multiplicity) and for the bad (slavery and affliction), represent the realization of God's decree as made explicit in the "brit bein ha-betarim," but God did not reveal Himself to His nation throughout that long period.

This break comes to a halt in the "central axis" of the speech: the turning point takes place when Israel are at their lowest point: "And we cried to Hashem, the God of our fathers." In the wake of Bnei Yisrael's cry to God, "God heard our voices and saw our affliction." In the central axis of the speech we see a mutual relationship being established between God and Israel: the "hester panim" (hiding of God's face) is over, but the execution of the necessary action is not yet described here. It is only in the second half that God's awesome historical act is revealed, redeeming His nation from Egypt and bringing them to the land for an inheritance. Thus the central axis of verse 7 is the outgrowth of verse 6 in the first half – it is the affliction and hard labor that give rise to the cry to God – and this in turn is the cause of verse 8 in the second half – when God hears the cry and sees the affliction, that gives rise to His historical action: "And God took us out of Egypt..."

There is a clear contrasting chiasmic structure in this speech, of the form A-B-C-B-A. Verse 5 opens the speech with the wanderings of the forefathers in Canaan and their descent to Egypt; verse 9 concludes the speech with their descendants being brought from Egypt back to Canaan. Verse 6 describes the Egyptians' cruel mistreatment of the Israelites; verse 8, in contrast, describes God's removal of His people from Egypt and his punishment of their oppressors.

The background to the entire speech is undoubtedly the brit bein ha-betarim which God made with Avraham (the "covenant between the pieces," Bereishit ch. 15). There are clear linguistic and thematic connections between the two. The significance of the "bikkurim declaration" is therefore recognition and gratitude for God's having fulfilled the covenant He made with Avraham. Therefore, the section of the Pesach Haggada which expounds the "bikkurim declaration" is preceded by the following:

"Blessed is He who keeps His promise to Israel, Blessed be He. For the Holy One calculated what He would do in the end, as He said to Avraham our father in the brit bein ha-betarim..."

IV. THE SPECIAL CONNECTION BETWEEN BIKKURIM AND THE LAND

Why was it specifically bikkurim, of all the "first gifts," that were chosen to serve as the vehicle for our gratitude to God for the gift of the land? The bikkurim combine two qualities which are not found together in the other "first" gifts brought from the produce of the land, and it is these qualities that make this mitzva special.

Firstly, the bikkurim are brought from the seven species which are the epitome of the praise of Eretz Yisrael. Secondly, the farmer has a special affection of the fruits that are the first to ripen; he awaits their appearance with great excitement. Yishayahu (28:4) describes the anticipation:

"Like the first ripe fig before summer which, when one sees it, he swallows it up while it is still in his hand."

But the Israelite farmer does not treat his first fruit, the joy of his heart, in this way:

"A person goes down to his field and sees a fig that has ripened, a cluster of grapes that has ripened or a pomegranate that has ripened – he ties a thread around them and says, 'Behold, these are bikkurim!'" (Mishna Bikkurim 3:1)

The bikkurim of the seven species with which Eretz Yisrael is blessed are therefore the essence of the praise and beauty of the land, and bringing them to the Temple as a 'mincha' offering to God expresses most appropriately our gratitude to Him for having given us a beautiful land that gives forth its fruit with such generosity.

This answers the third question we asked at the outset: Why do we bring bikkurim only from the seven species? In light of this, we can also explain that other laws that are unique to the mitzva of bikkurim:

1) The "bikkurim declaration" is meant to clarify the special reason for the mitzva of bringing bikkurim, which is unlike the reason for the other "first" mitzvot.

2) The crux of the reason for the mitzva of bikkurim, which is an expression of gratitude to God for the gift of the land, lies not in the fact that it represents one of the twenty-four gifts given to the kohen, but rather in the fact that it is a 'MINCHA' TO GOD Who gives the land. The kohanim consume the bikkurim in the same way as they have the merit of consuming other offerings brought to the Temple. For this reason, the mitzva depends on the existence of the Temple. The destruction of the Temple was a (temporary) disruption of God's gift of the land to Israel. When this halt occurs, the mitzva of bikkurim cannot continue.

4) Even when Israel dwell the land and the Temple stands, the obligation of bringing bikkurim applies only to the person who brings them from his own portion of the land. Ownership of the fruits is not in itself sufficient reason for the obligation; the owner of the fruit needs to be a partner in Israel's inheritance of the land. If the fruits grew on land which was not his own, then they do not provide sufficient basis for his gratitude for the gift of the land.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)