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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Go For the Gold

“And it will be if you obey the L-rd, your G-d, to observe to fulfill all His commandments which I command you this day, the L-rd, your G-d, will place you supreme above all the nations of the earth.” (28:1)

I come from the world of music and the arts. By age 26, I had co-produced a record that sold over 5 million copies. One thing that intrigued me when I became Torah-observant was meeting *frum* people who were fascinated to hear what some of the “stars” that I had met were like.

I sensed an ever-so-slight tinge of FOMO.

It's like: “We all know the Torah is true, there's a *Ribono Shel Olam, olam haba* and all that, but I'd love to get some of that glatt *olam hazeh* if it wasn't forbidden.”

Gentlemen, let me tell you – I wore the T-shirt – I **wove** the T-shirt. You are missing out on nothing. Except what it means to be a Yid. The Kotzer used to say if you really knew what it meant to be a Yid, you'd jump up and start dancing the Kazotsky.

Sometimes it takes a message from far away to make us realize exactly what we have:

South Korea is one of the most tech, fast paced countries on earth. Robots bringing food to your table. There's technology the world hasn't even seen yet. Their education system is one of the most intense in the world. But believe it or not, in South Korea, they learn Talmud in their schools.

About 25 years ago Korean educators became fascinated by the success of the Jewish people: here was a nation that endured exile after exile, pogroms, Holocaust, bloodshed, torture, and yet they somehow produced the most influential, radically transformative people on earth: Nobel prize winners, scientists, doctors, business leaders, thinkers way out of proportion to their numbers.

And the Koreans asked the same question the rest of the world has always asked: How? Why?

How is it possible that people running for their lives seemed to live the most fruitful lives?

But unlike other nations who nurture the poisonous illusion that the Jews conspire to control the world, the Koreans came to a much more honest conclusion: they said, maybe the Jewish people are more successful because their guidebook to life is wiser than any other guidebook. They said, we want to understand the Talmud.

We want to know why the Jews are so smart, why they're so resilient.

The Torah says “*baruch tihye mikol ha'amim*” (*Devarim 7:14*) - the Jewish people will be the most blessed of all the nations. The history of the Jewish people shows that we have lived lives far richer than all others: We have built the strongest families, we have the healthiest marriages, the most respectful and dignified ways of dealing with grief, with poverty, with death, the most compassionate ways of giving, the most loving way of guiding an orphan. When you step back and look at human life as a whole, the Jewish people have lived better, fuller, deeper, more meaningful lives than anyone else on this planet.

The next time you feel like you want to give up; that you're fed up with having to control yourself at every corner; that you're missing out on the good life; that life would be just so much easier if we didn't always have to be on guard; remember, our guide to life has been tested and proven generation after generation.

Sometimes it takes other people, looking from the outside, to tap us on the shoulder and remind us that we got the gold.

And what the world has is just so much tinsel town.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

When the Jewish People dwell in the Land of Israel, the first fruits are to be taken to the Temple and given to the *kohen*. This is done in a ceremony that expresses recognition that it is Hashem who guides the history of the Jewish People throughout the ages. This passage forms one of the central parts of the Pesach Haggadah that we read at the Seder.

On the last day of Pesach of the fourth and seventh years of the seven-year *shemitta* cycle, a person must recite a disclosure stating that he has indeed distributed the tithes to the appropriate people and in the prescribed manner. With this mitzvah, *Moshe concludes the commandments that Hashem has told him to give to the Jewish People*. Moshe exhorts them to walk in Hashem's ways, because they are set aside as a treasured people to Him.

When the Jewish People cross the Jordan River, they are to make a new commitment to the Torah. Huge stones are to be erected, and the Torah is to be written on them in the world's seventy primary languages. Afterwards, the stones are to be covered over with a thin layer of plaster. Half of the tribes are to stand on Mount Gerizim, and half on Mount Eval, and the *Levi'im* will stand in a valley between the two mountains. The *Levi'im* will recite twelve commandments, and all the people will answer "*amen*" to both the blessings and the curses. Moshe then details the blessings that will be bestowed upon the Jewish People, blessings that are both physical and spiritual. If, however, the Jewish People do not keep the Torah, Moshe details a chilling picture of destruction, exile and wandering among the nations.

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Q & A

Questions

1. When did the obligation to bring *bikkurim* begin?
2. *Bikkurim* are from which crops?
3. How does one designate *bikkurim*?
4. Who shakes the basket containing the *bikkurim*?
5. What does "v'anita v'amarta" mean?
6. Which Arami "tried to destroy my father?"
7. When during the year may *bikkurim* be brought? Until when are the special verses recited?
8. Someone declaring that he separated *terumah* and *ma'aser* says: "And I didn't forget." What didn't he forget?
9. What were the Jewish People to do with the 12 stones on Mount Eval?
10. Six tribes stood on Mount Eval and six on Mount Gerizim. Who and what were in the middle?
11. Who "causes the blind to go astray"?
12. How does one "strike another secretly"?
13. Eleven curses were spoken on Mount Eval. What is the significance of this number?
14. Why are sheep called "*ashterot*"?
15. How is the manner of expressing the curses in Parshat Bechukotai more severe than in this week's parsha?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 26:1 - After the Land was conquered and divided.
2. 26:2 - The seven species for which *Eretz Yisrael* is praised.
3. 26:2 - When he sees the first fruit ripen on a tree, he binds a piece of straw around it to mark it as *bikkurim*.
4. 26:4 - The *kohen* places his hands under the hands of the one bringing it, and they wave the basket together.
5. 26:5 - Speak loudly.
6. 26:5 - Lavan.
7. 26:11 - *Bikkurim* are brought from Shavuot until Chanukah. The verses are recited only until Succot.
8. 26:13 - To bless G-d.
9. 27:2 - Build an altar.
10. 27:12 - *Kohanim*, *levi'im* and the Holy Ark.
11. 27:18 - Any person who intentionally gives bad advice.
12. 27:24 - By slandering him.
13. 27:24 - Each curse corresponds to one of the tribes, except for the tribe of Shimon. Since Moshe didn't intend to bless the tribe of Shimon before his death, he did not want to curse it either.
14. 28:4 - Because they "enrich" (*m'ashirot*) their owners.
15. 28:23 - In Bechukotai the Torah speaks in the plural, whereas in this week's *parsha* the curses are mentioned in the singular.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 23)

“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.”

Wilson Mizener – American Playwright

Kriat Shema al Hamitah continues: **For Your salvation do I long, O Hashem** (Bereishet 49:18). **I do long, O Hashem, for Your salvation. Hashem, for Your salvation do I long.**

Just prior to his passing from this world, Ya'akov Avinu blessed each of his sons. Our verse is part of the blessing that Ya'akov gave to his son Dan. The message that Ya'akov is conveying is foundational: there is no one to rely upon other than Hashem.

True, there will be moments in life where we will feel as if we have been rescued from an impossible or perilous situation by someone or something. But each such time is only temporary; we are safe only until the next danger. Our verse instills within us the knowledge that the only One who can rescue us permanently from all danger is Hashem.

Baranovich, on Russia's border with Germany, was easily overrun by the Nazis during World War II. Following their evil and barbaric modus operandi, the Nazi ordered all the local Jews to line up facing a wall. Understanding all too well what was in store, the Jews prepared to leave this world by doing Teshuvah. Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000), the saintly Rebbe of Slonim, related that his father, Rabbi Moshe Avraham, was among those awaiting death. Instead of concentrating on Teshuvah, however, he asked for a cup of water. He explained that in the Holy Books there are sources that teach that it is considered a very lofty act if a person is able to recite the blessing “Shehakol nehiyeh bidvaro” before they leave this world. He was given a cup of water and with great intent and fervor he recited the blessing. He carefully and slowly nunciated every word and all those present answered with a heartfelt “amen”. Immediately afterwards gunshots were heard. But it was not the Jews who were being shot. Seemingly out of nowhere, Russian soldiers arrived and opened fire at the Nazis. In the midst of the clash, all the Jews escaped.

Once they got to a safe place, they went over to Rabbi Moshe Avraham and jubilantly shouted, “You saved our lives! It was a miracle!”

Rabbi Moshe Avraham emphatically replied, “It was not a miracle.” And then he explained that when he said the blessing “Shehakol nehiyeh bidvaro” he focused on strengthening his Emunah that absolutely everything is in the Hands of Hashem. “It wasn’t a miracle,” he told them, “It was Emunah that saved us.”

And that is why we recite our verse before going to sleep; to fortify our belief that only Hashem supports us and protects us; that only Hashem can support us and protect us.

Rabbeinu Bachya points out an enigma: after reciting the verse with Hashem’s name at the end as it appears in the Torah, we rearrange the words so that Hashem’s Name appears in the middle; we do this again but this time we place Hashem’s Name at the beginning. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that, according to Kabbalistic sources, the reason we rearrange the words is that they create mystical combinations of letters that spell out one of Hashem’s more esoteric Names. In effect, the more we surround ourselves with Hashem, the securer we will be. Because, when we turn to Hashem we must feel that there is no one who can help except for Him.

The Rebbe of Toldot Aharon was once swimming in the sea. Suddenly, a strong current carried him rapidly away from the shore. His life was in very real danger but, with an obvious display of Divine intervention, he was saved. Afterwards he told one of his grandsons, “What do you think I did at that time, when I understood that my life was coming to an end? Do you think I said viduy [confession]? Perhaps you think I shouted Shema Yisrael? Not at all. I shouted with all my strength, ‘Tatte [Father]! Only You can help me. Save me!’ And only then did a powerful undercurrent push me back to the shore.”

To be continued...

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.”
(Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

MAASER SHEINI – THE SECOND TITHE

Mitzvah #483; *DEVARIM* 14:22

We are commanded to separate several tithes from the produce of Eretz Yisrael, which amount to approximately a fifth of the total produce. Ten percent is given to the Levites, who are dedicated to the service of Hashem in the Beis HaMikdash. The owner of the produce must take another ten percent, called *maaser sheini* (the second tithe), and eat it in Yerushalayim, “***so that you will learn to fear Hashem***” (*Devarim* 14:23).

The Mitzvah to tithe *maaser sheini* applies in the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of the *shemittah* cycle, and it can only be eaten in Yerushalayim by someone in a state of purity. These days, when we cannot purify ourselves by means of the ashes of the Parah Adumah (*red cow*), we instead follow the alternative of redeeming the *maaser sheini* upon a coin, which assumes its sacred status and must be treated accordingly.

How does eating in Yerushalayim teach a person to fear Hashem? The commentaries explain that coming to the Beis HaMikdash, watching the Kohanim offer sacrifices, hearing the Levites sing and witnessing all the Jewish People participating in the service of Hashem was a profoundly inspiring experience. Moreover, the Beis HaMikdash was the seat of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Beis Din comprised of the seventy greatest Torah scholars of the generation. Just being in their presence was enough to awaken within a person a desire to study the Torah himself. When Hashem is the focus of a person’s surroundings, it becomes his focus as well. For this reason, when the Sages enacted that all children should study in Torah schools instead of relying solely on father-to-son education, they selected Yerushalayim as the ideal place for those schools (*Bava Basra* 21a with *Tosafos*).

Sefer HaChinuch adds that it could take a long time to eat all of one's *maaser sheini*, and the distance to Yerushalayim sometimes made it even more difficult for people to accomplish this. Therefore, people would commonly send one of their older sons with all of their *maaser sheini* to Yerushalayim, and he would stay there until it was finished, having nothing else to do but absorb the atmosphere and engage in Torah study. When he would return home, he would be a wellspring of Torah knowledge for the rest of his family. The result was Torah in every Jewish home.

There is no Beis HaMikdash in Yerushalayim today, yet the lesson about the importance of living and working in an environment that is conducive to the service of Hashem is no less relevant.

Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:39) observes that since people had to spend the tithe entirely on food, which was more than they could eat, they would often invite others to eat with them, and this would strengthen brotherhood and unity among the Jewish people (cited in *Mitzvos HaMevuaros*). The poor would gather in Yerushalayim knowing that they would be invited to share in these meals (*Bechor Shor*).

According to *Chiddushei HaRim*, the very act of eating in Yerushalayim causes a person to fear Hashem. Eating has a great effect upon us, for good or bad. While eating for pleasure pulls a person toward earthliness, eating in a holy environment as a mitzvah lifts a person toward holiness. We are fortunate to still have a parallel to the Beis HaMikdash, which is the holy days of Shabbos and Yom Tov, sanctuaries of time. Saving delicacies for these days can be compared to bringing *maaser sheini* to Yerushalayim (see *Yevamos 93a*), and this has a similar effect of teaching us to fear Hashem and drawing us nearer to Him. There are approximately seventy-three days of Shabbos and Yom Tov in the year, a fifth of 365 days, just like the tithes are approximately a fifth of the produce. These sacred days are like the year's tithes, and whatever holiness we invest in them permeates the rest of the year (*Sefas Emes, Re'eh 5654*).