

BAR AND BAS MITZVAH - A SPECIAL CELEBRATION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

According to Jewish law, children are not obligated to keep the Mitzvos, the commandments. The time during the early years of a person's life is a training period, where they learn about the Mitzvos and how to keep them properly. A woman becomes obligated to keep the Mitzvos (Bas Mitzvah) at the age of 12. A man becomes obligated to keep the Mitzvos (Bar Mitzvah) at the age of 13. We usually mark the reaching of this important milestone in a person's life with celebration. The interesting thing about reaching the age of Bar and Bas Mitzvah is that we don't find any explicit commandment in the Torah to celebrate the occasion. The Chasam Sofer poses this question in his commentary in Parshas Vayechi. He compares this glaring omission to another omission that we find in the Torah. When one would look to see why we celebrate the holiday of Shavuos, one would find that the Torah makes no association between Shavuos and the giving of the Torah (see I:24). Shavuos is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, and it seems fitting that we celebrate this anniversary on Shavuos. Yet, the Torah mentions the bringing of Bikkurim (the first fruits of the harvest) as a reason for celebration. Why does the Torah not mention any celebration of the anniversary of the giving of the Torah?

The Chasam Sofer, when answering his question, sets out some elementary facts. The people brought the first fruits to Jerusalem at the time of Shavuos, with great fanfare. The Sefer HaChinuch tells us why we have the commandment to set aside the first fruit. Until the time that the crops begin to grow, a farmer may be very worried about the success of his crops. His livelihood depends on these fruits, and waiting to see if they will grow and produce can be nerve-wracking. However, once the fruits have started to grow, and the farmer sees that his work is literally bearing fruits, the farmer is overjoyed. He knows that his work was not for naught and that he will have an income this year. It is precisely at a time like this that a farmer needs to remember who made his crops successful: Hashem. At the height of his joy, the farmer sets aside the first fruits of his labor upon the command of Hashem. This way, the farmer displays that he is thankful for all the help and the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon him. In this instance, the farmer needs a reminder of how and why he was blessed.

When it comes to the giving of the Torah, we should not need any commandment or any set celebration to remind us of how lucky we are to have the Torah. We should be inspired on our own to be thankful to Hashem for giving us this present, every day. If Hashem had given us a directive to celebrate the anniversary of our receiving the Torah, it would make the celebration obligatory, as

everything else in the Torah. We would be celebrating not necessarily because we truly feel happiness and appreciation for the Torah, but because Hashem told us that we should celebrate. This is not how Hashem wants us to celebrate our receiving of the Torah. Therefore, the Chasam Sofer says, the bringing of the Bikkurim is connected with the bringing of the Torah. Hashem made the time of bringing the Bikkurim, a time of natural joy for the farmer, and a time in which the farmer remembers Hashem, at the same time as the anniversary of receiving the Torah. The joy and thanks that come naturally from bringing Bikkurim should cause a spark to be ignited within us, so that we, on our own, express the same joy and thanks for receiving the Torah.

It is, perhaps, for this reason, that no commandments to celebrate becoming a Bar or Bas Mitzvah appears in the Torah. Upon becoming adults, young people have the yoke of Torah placed upon their shoulders. While it is indeed a time when one might be a bit frightened by the burden he or she is starting to bear, one should nevertheless be overjoyed by the fact that now he or she has the opportunity to do Mitzvos and fulfill the command of Hashem. This happiness has to be natural: the youth has to feel it on his own. An artificial happiness, brought on by an obligatory celebration of the fact, is not needed nor desired. The young man or woman at the time of the Bar or Bas Mitzvah has to realize how lucky he or she is to now have received the Torah and to be thankful to Hashem for this gift. This realization has to arise without any stimuli. It has to be self motivated and sincere. It is for this reason that the Torah contains no commandments to celebrate becoming a Bar or Bas Mitzvah.

It is interesting that the Klei Yakar comments that the commandment which best characterizes what the Bar or Bas Mitzvah is going through is that of Bikkurim. The young boy or girl has grown from an infant, totally dependent on his parents, to a young man or woman, who is now responsible for all 613 Mitzvos. Like the crops, he has been showered with attention and many sleepless hours have been spent worrying about the success of the object of the labor. At the time the child is beginning to blossom, beginning to bear fruit, the child, like the first fruits, is to be in essence set aside to Hashem - he now begins his life adhering to all that the Torah dictates.

From this comparison, we see two lessons. The Bar or Bas Mitzvah, while possibly feeling nervous about reading the Torah or giving a speech, looks forward to this milestone with great anticipation. The family of the young adult plans the Simcha, the celebration, hoping that all can share in their time of joy. There is a natural Simcha experienced upon a young person becoming a Bar or Bas Mitzvah. This natural Simcha, like the Simcha of Bikkurim, is supposed to carry over and inspire the new adult to be happy and give thanks that he has now personally received the Torah.

Furthermore, just as by Bikkurim, the Bar or Bas Mitzvah is a time for reflection for all who were involved with the youth, helping them be what they are today. Much work goes into raising a child. One can have much "nachas," satisfaction, from a child. Parents must realize how much Hakaras haTov, appreciation and thanks, one has to have to Hashem for His hand in Chinuch HaBanim, child rearing.

The message to the young person at the time of this special occasion is straightforward: Now is a time when you should be very happy because you have now just received the Torah. G-d gave it to you as a gift, and you should realize how precious this gift is, and therefore be thankful for getting it. You also have to appreciate all the work that went into bringing you to this occasion, and the time, effort, and money, that your parents spent to assure that you would reach your potential, and to assure that your Bar or Bas Mitzvah would be a time of Simcha, a Simcha that all would feel and that would inspire all.

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