

1. PRAYER, THE PATH TO CLARITY

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

The Torah states that when one brings the newly ripened produce (bikurim) to the Temple mount one must make a declaration of appreciation to G'd for all that he had received. The Midrash cites a verse from Psalms, "'Let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before Hashem, our Maker.' What is the meaning of this? Moshe had seen through his divine vision that in the future the Temple would be destroyed, thus the bringing of the bikurim come to an end. Moshe therefore promulgated that the Jewish people must stand before G'd in prayer (tefillah) three times a day. It is because prayer is more beloved to G'd than all good deeds and all of the sacrifices. As it states in Psalms, 'Let my prayer be established before You as the incense offering, and the lifting up of my palms as the evening sacrifice.'" Why is prayer more beloved to G'd than all good deeds and all of the sacrifices?

When one brings the bikurim accompanied by the declaration of one's indebtedness to G'd, one demonstrates through his verbal expression that he understands and appreciates that every aspect of his good fortune is only an endowment from G'd. After one had performed the ritual of the bikurim on the Temple Mount, which is the location of G'd's Presence, one must prostrate himself before G'd, which is a negation of one's self to indicate and confirm the internalization of all that he had stated. When one brought a sacrifice, for the purpose of atonement, it was an acknowledgement that because of his transgression, although it may have been inadvertent, he deserves to die. However, because of G'd's Mercy, he is able to bring the sacrifice in his stead. The bringing of a sacrifice is an acknowledgement that one must live his life as G'd prescribes and not as the individual chooses to live.

After the Temple was destroyed and the bikurim and sacrifices came to an end, the setting for the Jew to actualize this sense of negation - either through the bikurim or the sacrifices, no longer existed. What could compensate or even surpass that setting? Moshe therefore enacted that one must stand before G'd and pray three times a day. In the prayer service, one acknowledges that every aspect of his life is willed and dictated by G'd. When one prays, one addresses and acknowledges specific areas of one's life that most take for granted as being initial endowments. However, when the Jew prays, it is not only acknowledging all of these benefits as endowments, but rather he supplicates G'd to continue to provide these endowment in order for him to be productive in his life. Therefore, when one stands and supplicates G'd as prescribed by Moshe, it would restore that negation of self which is necessary for one to dedicate himself to the service of G'd.

2. Bikurim, the Cause of Blessing

The Torah tells us that after one brings the newly ripened produce (bikurim) to the Temple mount one must make a declaration of appreciation to G'd for all that he had received. The Midrash states, "After bringing the bikurim one must supplicate G'd saying, 'Gaze down from Your heavenly abode and bring blessing upon me and the entire Jewish people.' Reb Avahu said in the name of Reb Yossi Bar Chanina, 'See to what degree we supplicate G'd! and how the one who performs mitzvos is deserving of reward! There are times when one invests great amounts of money in order to gain an audience with the King. Even if he should succeed to go before the King, it is still questionable if his request will be accommodated. However, this is not the case with G'd. When one enters into his field and sees a cluster of grapes that has ripened, or a fig that had ripened, or a pomegranate that had ripened, he places them in a basket and travels to Jerusalem. There he stands in the middle of the Sanctuary and supplicates G'd for Mercy for himself, the Jewish people and the Land of Israel...He concludes by saying, 'I will not leave this location until You will accommodate all of my needs today.' Immediately, G'd gives the order that the individual's requests should be fulfilled. Reb Shimon Ben Lakish says, 'A Heavenly Voice immediately proclaims, 'You should merit to bring the bikurim next year as you have done this year.' It is as if one had given a new fruit to his fellow and the recipient says, 'May you merit next year to give me the gift as you have done this year.'" Why is the bringing of the bikurim so significant that the one who brings them is deserving of such a unique level of blessing and Mercy, although his classification may not be devout? G'd will immediately respond and acquiesce to his supplications.

The Prophet Yeshaya states, "G'd said regarding existence, 'For My glory I have created it.'" Meaning, G'd created existence, which is awesome and unfathomable, for the sake of the glorification of His Name. All existence reflects G'd's Omnipotence, because it was created for the specific purpose of glorifying Him. King David writes in Psalms, "How great (rabu) are Your works Hashem..." Ramak (Reb Moshe Cordavero) writes in his work Tomer Devorah that the word "rabu," which literally means "numerous" should be interpreted as "great (awesome)." Meaning, that every aspect of creation reflects the infinite genius of G'd. Just as the physical characteristics of the father are evident on his child, so too is the imprint of G'd encoded in every aspect of creation. When one acknowledges this fact and expresses his indebtedness to G'd for what he has received, he is in essence fulfilling the purpose of creation through his acknowledgement.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that if one benefits from this world (through eating or drinking) it is as if he is stealing from G'd and the entire Jewish people. This is because all existence was created to acknowledge G'd. Therefore, the Rabbis promulgated the recitation of blessings before partaking of food or drink in order to address this acknowledgement. If one benefits and partakes of this world without acknowledging one's benefactor, through the recitation of a blessing, he is not utilizing existence for its objective and purpose. G'd will therefore withdraw the means, since the objective is not being addressed. In contrast, when one acknowledges that there is a Benefactor and that the individual is only a beneficiary of the Creator's Beneficence, then that person is fulfilling the purpose of Creation.

When one goes to the Sanctuary and brings the bikurim, which are the produce that are the most endeared to the farmer, before G'd and makes a declaration of indebtedness to the Master, he is bringing about a public sanctification of G'd's Name. Despite the fact that one must toil and invest one's ability to bring about G'd's blessing; nevertheless, this individual is acknowledging that all that he has is from Him. Therefore, this individual is in a position to supplicate G'd and demand that his requests be fulfilled. If one is continuously cognizant of G'd's Beneficence, he will merit G'd's blessing.

3. The Criteria to Establish Holiness

The Torah states, "It shall be that if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G'd, to observe, to perform all of His commandments ... G'd, will make you supreme over all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you... Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb....you will be revered..." If one heeds the Word of G'd, unlimited blessing will come upon him in every aspect of his life. Sforno explains, "What is the meaning of 'if you hearken to the voice of Hashem?' If one's makes his Torah study primary and his material pursuits secondary. It is only then that all the blessings will come upon you without the need to take the initiative for the material." It is not sufficient to merely observe the mitzvos as an adjunct to one's primary focus, which is the pursuit of one's livelihood. One's Torah study must be primary and one's focus in life must be to fulfill the Word of G'd. One's livelihood is only an incidental to accommodate and provide for his material needs.

One may think that since one lives in a material world one must focus on the pursuit of the material in order to succeed. How could one have material success without being dedicated to securing one's financial future? The Torah tells us that one's material success is an endowment from G'd and not related at all to the degree of initiative that one takes. G'd provides unlimited blessing to the one whose Torah study is primary because that individual demonstrates, through his spiritual pursuits, that existence is purely for that objective. However, if one chooses to make his material pursuit primary, he may need to work day and night to achieve his goal. Even at that level of involvement his success is in question. The one who makes his work primary evidently believes that the basis for his success is his own initiative. G'd therefore says, "If that is the case, then you truly must pursue that avenue alone, without My assistance."

The Torah continues, "Hashem will establish you for Himself as a holy people, as He swore to you- if you observe the commandments of Hashem, your G'd, and go in His ways." In order assume a profile of holiness the Jew must heed all the commandments and must also walk in the way of G'd to emulate His characteristics. As the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos states, "Just as He is merciful you should be merciful; just as He is gracious you should be gracious etc." If the Jew is an embodiment of holiness, he will merit Divine protection and blessing because his essence declares G'd's glory, which is itself a sanctification of G'd's Name. As a result of this advanced state of holiness, "the Name of G'd will be upon you and the nations of the world will revere you." As the Gemara in Tractate

Yomah tells us that if one is a Torah scholar and behaves in an exemplary manner, he will be admired and esteemed by the masses who will say, "Blessed are the womb who bore him. Blessed is the Torah that he has studied." This is a sanctification of G'd's Name.

4. The Subtle Erosion of Spirituality

The Torah states in the portion of the curses (tochacha) "But it will be that if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G'd, to observe all His commandments and all His decrees that I command you today, then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...Because you did not serve Hashem, your G'd with joy (simcha) and wholeheartedness..." Despite the fact that one may have observed all of the mitzvos, one is nevertheless deserving of extreme curses and tragedies that are delineated by the Torah because he did not serve G'd with "joy and wholeheartedness." It seems that if one had performed the mitzvos meticulously, but did so begrudgingly and without joy, he is deserving of punishment. Although the mitzvah may not have been executed wholeheartedly, why should the punishment be so severe because the individual was lacking joy and a sense of good fortune?

The Torah tells us that G'd reacted in the most severe manner with the Jewish people behaved as ingrates (kafui tovah). After the Jewish people had benefited from the Manna, in the desert for forty years, they complained regarding the Manna saying, "...our soul is disgusted with this insubstantial food." The Manna nourished and sustained the Jewish people for forty years. It was completely absorbed in the innards without expelling any waste. After ingesting this miracle food for forty years they insisted to be sustained with regular food. In response to their complaints, G'd sent venomous serpents to bite them and there were many casualties. The Gemara in Tractate Avoda Zarah tells us that when the Jewish people complained regarding the Manna, G'd characterized the Jewish people by saying, "You are ingrates who descend from an ingrate." The Gemara explains that this is referring to them as the decedents of Adam, who was the original ingrate.

The Torah tells us that after Adam had transgressed the Word of G'd by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, G'd confronted him by asking, "Why did you eat from the tree of knowledge?" Adam responded by saying, "I ate because of the wife that You have given me." This implied that G'd was the cause of his failing. The reason G'd provided Adam with a wife was for her to be his helpmate- to assist him in achieving a state of spiritual perfection. However, rather than acknowledging the goodness that G'd had provided for him, Adam perceived it as a curse. Because of this, G'd called him an "ingrate (kafui tovah)."

The Gemara in Tractate Pesachim tells us that if one comes upon chametz (leavened product) on Pesach, he is not permitted to move it because it is a forbidden substance that has no relevance to the day (muktsa) However, one must cover it with a vessel to indicate that it is "off limits." The literal meaning of "kafeh" is "to turn over". Thus the meaning of "kafui tovah" is to turn over something that is innately good and beneficial and regard it as something detrimental and destructive. The Manna

was beneficial to the Jewish people on many levels. It did not produce any waste after one had ingested it. This was a great convenience because the Jewish people were commanded to keep their camp holy, which meant that if one needed to do his bodily functions he would have to go outside of the camp, which is considered an inconvenience and hardship. This was not the case with the Manna. Rather than appreciating the value of the gift that G'd had provided for the Jewish people, they saw it as a detriment. They believed that it would ultimately cause their death by exploding in their innards. They took the good and inverted it to be seen as something ominous and destructive.

One who distorts truth to the point of seeing something that is good as a detriment will also perceive the good as an infringement on his life. Rather than perceiving the service of G'd as a privilege and the ultimate opportunity to serve the Master of all existence, the individual experiences his service as an obligation and an infringement. The holiness of the Shabbos is regarded as "a semblance of the world to come," which is its essence. The individual who does not perceive it correctly sees the Shabbos as an extended period of time in which one is bound and restricted from one's own freedoms. This mindset emanates from the individual who processes things in a negative manner rather than perceiving things for what they are. Thus, he assumes the status of a bona fide ingrate. When one feels privileged when he performs the mitzvos, seeing them as opportunities, he will be inspired to do more, rather than being overwhelmed because they are an infringement on his freedoms. If one does not experience the service of G'd with joy and wholeheartedness he will ultimately come to transgress to accommodate his own personal needs. This individual has assumed the profile of an ingrate and is thus deserving of the curses stated in the Torah. The Torah is not saying that he is deserving of the curses because he did not serve G'd with joy, but rather, since he did not serve with joy it lead him to his ultimate spiritual demise.

5. The Culpability of the Amalekites (from Ki Seitzei)

The Torah states the positive commandment, "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt...when you were faint and exhausted, and he did not fear G'd...you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven." Chazal equate Amalek to the fool who had jumped into a scolding bath and was burned. Although initially, everyone was hesitant and afraid to enter the bath out of concern of being scalded; however, after the fool jumped into it, it had become cool for the others to enter. Identically, when the Amalekites, who were a wandering band of nomads, attacked the Jewish people (although they were defeated and incapacitated) they had dispelled the aura and reverence that the nations of the world had for the Jewish people. The nations were awed by the Jewish people after hearing about the miracles and wonders that had transpired at the time of the splitting of the Sea. The world stood in trepidation of them and would not consider attacking G'd's people. Although Egypt had the mightiest army in the world, they were destroyed as a result of the Sea closing upon them. However, the Amalekites were not awed by the miraculous events that had saved the Jewish people from their pursuers. The attack of the

Amalekites against the Jewish people was an indication and confirmation that they did not have the capacity to appreciate or understand the Omnipotence and Infinite Power of G'd.

The Jewish people, being G'd's chosen, were to be the medium through which the nations of the world would revere G'd. However, as a result of the insensitivity of the Amalekites, their special aura of holiness was dispelled and thus their value was negated. This is the reason G'd said, "My Throne is not be complete until the Amalekites are obliterated from under the heavens." As long as there is a representation of Amalek in existence G'd's Presence will be obscured from mankind. Until they are obliterated from under the heavens it will not be possible for one to have a full recognition and sense of G'd's Dominion and Majesty in existence.

Malbim explains that there are many reasons nations go to war. A nation may wage war to defend itself when it feels threatened. A nation may go to war for the sake of land acquisition. A nation may go to war for the sake of its religious beliefs, a holy war. However, the basis for the attack of the Amalekites against the Jewish people was unrelated to any of these reasons. They did not attack the Jewish people for the purpose of defending themselves because the verse states, "(they attacked you when) you were faint and exhausted." Their attack was not for the sake of land acquisition because the verse states, "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way..." The Jewish people at that time had no land. Amalek did not attack the Jewish people for the sake of their religious beliefs because they did not believe in any supreme power or deity. Therefore, the only reason they attacked the Jewish people was because they could not tolerate G'd's Presence in existence. The Jewish people, being His Chosen, were thus attacked. It was a direct affront to G'd. Therefore, He said that they must be obliterated from under the heavens.

The Torah states, "cursed is the one who does not uphold the Torah." Does this mean if one violates any of the commandments of the Torah, he should be cursed? Rabbeinu Yonah in the Gates of Repentance explains that the verse is referring to one who willingly accepts 612 mitzvos of the 613 mitzvos upon himself. However, this individual chooses to reject one of the mitzvos for his own reasons. He believes that it does not have any relevance to him. The claim against this individual is not that he does not observe and fulfill one of the 613 mitzvos, but rather he believes that he has the right to pick and choose what has relevance to his own life. This person's position is equivalent to an act of insubordination. This is similar to a slave, who is a chattel, telling his master that he will obey everything that he is instructed to do except for one thing. Without question the slave deserves to be punished severely. Identically, the Jew who assumes this posture, is in essence defying G'd, Who is the Master of all. This behavior to a degree reflects the mindset of the Amalekites. They recognize that there is a G'd but choose to undermine His Dominion in existence. This is the reason the one who does not uphold the Torah deserves to be cursed. In contrast, the one who accepts the Torah in its entirety, although he may fail regarding its observance, he is deserving of blessing. Text Copyright © 2011 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and **[Torah.org](https://torah.org)**.

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