

FRUIT OF GRATITUDE

by Rabbi Dovid Green

This week's parsha is a lesson in thankfulness. The first topic is Bikurim. This is the commandment to bring from the first fruits of one's orchards and vineyards to the Sanctuary in Jerusalem as a gift to the Kohanim, G-d's dedicated servants. Upon arrival we give the fruits to the Kohein, and we make a declaration of thanks to G-d for giving us the Land of Israel. What is the Torah concept of thankfulness?

Conveniently enough we can understand this from the word Jew. The etymological root of the word Jew before its dilution through several countries of exile, is the name Yehudah. Yehudah was one of the twelve tribes of Israel who became one of the dominant tribes at the end of the First Temple Era approximately 2,500 years ago. Hence all Jews became referred to as Yehudim, the plural of Yehudah, even though they were still a conglomerate of several tribes.

Yehudah was born to Yaakov our Patriarch, and his wife Leah. Leah, being one of four wives, did not expect to have Yehudah, a fourth child*, and expressed her thanks and acknowledgement to G-d in the name she chose for him. The root of the word Yehudah is "thanks," or "acknowledgement." This is Yehudah's name, and this is his essence. As Rashi explains Leah felt "I've taken more than my portion."

Our steadfastness in clinging to G-d lies in our essence as "Yehudim." We are overwhelmed with indebtedness to G-d. There aren't enough megabytes to store the list of the kindnesses G-d bestows each of us in a single day. Just consider how many physiological processes have to work correctly in order to enable us to read this essay! On an even deeper level we trust that even the things which are apparently bad are for an ultimate good, and are nevertheless far outweighed by the apparent good which we receive.

Consequently we want to give something back to G-d. We know, and of course He knows that we can never repay Him. That's how He set up the world. Still He wants us to always be cognizant of our "debt" and act as one who fervently wishes he was able to reciprocate.

This is the mitzvah of Bikurim; first fruits. It is our recognition and thankfulness that behooves us to return to G-d the first and best of what He gave us.

Don't think it's small and insignificant to give some small gift of fruit to G-d. The midrash writes that Bikurim is one of the things which justifies the creation of the world. The 19th century Chassidic

leader known as the Sfas Emes explains the midrash. "Certainly G-d is able to create the world in a way that everyone would clearly recognize the greatness of His kingdom. But G-d (already) has millions of worlds (in which that can be accomplished). Rather, G-d wants that there should be a testimony in the world that He created it, and that testimony justifies it's entire creation, even if there exists those who deny it." View it as a small shining light in a vast darkness.

Through our Torah study, performance of commandments, and prayer, we give testimony to G-d's existence and supremacy. This is justification enough to create the world despite all the injustice which is perpetrated by irresponsible people who we share the earth with.

This month, Elul, is the month of introspection. Rosh Hashana will be here soon. Every year G-d makes decrees which position the world in its place in bringing about the ultimate purpose of creation. Rosh Hashana is a day of judgement for this reason. Each year G-d examines the world as a whole, and each person individually in his contribution to bringing about the purpose of creation. G-d makes the necessary "adjustments" which guide everything to its individual and communal fulfillment. All subsequent world events for "good" or "bad" are based on this decision process.

In Elul the Jew traditionally asks himself, "did I contribute to the justification of creation, or did I detract from it? How can I personally reposition my direction in life, even in small ways, to be a contributor?" Together with this we also know that this is a time when G-d is especially predisposed to listen to our prayers and is ready and willing to help us in our positive endeavors. With the knowledge of the inner workings of this very special time, let us grab the opportunity and become part of a very spectacular process of justifying creation.

Good Shabbos!

*For the sake of brevity Leah's reasoning for this has not been stated.

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