

# A LESSON IN RESTRAINT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This week's Torah reading, Ki Savo, begins with the mitzvah of Bikkurim, the commandment to bring the first fruits of the field to the Beis HaMikdash, the Holy Temple. *"And it will be, when you enter the land that Hashem your G-d gives you as an inheritance... and you shall take the first of every fruit of the ground... and you shall put it in a basket, and go to the place that Hashem your G-d will choose to make His name rest there. (26:1-2)"* The first fruits are brought from the seven species for which Eretz Yisrael is famed: Wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

When a land-owner notices that the first fruit of any of the aforementioned kind begin to ripen in his field or orchard, he ties a thread around it to mark it as Bikkurim. He then waits until the various kinds of fruits have fully ripened, to take them together to the Beis HaMikdash.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevochim (Guide to the Perplexed) explains that one of the benefits of Bikkurim is to strengthen our self-control. It is very tempting for the farmer, having toiled for many months, to finally partake in the first ripe fruits of his crop. Instead, the Torah obligates him to refrain, and reserve it for Hashem.

Normally, we think of the concept of "refraining from that which is permissible" as something reserved for only the most holy and pious individuals. "Kedushah" - the term used by the Torah to describe abstinence and restraint from indulgence - is not often thought of as a goal toward which every Jew should strive.

The Torah, however, disagrees. The mitzvah of "Kedoshim tiyu - you shall be holy, (Vayikra 19:2)" applies to every Jew, from Sage to simpleton. Ramban (ibid.) explains that this mitzvah requires, "Lekadeish atzmecha be-mutar lach - that we sanctify ourselves [by refraining from even] that which is permissible."

In explanation of the Ben Sorer u-Moreh (the Wayward Son, who is killed for having seemingly done very little), Ramban explains that he is put to death not for what he has done, but because he has demonstrated a total inability to separate himself from his desires. His actions have begun to take the fatal but inevitable step, crossing over the delicate line between that which is permissible and that which is forbidden. One who submits completely to his desires, who fails to adhere to the Torah's standard of "Kedoshim tiyu," will eventually stray further than we could ever imagine.

Having arrived with his fruits, the bringer of Bikkurim then recites what is known as Mikra Bikkurim - The Bikkurim Speech. (26:5) "My father [Yaakov] descended to Egypt, and sojourned there, few in

number. And there he became a nation, great, strong, and numerous." What is the connection between the Jewish nation's sojourn in Egypt, and the mitzvah of Bikkurim?

Regarding the Egyptian exile, we find seemingly contradictory statements in the words of our Sages. On the one hand, we are told that the Jews "insulated themselves" from engaging in immoral relationships with the Egyptians. We also find that (Shemos Rabbah 1:1), "they were redeemed (from Egypt) because they did not change their names, their language, and their dress." Seemingly, the Jews of Egypt lived as "full fledged Yidden!" - they spoke Jewish, dressed Jewish, and married only nice Jewish boys and girls.

On the other hand, we are taught that when the Jews were taken out of Mitzrayim, they had already descended to the "forty-ninth" of the fifty "gates of spiritual contamination." Had they remained any longer, they would have descended to the "fiftieth gate," from where their removal would have proved impossible (this is one of the reasons that Hashem took them out before the appointed time).

How can these seemingly contradictory statements be true - That they were both thoroughly "Jewish" and separated from the Egyptians, yet they had become contaminated by the deepest depths of impurity?

Perhaps, however, the answer lies in the concept of "Kadeish atzmecha be-mutar lach - Sanctify yourself with that which is permissible." The Jews had descended to such a deep level of tum'ah by constantly indulging themselves with whatever their hearts desired - provided it was within the realms of (what then constituted) halachah. They were so steeped in material pleasure, and charmed by the allure of Egyptian culture, that even though externally they took on the appearance of "heimishe" Jews, internally their souls were almost completely cut off from Hashem. (Nesivos Shalom, Ki Setze p. 137) Indeed, from such impurity it is extremely difficult to escape - for since all one's actions are halachically acceptable, one finds no inherent wrong in what he's doing.

Perhaps this is why the bringer of Bikkurim invokes the Egyptian exile, as if to say: I have not made the mistake of my forefathers in Egypt - I have exercised self-control and refrained from indulging in the first of my fruits. I control my desires - my desires don't control me.

When Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur arrive, we will focus on repenting for our sins and wrongdoings. Beforehand, during the month of Elul, it is imperative that we examine not only our sins, but even the "grey-area" of permissibility. Do we exercise restraint and self-control even within the realm of heter (permissible), or are we controlled by our desires? Are our minds attuned to the level of kedushah to which the Torah wants every Jew to strive, or have our senses become dulled by the constant and incessant pursuit of material bliss and sensory satisfaction? Only by using Elul to re-energize our spirituality through the mitzvah of "Kedoshim tihyu" and "kadeish atzmecha be-mutar lach" will we be able to properly repent and reconnect during the approaching Days of Awe and Judgement.

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