

BIKURIM: CULTIVATING OUR CONNOISSEURSHIP

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

When you come to the Land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you as an inheritance, occupying and settling it, you shall take the first of every fruit of the ground produced by the Land... place it in a basket, and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose to make His presence rest there... And you shall call out and say before Hashem, your G-d, [Lavan] the Aramaean [wanted to] destroy my ancestor [Yaakov], and he descended to Egypt, yet there he became a great, powerful, and populous nation. The Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and placing heavy work upon us. We cried out to Hashem, G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice... [26:1-6]

Why does the Torah select the mitzvah of Bikurim, the presentation of the first fruits, as the subject of this emotional declaration? We don't find such proclamations in connection to any other mitzvos. Also, where do we find that Lavan sought to destroy Yaakov? He did give him a hard time, switched the brides, and switched his compensation many times - but to destroy him? And how is all this connected to the backbreaking labour of our ancestors in Egypt?

The professional food-taster makes his living on his tastebuds. Just as the surgeon guards his fingers from ill-treatment, the food-taster must protect his tastebuds from foods that dull their sensitivity to the many flavours and seasonings he must detect and analyze.

There are two main pitfalls of which the food-taster must be wary: He must be careful not to eat foods that are so spicy or pungent that they dull his ability to taste other tastes. And he must be hungry enough to be able to enjoy his food.

David Ha-melech says (Tehillim 34:9), "Taste! And you will see that Hashem is good." If we want to 'taste' the goodness of Torah and mitzvos, we must likewise be careful not to ruin our spiritual tastebuds. We must be careful not to sin, because sins soil our neshamos and violate our ability to taste and enjoy the metaphysical. And secondly, even if not sinning, we must be aware of the possibility of becoming so saturated and inundated by physical pleasures that - like the food-taster whose belly is already stuffed - there is no room left to enjoy the sweet treasures of the Torah. [Based on Mishlei Yaakov of the Dubner Maggid, Mashal 139]

When we picture the glutton - surrounded with food, drink, and physical indulgences - it is not difficult to imagine that it would be difficult for him to cultivate a sense for more refined pleasures.

But there are other, more insidious dangers that are just as, if not more, poisonous to our sensitivity to the sublime. The desire to accumulate wealth, and the erroneous feeling that, "My hands and my strength have produced all this," have the potential to sever a Jew's bond with the Almighty and destroy his ability to experience the ethereal.

This was Lavan's plan. By having Yaakov work for fourteen years for his wives, and by subsequently promising him wealth and continually changing his compensation, Lavan hoped his ultra-orthodox son-in-law would trade the soul for the silver spoon. That his mind would become so preoccupied with making a living that he'd forget his desire for the spiritual, his taste for the refined having been congested and clogged by the crude trappings of material success.

The Aramaean tried to destroy my desire. The word avi - my father - can also mean 'my desire.' The Lavan's of the world are always there to seduce us with their promises of wealth, fame, and happiness. "All it takes is hard work," they say. And maybe they really will make us rich - but at what price?

This too was the plan of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He, of course, didn't promise wealth. But he knew the shpiel: Inundate them with hard work, and they'll have no time, no patience, and no desire for anything else.

Our ancestors were smarter than that. They knew that it isn't the hard work per se that does the damage, but the attitude. One can work hard, and make a lot of money, yet never for a moment forget that it is Hashem Who gives him success, and never lose sight of his desire to taste the sweetness of the Torah. Someone once mused, "It is said that wealth corrupts. In fact, it's wealth that attracts the corruptible. The thinking man is attracted to things nobler than wealth."

The Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and placing heavy work upon us. They wanted to make us forget Hashem, but we didn't: We cried out to Hashem, G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice...

This, explains the Ma'or Va-Shamesh, is the concept behind Bikurim. After plowing, sowing, and caring for our produce, we are finally ready to enjoy our fruits - to reap the benefits of our hard work. It is then that we are most vulnerable to fall prey to the destructive forces of pride and self-importance. This is why it is so important that we dedicate the very first fruits of our labour to Hashem, immediately recognizing that without His constant assistance, we would have nothing. That prayer is more important than planting, and Torah takes precedence over threshing. We bring our fruits to the Holy Temple, and in our declaration, we mention Lavan and the Egyptians, who likewise thought they could distract us by satiating us with the physical, leaving no room for loftier goals.

This is why, he writes, Chazal say (Kesubos 105b), "Whoever brings a gift to a Torah scholar is as if he has brought Bikurim to the Beis Ha-mikdash." By seeing that Torah scholars are the beneficiaries of his wealth, the man-of-means is not simply being benevolent; he is recognizing that it is not his prowess that has brought him success, but rather the merit of those who study Torah. He expresses his desire to have a share in the true pleasures of life, and not to be led astray by seductive promises of material bliss.

"I don't know," said R' Mordechai of Lechovitch zt"l (Toras Avos pg. 191), "why I should deserve any reward in the World to Come. I would give everything for the pleasure I have from doing a mitzvah!" While we should be thankful for the extreme level of comfort that Western society offers us, we must be wary of its potential to distract us from higher aspirations, and dull our passion for the Torah.

Have a good Shabbos.

***** *This week's publication has been sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Yitzchak Goldstein, in memory of Sheindel Nechama bas Shmuel Goldstein (22 Elul). And in honour of the Bar Mitzvah of their son David this Shabbos. And by Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Woolf in memory of her mother, Chaya bas R' Avraham Ezra (14 Elul). And by Mr. Yehdah Scharf and his wife, in honour of the wedding of their daughter, Aviva, to Dovid Aber.* ***** Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**