

BIKKURIM - BASKET CASE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you as an inheritance; you will possess it and dwell in it. You shall take the first of every fruit of the ground... and you shall place it in a basket, and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose... The Kohen shall take the basket from your hand, and lay it before the Altar of Hashem, your G-d. Then you shall declare before Hashem, your G-d, 'An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and lived there—few in number—yet there he became a nation, great, strong, and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us... Then we cried out to Hashem, G-d of our forefathers; Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction... and He took us out of Egypt with a strong hand... and brought us to this Land... and now behold: I have brought the first fruit of the ground that you have given me, O Hashem.'" (26:1-9)

Where, asks the Gemara (Bava Kama 92b), does the expression "poverty pursues the poor" come from? One of the answers the Gemara gives is that its source is found in the mitzvah of Bikkurim (the first fruits). The Mishna (Bikkurim 3:8) teaches that while the wealthy presented their first fruits on trays of gold and silver, the poor brought theirs in simple woven baskets. The Kohen who accepted the offering would return the rich donors' trays, but not the baskets of the poor. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

"Why," the holy R' Duvid'l of Tolna zt"l once asked his disciples, "did the Kohen not keep the gold and silver trays? The wealthy men could easily have afforded to leave them for the Temple, where they would no doubt have been put to good use, bringing honour to their donor. And what was to be gained by keeping the poor man's simple straw basket? Did the Holy Temple have a need for such rudimentary implements?"

None of the disciples seemed to have an answer to the question he felt was worth sharing. "Allow me, then," said R' Duvid, "to answer my question. Some time ago, my plans were such that I was to travel to a certain city for Shabbos. In that city lived a number of my disciples. Of course I sent them a message to let them know I was coming."

"Among them was a certain, impoverished chassid. Hearing that I was going to be coming, he was full of joy and anticipation to have me as a guest in his town. But there was one thing that bothered him very much. He did not have the means to give me even the humblest pidyon nefesh (it was customary that when a disciple would ask his rebbe to pray for him, he would accompany his request with a donation to the rebbe; this was called pidyon nefesh). 'How could he approach his rebbe,' he kept asking himself, 'with empty hands?'"

"'What are you so worried about,' his wife asked him, 'there are still a few weeks until the rebbe arrives—if we start saving now, we can have a small but respectable pidyon by the time the rebbe gets here.' And so they began saving; here a penny, there a nickel or even a dime. Their donation was indeed small, but it was given with great joy and humility."

"In that same city, I have another disciple, one with the means to give a sizeable donation. He needed not worry about how he would come up with the funds for a pidyon. Yet this chassid was also worrying. In fact, from the moment he heard I was coming, his mood had turned sour. 'Everyone knows,' he kept telling himself, 'that I have money. I can't appease the rebbe with a standard pidyon like all the rest... No! Everyone expects me to give some hefty sum—who knows how much money they think I have. If I don't give something really substantial, I'll be the laughing stock!'"

"In the end, of course, he did in fact give a very fine donation. I, likewise, had no choice to accept it, even if it was given with a sour face and a lack of true generosity. Practically speaking, his funds went a lot further than the poor couple's meagre contribution—but if you ask me which donation I enjoyed receiving, well that's a completely different story."

"I have a feeling," continued R' Duvid, "that a similar scenario was taking place when it came time to bring one's first fruits up to the Beis Ha-mikdash (Holy Temple). The simple farmer, when he noticed the first of his crop beginning to ripen on the branches, was full of joy and anticipation. Soon he would be able to travel to Yerushalayim and give his simple but heartfelt thanks to Hashem for another successful harvest. 'But what will I bring my offering in?' he asked his wife. 'We don't have the means to buy even the simplest basket or tray?' 'Don't worry,' she would console him, 'we have a willow tree. We can clip some of its branches, and use them to weave our own basket. It might not be as fancy and professional as what they sell, but I'm sure we can do a fine job.'"

"Of course the wealthy farmer, with numerous fields and vineyards, also had to do the mitzvah of Bikkurim. When his farm-aides would come and tell him that the fruits were almost ripe, he knew he had a duty to perform. 'Already time to go to Yerushalayim, again?' he thought to himself. 'It feels like I was just there! What can you do—a duty's a duty. Okay, now what should I put my fruits in? Some old straw basket? It just won't do! Now last year, when Moshe brought his Bikkurim on a silver tray, now that brought some oohs and aahs from the simple folk. Turned some heads, I'll tell you. Well I can't bring a silver one—Moshe already did that. I'll have my goldsmith cast me a regal tray of gold—yes that's sure to wow them!'"

"So you see, the poor man's woven basket, presented with joy and generosity, that was something which the Kohen could accept along with the obligatory fruits. It was a gift of the heart, and would surely find a place of honour, if humble, to serve in the Beis Ha-mikdash. The rich man's tray, albeit grandiose, was presented begrudgingly—and to wow the audience. Such a contribution had no place in the Holy Temple. Despite the rich man's earnest protestations, the Kohen insisted he take it home with him."

Rashi writes (26:16) that after the first fruits were presented, a Heavenly voice would call out, "Just like you brought your first fruits this year, so may it be next year!" One might conjecture that this blessing was only given to those whose Bikkurim were brought with joy and generosity. Why would the voice bless fruits given begrudgingly that, "so shall it be next year?"

In the declaration made with the giving of the first fruits, the declaration made by their donor is called *aniyah*—to proclaim. The same word-root also means poor, and also means humble. Perhaps this offers us a novel interpretation of the above Gemara (so as not to curse the poor man with eternal poverty): "How do we know that the declaration (*aniyah* 'Thus may it be next year') pursues the humble (*anyusa*—those who have presented their offerings, large or small, with joy and humility)? We see it from the mitzvah of Bikkurim—for the Kohen gladly accepted the poor man's humble basket, while refusing to take the rich man's lavish tray.

Elul is a time when Jews are occupied with special prayers, selichos, and Tehillim. The words of our mouth, when spoken to Hashem, are called our *nedava*/donation (see Tehillim/Psalms 119:108 "Nidvos pi r'tzeh na Hashem"). We must likewise be careful that our prayers are offered as heartfelt words of praise and supplication, and not let tefillah become an exercise in page-turning and getting to the end.

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