

SWEET TASTE OF SUCCESS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the mitzvot that is described in this week's Torah reading is that of bikurim - the offering of the first-harvested fruit on the premises of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish farmer, after surviving the arduous task of planting and harvesting his precious and hard-won crops, brings the fruit of his labors to the kohen in the great and holy Temple in Jerusalem. There, upon handing over his basket of bikurim to the kohen and the altar, the Jewish farmer recites a prayer of thanksgiving and hope. But the language of that prayer, at first glance, appears to be out of place with the ceremony of bikurim that it is meant to commemorate. Instead of the expected and logical thanks for the rain, the sunlight and the bounty of the fertile earth, the prayer is a short review of ancient Jewish history. Instead, it tells of the travails of our founding forefathers, the descent of the tribes of Israel into Egyptian bondage, their eventual redemption from that bondage and their entry into the Holy Land, and the struggle of Israel to establish itself in its promised land. And then the prayer almost abruptly switches to the acknowledgment of God's bounty in helping the farmer bring this first-harvested fruit offering to the Temple. What is the import of this construction of the prayer? Why the history lesson? What are we to make of this recitation of the prayer of bikurim?

People are justifiably proud of their accomplishments. After all, one's efforts and talents, time and struggle, are of no minor consequence in one's life. Many times, we feel that this is perhaps all we have to show for our years on earth. Therefore, there is a human tendency to view one's achievements in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, without being able to place the true accomplishment in realistic perspective. In life, individual or communal, nothing takes place in a vacuum. There is always a past to our efforts and struggles, as we hope there will be a future to them as well. If we do not somehow see ourselves in the light of that past, we really cannot be aware of the true nature of our accomplishment in the present.

The disregard of the past is a common illness in twentieth century life. Much of secular society and secular Jewry blithely ignores the lessons of our past and of general history at large. Same-sex marriages, blind pagan worship of environment and nature, widespread use of addictive drugs, a disproportionate emphasis in life on sports and unwarranted adulation of athletes and the strong, feel-good and undemanding moral standards, all were staple components of the downfall of society in the Classical Era of Greece and Rome. But our world blithely ignores all of the lessons of the past. We see our society as being new and progressive, existing in a vacuum, cleverer by far than all generations that preceded us. That is the false reality that the Torah warns about in this prayer of the bikurim service. Therefore, before the Jewish farmer, proud of his achievements and confident of his

future and success, proclaimed his personal victory in the holy Temple of God, he first had to recite and remember a basic lesson of Jewish history. He had to admit that life and society did not begin with him, that his "first harvest" - bikurim - was preceded by many other such "first harvests." This sobering assessment of life is realism - uncomfortable, disturbing, thought provoking, challenging and valuable. The Torah prescribes this realism as the gateway to wisdom.

We should all treasure our accomplishments in life. We should love and value our children and family. We can be proud of our companies, awards, enterprises and commercial successes. But we should be wise and cautious and remember our past in assessing our present. The necessity to avoid hubris and be realistic about our achievements is the key to true human success. That may be accomplished by studied knowledge and appreciation of our historic past.

Shabat Shalom.
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