

UNDERSTANDING A BOLD PROCLAMATION: "I'VE DONE MY PART; NOW, G-D, YOU DO YOURS"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #1043 – Checking Mezzusos: What Do You Do While They Are Down? Good Shabbos!

Parshas Ki Savo contains the "Confession of Tithing" (*Vidui Ma'asros*): "When you have finished tithing your produce of the third year, the year of the tithe, and you will have given to the Levite, the convert, the orphan, and the widow, and they will have eaten in your cities and will have been satisfied..." [Devarim 26:12]. The Torah specifies a three year "*ma'aser* cycle" within the seven year "*shmita* cycle". The first two years of the "*ma'aser* cycle", a person gives both "the first tithe" (which goes to the Levite) and "the second tithe" (which is separated and consumed by the owner in Jerusalem). In the third year of the three year cycle the "second tithe" is replaced by what is called "the tithe for the poor" (*ma'aser ani*).

At the end of the three year cycle, a person must recite the "Confession of Tithing" in which he makes a short speech attesting to the fact that he has fulfilled all the *mitzvos* associated with tithing: "then you shall say before Hashem, your G-d, 'I have eliminated the holy things from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow, according to the entire commandment that You commanded me; I have not transgressed any of Your commandments, and I have not forgotten.'" [Devarim 26:13]

The "confession" continues: "I have not eaten of it in my intense mourning; I have not consumed it in a state of impurity, and I have not given of it to a dead person; I have listened to the voice of Hashem, my G-d; I have acted according to everything You have commanded me." [Devarim 26:14]

After testifying, as it were, that he has abided by all the Divine regulations regarding distribution of the tithes and maintained their sanctity, the Jewish farmer concludes: "Gaze down from Your holy abode, from the heavens and bless Your people Israel, and the ground that You gave us, as You swore to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." [Devarim 26:15]

Rashi makes a startling observation in interpreting this last statement of the "*Vidui Ma'aser*": "We have done what You decreed upon us; You do what is incumbent upon You to do, for You have said, 'If you will go in (the way of) My commandments... then I will provide your rains in their time' [Vayikra

26:3-4]". This is a rather bold statement: "I did my part, G-d, now You do Yours!"

There is almost no other mitzvah (with perhaps one exception which we will discuss) where a person makes such a proclamation. We do not get up at the Seder and say, "Master of the Universe, we ate *matzah*, we ate *marror*, we drank 4 cups of wine, we reclined. I did my part, now You do Yours!" We do not find this by *matzah*, by *shofar*, by *Tefillin*. What kind of business is this to say, "I did what I was supposed to do, not it's Your turn, G-d"?

We only find this idea here...and in one other place. The average Jewish person might not be able to guess where this is. However, *Kohanim* should be familiar with this kind of expression. At the end of *Birchas Kohanim* (the Priestly Benediction) the *Kohanim* recite the following prayer [based on Sotah 39a]: "Master of the Universe, we have done what You have decreed upon us, now may You also do as You have promised us". In fact they conclude this prayer by citing the very *pasuk* recited at the conclusion of the "*Vidui Ma'aser*" recitation: "Look down from Your sacred dwelling, from the heavens, and bless Your people, Israel, and the earth which You have given us – just as You have sworn to our fathers – a land that flows with milk and honey."

These are the only two times throughout the entire scope of Jewish practice that we come across such a phenomenon. This is peculiar. What does it mean?

The Chasam Sofer in *Drashos haChasam Sofer* asks another question regarding this particular expression of prayer. The Talmud asks [Sanhedrin 93b] why a book of *Tanach* [the Bible] was not named for Nechemia. (In *Tanach* the "Book of Nechemia" is incorporated into the "Book of Ezra" and is called by that name - as spelled out in Bava Basra 14b). The Talmud answers that this was "punishment" for Nechemia's proclaiming: "Remember in my favor, O my G-d, all that I did for this people" [Nechemia 5:19]. Variations of this idea appear 4 times in the "Book of Nechemia" [Including 3 additional times in the last chapter of the *sefer*: 13:14; 13:22; and 13:31].

This proclamation: "Remember what I did, I did so much" – as if to say "I have it coming to me; I deserve reward" -- says the Gemara in Sanhedrin -- caused Nechemia, as great as he indeed was, to not have a *sefer* of the *Tanach* named for him.

The Chasam Sofer asks – what difference is there between what Nechemia said and what is said at the end of *Vidui Ma'aser* and by the *Kohanim* following the priestly blessing? Nechemia, if anything, was more circumspect in his statement. All Nechemia asks is that he be remembered for the good. The statement in *Vidui Ma'aser* is presented almost as a quid pro quo demand! Yet, because of that, Nechemia lost his immortality to a certain extent. What is the difference?

I heard a beautiful answer to the Chasam Sofer's question from the Tolner Rebbe, shlita, which in turn helps us understand the entire concept of "we have done what You decreed upon us...."

The last *pasuk* of *Vidui Ma'aser*, prior to the request "Gaze down from Your holy abode..." says: "...I have listened to the voice of Hashem, my G-d; I have acted according to everything You have

commanded me." On the words "I have acted according to everything you have commanded me." Rashi comments, "I have rejoiced; and have brought joy to others with it." Essential to this declaration is the testimony that in carrying out the *mitzvos* of the Almighty, "I made happy the lives of the convert, the orphan, and the widow" – the downtrodden of *Klal Yisrael*, the "forgotten people", the people who sometimes do not have a mouth to speak for themselves. "I took care of them."

It was not merely "a meal for his stomach" [see Rambam Hilchos Yom Tov 6:18], such that he ate well. No. "I rejoiced and I brought joy to others with it." The farmer is testifying to G-d: "I took care of Your people".

Rashi explains this concept at the end of *Parshas Re'eh* on the *pasuk*: "You shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d – you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, the Levite who is in your cities, the convert, the orphan, and the widow who are among you – in the place where Hashem your G-d will choose to rest His Name there." [Devarim 16:11]:

"The Levite, the convert, the orphan, and the widow are My four people, who correspond to your four people – your son, your daughter, your slave, and your maidservant – If you will make Mine happy, I will make yours happy." Rashi explains that the Almighty has made a pledge: You take care of mine, and I will take care of yours. You are worried about "your four people" and I am worried about "four people". You take care of mine and I will take care of yours.

This is why the Tithing Confession is different. When the Jewish farmer can get up and proclaim, "I rejoiced and I brought joy to others" (*samachti v'simachti*), then he has a guarantee from the Master of the Universe that he will be rewarded with blessing. The farmer is not boldly and disrespectfully challenging the Almighty, he is merely "reminding Him" of the promise He has made.

Matzah, *Tefillin*, and all other *mitzvos* do not include any such prior commitment. However, regarding worrying about the unfortunates in the community – the people who because of the vagaries of life have been dealt a raw hand – Hashem says: "You make those people happy and your reward is 'on Me!'" This is a Divine guarantee.

The Tolner Rebbe says that this can explain *Birchas Kohanim* as well. The Beis Yosef paskens [Tur Chapter 128 *Hilchos Birchas Kohanim*] that an unmarried Kohen cannot *duchen* [participate in the Priestly Blessings]. We do not accept this view as normative practice. However, this ruling follows the opinion of the Mordechai and the *Shibalei haLeKet*, who base it on the idea that "one who is without a wife is without joy in his life" (*ha'sharui b'lo isha sharui b'lo simcha*). In order to invoke the Priestly Blessing, a person must experience internal happiness. The blessing the *Kohanim* are invoking is that the Almighty should give the Jewish people blessing "*ad bli dye*" (without limit - unbounded blessing). A person who is not married, the Talmud states, is living without *simcha* [Yevamos 62b]. Such a person cannot convey the intensity of blessing that *Birchas Kohanim* is meant to invoke.

The *Kohen*, when he gets up on the platform to recite the Priestly Blessing, must put himself in the

mindset that he is in a joyful state of mind. Rav Matisyahu Solomon once pointed out that the prayer recited by the *Kohanim* after having recited the *Birchas Kohanim* contains a strange expression: "We have done that which you decreed upon us". What kind of "decree" are we talking about? It does not seem to be so harsh – they get to stand up in front of the congregation, they get to sing, they offer beautiful blessings. What is this talk about a "decree"?

The answer is that yes, it is a decree. "You the Kohen may be in the doldrums. You the Kohen may have just lost a fortune. Yet you need to get up in a state of joy and say 'May G-d bless you with wealth, with completeness (*shleimus*), and with Divine Protection!'" You have to bring joy to the hearts of the people."

Therefore, says the Tolner Rebbe, in *Birchas Kohanim* also we find the concept that they need to rejoice (*v'Samachta*) and they need to cause other to rejoice (*v'simachti es acheirim*). Consequently, here too, they can invoke this same Divine guarantee as we can by the Tithing Confession: You take care of Mine and I will take care of yours!

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