

PARSHAS KI SAVO - UNDESERVEDLY DESERVING

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Undeservedly Deserving¹

You shall come to whomever will be the kohein in those days, and you shall say to him, "I declare today to Hashem your G-d that I have come to the land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us." The kohein shall take the basket from your hand, and lay it before the altar of Hashem your G-d. Then you shall call out and say, "An Aramean close to ruin was my father..."

What, precisely, is the alternative to bringing the bikurim to the kohein "in those days?" If he wanted, could he bring them to a kohein of the past or the future?

We've been here once before. The Torah earlier used the same phrase regarding seeking out halachic rulings from judges[2]. In both cases, the Sifri offers the same approach. Don't be dismissive of the leaders that are available to you. Scoffers may reject them, saying "We remember when our people had real Torah giants, not like the lesser lights of today. How can anyone be expected to content himself with our contemporaries, when we remember what real greatness was?" Despite any tendency to think this way, that Torah tells us that we must avail ourselves of the judges and kohanim with whom we live.

Begrudgingly, we can make peace with accepting the decisions of judges, even if they do not hold a candle to gedolim of the past. We realize that Hashem Himself wishes the rules of Torah to be applied to all times. If all people could demand to go to Moshe Rabbenu for answers, or to Hillel, or R. Akiva, or R. Akiva Eiger, or even to the gadol hador of their generation, we would have legal chaos. We understand that a legal system given over to human beings will show uneven distribution of insight and greatness. It is Hashem's Will that we satisfy ourselves with competence, and not demand greatness for every question that arises.

The role of the kohein, we would think, is different. We go to the beis ha-mikdash seeking illumination and guidance. If the kohanim leave us uninspired, what's the point of going? If you come to Yerushalayim expecting to hear the song of the angels, but find that the kohein is tone-deaf, is the trip really worth it?

The Sifri's answer is a resounding "yes!"

To understand why, we need to examine what happens when a person brings his bikurim to Yerushalayim.

The phrase "Hashem your G-d" can be read in two ways. We can read it as a directive from Hashem to those bringing the bikurim. "Your" would then mean the G-d of Klal Yisrael: all of you landowners, be sure to bring your first fruits and place them before the altar of the G-d of Israel. But it can also be read as referring back to the speech already begun by the owner of the bikurim. As he hands the fruit to the kohein, he tells him that he, together with the kohein, now stand ready to place the basket in front of the mizbeach of "your" G-d, meaning the G-d of the kohein. (Indeed there are several examples in Tanach where a speaker refers to Hashem as the G-d of the person to whom he speaks, rather than referring to Hashem as the G-d of both of them. Shaul does this to Shmuel[3]; Chizkiyah to Yeshaya[4]).

Why would he talk about Hashem in such a way? If anything, he should feel especially close to Hashem, privileged to have been blessed by Him so that he is able to bring the first fruits of the harvest to Him in gratitude. Should he not be stressing "Hashem my G-d?" rather than as belonging to another?

Yes and no. Gratitude is a central theme of bikurim. The Torah, however, subtly weaves in another theme in this parshah, that of unreservedness. The recipient of beracha from Hashem can easily see himself as entitled to receive it, and free to do whatever he wants with it. Poised to offer his bikurim, the owner addresses this spiritual pitfall. He tells the kohein: "The trees that yielded this fruit do not really belong to me. They belong to Hashem, your G-d - you as representative of our entire people present and past. He did not give me the fruit because He chose me individually from all the billions of inhabitants of the globe. I understand that I am privileged because I am part of a people with which He entered into a covenant in the time of the avos. I occupy it because I am one of their descendents. I am therefore bound by all expectations placed upon those descendents. I declare not only my thanks, but my willingness to use these blessings in accordance with His plans and expectations."

The point is driven home by his next action. The two act in concert - the owner and the kohein. Together, they raise up and wave the fruit in all directions: up and down, to and fro. The fruit will not be squirreled away for the selfish enjoyment of the owner. He dedicates it to Hashem's Will (represented by His surrogate, the kohein), and applied all over, indeed to all of mankind.

If this analysis is correct, we have little trouble understanding the Sifri. Our expectation of the kohein is misplaced. His primary function is passive. He is a symbolic representation of the Will of Hashem, stretching from antiquity to the present. Surely, he must be "kosher" and follow the instructions of the avodah. If he doesn't, he cannot serve as a symbol. But he needn't have the warmth and effectiveness of Aharon ha-Kohein either. When an activity is symbolic, we are the ones who have to do the heavy lifting of understanding the symbolism and taking it to heart. The kohein can make it easier for us through his insight, his smile, his charm, his piety. That is all icing on the cake. He adequately does his job by simply being there in the role prescribed for him. Our job is to take the symbolism to heart[5]. We are the ones who must make the most of the lesson.

In fact, the less deserving the kohein, the more on target this parshah is. Standing before a kohein who cuts a much smaller figure than his ancestors did, the owner can address his speech not only to his own heart but to that of the kohein! "You and I together must declare that we owe all we are to an ancient covenant with our ancestors. We must understand and savor how Hashem took us from humble beginnings and brought us to this place." We both have much room to grow!

In the final analysis, the case for accepting the kohein of one's own generation is even more compelling than for accepting a contemporary judge. The latter involves some compromise, some watering down of legal standards from what we would want them to be. Accepting the kohein does not. We must simply be able to see him as an abstraction, as a symbol and open our hearts and minds to the rich and deep symbolism of Hashem's Torah.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 26:3-5
 2. Devarim 17:9
 3. Shmuel I 15:15; 21:30
 4. Melachim II 19:4
 5. This idea, of course, is central to the general approach of Rav Hirsch who sees so much of the detail of the mitzvos as conveying symbolic content, and claims that our task is to understand it.
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