

Parshat Ki Tavo: The Source of Self-Effacement

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Parshat Ki Tavo begins with the *mitzvah* of *bikurim*, bringing the first fruits to the *kohain* and dedicating them to Hashem. At the conclusion, the farmer prostrates himself before Hashem, a requirement unique to *bikurim*. The Shaarei Derech cites the *Midrash* that the world was created in the merit of three *mitzvot*, referred to as *reishit*, beginning, and for which there exists a Rosh Hashanah to commemorate the beginning of the world. They are *challah* (the first of your dough), tithes, and *bikurim*. What was so special about *bikurim*? The *Midrash Tanchuma* tells us that today, since we no longer have a *beit hamikdash* and *bikurim*, we have the *mitzvah* of praying three times a day instead. What is the connection? The *Meirosh Tzurim* mentions another rather cryptic association with this passage. *Perek Shirah* records the praise of the dog which is the verse alluding to this passage, "Come let us prostrate ourselves and bow down and bless Hashem our Maker." The *Moda Labinah* quoting the *Zohar* states that the key *mitzvah* of Rosh Hashanah is *Yoma Dedinah*, the Day of Judgment. While we understand that judgment is the essence of the day, how is that a *mitzvah*?

Rabbi Leff asks, why did the Torah command us to bring the first fruit instead of the best fruit? Because the first, the beginning, lays the foundation for all that is to follow, and like the foundation of a building, it must be without blemish if what follows is to be sustainable. If one wants to infuse sanctity into a project, one must begin with sanctity. As the *Tolna Rebbe* explains, although it appears that our work and nature have partnered to produce this fruit, all nature comes from Hashem. Therefore we dedicate the first fruits to Hashem so that all the rest of our endeavors will be equally holy. The *Shaarei Derech* citing the *Baal Haturim* notes that there is no letter *samech* in the entire passage of *bikurim*. The *samech* is a circular letter implying that nature makes things happen cyclically. Bringing *bikurim* to Hashem belies this philosophy and "gives back" to Hashem that which is rightfully His. What then is the connection between *bikurim* and prayer? Rabbi *Frieman* continues. We pray because even when all is well we have no guarantees that the status quo will continue. Everything can change in one

moment. We start our day with *Modeh Ani*, we continue with declaring that Hashem renews creation each day, and we daven two more times in the day. Dogs, extremely brazen creatures, still recognize their masters and obey their commands. They acknowledge Hashem's mastery over their very nature in the verse they sing to Hashem, writes the *Tzabeni Rav*. Since Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year, everything can change. Therefore one should approach it as one who is poor and downtrodden. As the *Sifsei Chaim* writes, if you want a good year, realize with full clarity that we have nothing, and we must beg anew for everything. We have no guarantees that what we have we will retain. We are completely dependent on Hashem. Therefore, writes the *Tiv Hatorah*, we should train ourselves to say, "*Im yirtzeh Hashem*," or, "*B'eizat Hashem*," – with God's will and His help, constantly in our conversations, because all could change in a moment. The *Talelei Chaim* reinforces this message. *Rosh* and *Reishit* mean not only head and beginning, but also source. On Rosh Hashanah we connect ourselves to our ultimate Source and are charged with revealing His presence in the world. It is the Day of Judgment when we have the ability to plug in to Hashem and recharge our batteries to do His will, for He is the One Who empowers us.

Perhaps we can better understand how our attitude on Rosh Hashanah can affect our lives by way of a parable from the *Matnas Chaim*. A boy was adopted by a man in the construction business. The father raised the boy with much love and gave him everything he needed. When the boy grew up, he decided he wanted to repay his father for all his kindnesses by building him a magnificent mansion. He presented his idea to his father who then gave him a letter to present at his warehouses giving him immediate access to all materials he requested at no cost. Other people waiting in line to fulfill their purchases had to pay full price for all their materials and were not only puzzled but also angry. After all, they did not know that all the materials this man was collecting were to be used for a home for the owner of the construction company himself. Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah we approach Hashem with the desire to coronate Him on earth and to do His bidding. We hope that in doing so, we will be granted all the blessings

necessary to accomplish our task.

Rabbi *Roberts* notes that the *Ramban* considered humility the greatest of all character qualities, and the *mitzvah* of *bikurim* is a model for humility. Although the farmer has invested so much into this crop, he nevertheless acknowledges that it all belongs to Hashem. The passage immediately preceding *bikurim* is *Parshat Zachor*, where we are commanded to remember how *Amalek* attacked us as we left Egypt. *Amalek* is also referred to as *reishit goyim*, the head, or chief, among nations. They were unafraid to challenge anyone, even God Who had already demonstrated His supremacy to every other nation. *Amalek* was the epitome of arrogance. Even their name is numerically equivalent to haughtiness, *ram*, both totaling 240. The Torah juxtaposes these two passages for us to note the contrast, and especially on Rosh Hashanah to distance ourselves from arrogance. We must recognize our own inadequacies to merit Divine grace. As Rabbi *Reiss* points out, when I pray before Hashem, it is because I realize my own nothingness and recognize that He is the Source of all. The essence of Rosh Hashanah and *Yom Kippur* is complete humility, writes the *Netivot Shalom*. That's why many have the custom to prostrate themselves fully and bow during *Aleinu* and the recitation of the *Avodah* as the *kohain* did in the *Beit Hamikdash* and as the farmer did when he brought the *bikurim*. We must efface the ego which stands between ourselves and Hashem. To this end, we substitute prayer three times daily for the *bikurim*. When we bow before Hashem, we are demonstrating our willingness to break our arrogance and acknowledge that our life energy comes from Hashem. The *Sifsei Chaim* notes that Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Teruah*, the day of sounding the broken notes of the *shofar*, for on this day we come before Hashem completely broken and humble. This is the proactive *mitzvah* of the day, notes the *Avodat Avodah*, to stand in humility before Hashem and accept His sovereignty over us. Perhaps a good way to incorporate this idea into our daily lives is to stop at the word *Melech* every time we say a *bracha* and to ponder the meaning of standing before the King. May we merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of revealed goodness and blessing.

Elul in our Times Part II

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb
Summary by Devora Kaye

The third step of *teshuva* is having a plan how to avoid the sin in the future. Simply saying, "I'll always be grateful and pleasant and happy is not going to do it." You have to have a route mapped out how to uproot the negativity. Once we've come to grips with what's wrong, experienced regret as opposed to guilt, and figured out a plan of action, we've accomplished *teshuva*, returning to who we could be.

A way to draw close to Hashem in *Elul* is to take time every day to do a life review, to tap into one's true desire to be different and good. The main thing Hashem wants is for us to be who we can be. Once we've figured out where we went wrong, we shouldn't go back there again. Our focus should be on now and the future. That's *ani l'dodi*. The other side is *v'dodi li*. Hashem wants to help. He's there for us and understands our tests. The act of doing *teshuva* gets us closer to Hashem than we would've, had we not sinned. The Maharal explains this with an allegory.

Imagine two people bound together by a rope. Someone cuts the rope and makes a knot. Now they're closer. They cut it again and make another knot, now they're even closer. Similarly, when you sin and distance yourself from Hashem you cut the rope. When you do *teshuva*, you tie it and you're now closer than

you ever were before. However, the place of the knot is weaker than the rest. So, if you failed in the past, don't test yourself again. Don't put yourself in impossible situations. Be good to yourself. Hashem want you to succeed. Don't take steps that are too big for you. Don't put yourself in the face of temptation.

Another way to get closer to Hashem is through *tefilah*. The beginning of *shemone esrei* tells us that Hashem is the source of everything and the one who is bringing us to where we need to go. The end tells us what he's done for us and gives us a chance to express our thanks. The middle blessings are about requests. We tell Hashem, "This is what I need and only you can give it to me." It can come through people but not from people. We ask Hashem for *daat*- the ability to know and to take what we know and let it touch our hearts. You cannot buy *chochma* or *binah* and if you don't have it, life is worthless. We ask Hashem for *teshuva*. Otherwise, we'd be locked into our mistakes. We ask Hashem to see our pain and our enslavement and that of the whole Jewish people. We ask Him for healing which can never be guaranteed or bought. It's all dependent on Him. We ask Him for sustenance. If we're not begging in the streets, it's because He's sustaining us. We ask Him to give us national redemption so that we can all come back to Him. We ask for true

judges to defeat evil and to count us among the *tzadikim* because their stories are a part of our heart. The more we let ourselves be inspired by the *tzadikim*, the more our merit and their merit are joined. The more we know who we're talking to, what Hashem has given us, and the more we express our reliance and dependence on Him, the closer we get to Him.

How does *tzedaka* change a person? *Tzedek* means justice. Hashem gives us the resources, energy, insight, and opportunities to use our money. A rich person must act as a teller in the bank. He needs some of the money, so do other people. People get attached to money because they see it as a representative and a reflection of their energy and capacity. They also have this fear that if they don't have money, they won't be able to get by. You should recognize that Hashem gave you what you need by your making the efforts to get it. He wants you to have the satisfaction, self-expression, and development of creativity and giving, that earning a living necessitates. If you think this way, you'll find yourself deglamorizing money. You'll recognize that it's good for you to make your efforts, but you could take it a step further and participate with Hashem in ruling His world by giving *tzedakah* which draws you close to Him. There are real *baalei tzedakah* who enjoy giving and that's something to aim towards.

Tehilim 91- Under G-d's Wing

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dr. Esther Shkop

Tehilim, Chapter 91 is found often in the Jewish liturgy. It was included in the *pesukei d'zimra* of *Shachrit* on *Shabbat* and the Holidays, in *kriat shema* before going to sleep, and in *Maariv* of *Motzai Shabbat* as a prayer for the new week. It's also recited at funerals as the bier is carried to the grave. Midrash Shochor Tov attributes this *mizmor* to Moshe Rabbenu. The imagery and language are reminiscent of *Shirat Haazinu*, the prophetic epic written by Moshe prior to his death. It appears to be a continuation of the previous psalm which depicts the brevity and frailty of human life and endeavor which can only be overcome by relying on Hashem and receiving his aid.

This chapter is a peon to the person who has complete faith and trust in Hashem and is rewarded with His protection from the vagaries and dangers of life both known and unknown. Chazal tell us that were we able to see what was really around us, we would see thousands of *mazikim* whether spiritual or organic surrounding us on all sides with the

ability to threaten our very lives and we would be paralyzed with fear. This *mizmor* provides comfort to the man who sits b'seser elyon and leans on *b'zel shakai*- the shadow of Hashem. Rashi explains that this chapter is not a description of *Hashem* but rather of the man who trusts in Hashem and recognizes that He is at his side at all times. Part of the psalm is a declaration to *Hashem* and part of it is meant for us to learn from. Conceivably, Moshe addresses the Jewish nation throughout the ages telling us that the one who seeks Hashem's closeness and protection is promised that he will receive it.

Malbim argues that, "The one that dwells in the hidden secrets on high," refers to one of the angels who offers encouragement to the person who seeks Hashem and His protection. Perhaps the angel is Moshe himself who was called *Ish Elokim*; the one who had gone up on the mountain and had seen what no human had seen. Moshe gives encouragement to all Jews throughout the ages through this *mizmor* said prior to his death reassuring us that

Hashem will guide us and protect us as we traverse through exile and seek to return to our homeland. Hashem will save us from all entrapments, stumbling blocks, and plagues. Under His wings we will find refuge; He will be like a shield that protects us from physical, emotional, and spiritual dangers that surround us.

"Do not fear the terror of night." Night represents the times when Hashem's presence is concealed. "A thousand will fall on your side, ten thousand on your right and the angel of death will not approach you... we will see the payback and the downfall of evil doers." And we've witnessed this throughout history.

"For you *Hashem* are my shelter..." And if we put our trust in Him- "No evil will befall you..." Hashem Himself promises, "I will rescue him, I will lift him up from his troubles ... when he calls on me, I will surely answer him...and I will yet show him (if not in this world then in the next) my salvation."

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