

Parashat Ki Tavo 5772, 2012:

Rabbi David Etengoff

Of Strangers and Actualizing Our Spiritual Potential

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Chazal (our Sages may they be remembered for a blessing) teach us that “*Hakol tzarichin mazel, afilu sefer torah sh’beheichal*” (“Everything needs luck, even a Sefer Torah in the sanctuary,” *Tikunei Zohar*, 69). There are certain passages in the Torah, however, that seem to be “luckier” than others. One of the luckiest of all of these portions is found in our *parasha*. It is the famous section known as “*Arami oveid avi*” (“An Aramean tried to destroy my forebear”). It has achieved its celebrated status as a result of its incorporation into the Passover Hagadah. As a result, it is recited twice a year by nearly all of world Jewry. This text is particularly apropos, since its relatively few words provide a synopsis of the events leading up to, and including, the Exodus:

And you shall call out and say before the L-rd, your G-d, "An Aramean [sought to] destroy my forefather, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people, and there, he became a great, mighty, and numerous nation. And the Egyptians treated us cruelly and afflicted us, and they imposed hard labor upon us. So we cried out to the L-rd, G-d of our fathers, and the L-rd heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the L-rd brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awe, and with signs and wonders. (*Sefer Devarim* 26:5-8. All Bible and Rashi translations are from *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The recitation of this Exodus-themed passage is actually part of the mitzvah of bringing *bikkurim* (the First Fruits) to the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. It is known as *vidui bikkurim* (the Declaration of the First Fruits). It is introduced by *Sefer Devarim* 26:1-4, and followed by 26:9-11:

And it will be, when you come into the land which the L-rd, your G-d, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle in it, that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you will bring from your land, which the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you. ...And He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O L-rd, have given to me. Then, you shall lay it before the L-rd, your G-d, and prostrate yourself before the L-rd, your G-d. Then, you shall rejoice with all the good that the L-rd, your G-d, has granted you and your household you, the Levite, and the stranger who is among you.

The exact role to be played by “the stranger [Hebrew, *ger*] who is among you” is a fascinating debate within the world of Halacha. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on *Mishnah Bikkurim* 1:4, states: “He brings [his first fruits], but he does not recite the declaration, since he cannot say ‘to our fathers’ [in the introduction to the declaration (verse 3): ‘I have come to the land which the L-rd swore to our forefathers to give us’]. In contrast, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Bikkurim* 4:3 states: “The stranger brings [the *bikkurim*] and recites [the *vidui*].” The point of departure between these two Torah luminaries is clear: Both agree the *ger* must bring the *bikkurim*; they differ, however, as to whether or not the *ger* may recite the declaration.

At first glance, the Rambam’s opinion appears to be very difficult. His *p’sak* (halachic ruling) is an unequivocal rejection of the explicit words of the Mishnah. Yet, upon further examination, we find that the *Talmud Yerushalmi*’s comment on our Mishnah foreshadowed his position:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yehudah: “The *ger*, himself, brings [the *bikkurim*] and recites [the *vidui*].” What is the rationale? [It says in the Torah in reference to Avraham] “...but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 17:5) In the past you were [only] the Father of Aram [a play on the original name “Avram”] And now, and from hereon, you shall be a Father to the entire world. [A play on the name “Avraham.”]

It must be noted that this section is not simply explanatory in nature. Instead, it forms the basis for the *piska* (practical halachic ruling) of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: “Rabbi

Yehoshua ben Levi said: “The law is in accordance with Rabbi Yehudah.” The pragmatic nature of this decision is underscored by the closing words of the passage: “A practical opportunity for rendering judgment came before Rabbi Abahu and he ruled in accordance with Rabbi Yehudah.”

The Rambam explicates the rationale of the above-quoted *Talmud Yerushalmi* in the following manner: “Behold he [Avraham] was the Father of the entire world that entered under the protection of the *Shechinah* (G-d’s divine presence).” Moreover, “Unto Avraham was first given the promise that his children would inherit the Land [of Israel].” Therefore, for Maimonides, all of Avraham’s children – inclusive of the *ger* – had, and have, full rights of inheritance regarding *Eretz Yisrael*. This is the case, as well, in reference to *bikkurim*. Namely, the *ger* is no different than a native-born Jew: He both brings the *Bikkurim* and recites the complete *vidui* over them.

It is fascinating to note that the Rambam initially ruled like Rashi in the first edition of his earliest work of Jewish jurisprudence, *Perush HaMishnaiot* (*Explanation of the Mishnah*, 1168). In the second edition of this masterful work (the version that we have), however, he rejected the above-cited decision of *Mishnah Bikkurim*, and embraced the halachic position of the *Talmud Yerushalmi* – just as he did in the *Mishneh Torah* (completed in 1180). What might account for this change in the Rambam’s halachic decision-making? The great Rambam scholar, Rabbi Yosef Kapach *zatzal* (1917-2000), in his edition of the *Perush Hamishnaiot*, suggested that Maimonides’ famous responsum of the Rambam to Ovadiah the Proselyte (ed. Freimann, no. 42 = Blau, no. 293) was a tipping point in his thought. In short, Ovadiah asked Maimonides if he, too, could recite

the words, “Our G-d and G-d of our Fathers” in the beginning of the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the 18 Benedictions), since he was a convert, rather than a natural-born Jew. Rav Kapach opined that the responsum process caused the Rambam to come face to face with the existential alienation and pain felt by Ovadiah, and his struggle for recognition within the Jewish community. Therefore, Maimonides, in contradistinction to *Mishnah Bikkurim* 1:4, ruled that Ovadiah, and all other converts, should recite “Our G-d and G-d of our Fathers” in the *Shemoneh Esreh* – just like any other Jew. In addition to being one of the most prodigious intellects of all time, the Rambam thus emerges as being acutely sensitive to the manifest pathos and challenges of the human condition.

We are now in Elul, the month that is preeminently set aside for *cheshbon hanefesh* (self-judgment) and *tikkun hanefesh* (addressing our failings and improving ourselves), in preparation for standing before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. It is no less a time for us to realize that everyone, on occasion, feels alienated, lonely and alone, like a “*ger b’eretz nochriah*” (“a stranger in a strange land,” *Sefer Shemot* 2:22). Therefore, just as we need to redouble our efforts in improving our relationship with the Master of the Universe, we need to improve our relationships with our fellow man and reach out to them with *chane, v’chesed, v’rachamim* (kindness, sensitivity, and mercy). We need to strengthen our relationships with our family, friends, and acquaintances, and let them know that they are important to us, and that they are never alone. This is the heartfelt reassurance that we all really need – to know that we are significant to others and that we truly matter in their lives. If we can improve ourselves in both these areas of the human endeavor – our relationships with G-d and with our fellow human beings - we will go a long way to becoming better people, and to actualizing our hidden spiritual potential.

G-d willing, when we stand before Hashem this Rosh Hashanah, may each of us merit a *shannah tovah* (a good year), a *shannah metukah* (a sweet year), a *shannah shel chaim tovim* (a year of good life), and a year of *shalom* (peace) for ourselves, for all of the Jewish people, and for all Mankind. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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