

Parashat Ki Tavo 5779, 2019:

The Hidden Message of Mikrah Bikkurim

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a passage that has gained considerable fame due to its inclusion in the *Haggadah*:

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 translations *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The recitation of this Exodus-themed passage constitutes the *mitzvah* of *Mikrah Bikkurim* (the Declaration of the First Fruits), and is performed when we fulfill the commandment of bringing the *Bikkurim* to the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) formulates it in this manner:

The 132nd [positive] *mitzvah* is that we are commanded when bringing *Bikkurim* to make a proclamation regarding the kindness that G-d has bestowed upon us. Namely: How He saved us from the early difficulties [forced upon] our patriarch Ya’akov and from the slavery and afflictions of the Egyptians, to thank Him for all this, and to ask that He continue His blessings forever. The source of this commandment is G-d’s statement, “You shall then make the following declaration before G-d your L-rd: ‘An Aramean tried to destroy my ancestor...’” until the end of the entire section. This *mitzvah* is called *Mikra*

Bikkurim. (Sefer HaMitzvot, translation, Rabbi Berel Bell, with my emendations)

According to the Rambam, *Mikra Bikkurim* may be conceptualized as “a proclamation regarding the kindness that G-d has bestowed upon us.” How was this proclamation performed? At first, the *mavi Bikkurim* (individual bringing the *Bikkurim*) was obligated to read the declaration cited above, plus two more verses, in the original Hebrew. If, however, he was unable to do so, the *Kohane* would read each word aloud and the *mavi Bikkurim* would repeat after him. Over time, many people ceased to bring *Bikkurim* because they were embarrassed to engage in this rote repetition. At that juncture, our Sages ruled that going forward, the *Kohane* would read the passage, and all *mavi'ei Bikkurim* would repeat after him — including those who were capable of correctly reading it themselves. In this way, everyone would feel comfortable when bringing the *Bikkurim* to the *Beit HaMikdash*, and no one would be embarrassed by their illiteracy. (*Mishnah Bikkurim*, III:7, according to the explanations of Rav Ovadiah Bartenura and the Tifferet Yisrael)

This Rabbinic enactment to prevent the embarrassment of the unlettered among the *mavi'ei Bikkurim* is in consonance with the Torah prohibition that forbids us from humiliating one another, that is, “*melavane p'nai chaveiro b'rabim*” — the public embarrassment of a fellow Jew. The Rambam codified this *halacha* in his *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Deot* 6:8:

... it is forbidden for a person to embarrass a [fellow] Jew. How much more so [is it forbidden to embarrass him] in public...it is a great sin. Our Sages said: “A person who embarrasses a colleague in public does not have a share in the World to Come.” Therefore, a person should be careful not to embarrass a colleague - whether of greater or lesser stature - in public, and not to call him a name, which embarrasses him, or to relate a matter that brings him shame in his presence. (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Not too surprisingly, many sources in Rabbinic literature give voice to the seriousness of this *aveirah* (sin). By way of illustration, we find the following well-known statement in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers): “Rabbi Elazar of Modi’in would say: ‘One who...humiliates his friend in public — although he may possess Torah knowledge and good deeds, has no share in the World to Come.’” (III:11, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus)

Then, too, *Talmud Bavli*, tractate *Babba Metziah*, views this sin as the equivalent of engaging in forbidden relations:

All those who go to Gehenom will eventually arise — except for three [whose behaviors are so reprehensible] that they go down to Gehenom and never arise, and these are they: One who is physically intimate with another man’s wife, the *melavane p’nai chaveiro b’rabim*, and the person who gives their fellow Jew a pejorative [and destructive] nickname. (58b, translation and brackets my own)

It is crucial to note that the Talmud’s statement, “they go down to Gehenom and never arise,” is applicable only if a person steadfastly refuses to engage in the *teshuvah* (repentance) process. For as the Rambam teaches us, “nothing can stand in the way of *teshuvah*:”

When does the statement that these individuals do not have a portion in the world to come apply? When they die without having repented. However, if such a person repents from his wicked deeds and dies as a *Baal-Teshuvah* [penitent], he will merit the world to come, for nothing can stand in the way of Teshuvah. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* III:14, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

We are nearing the end of Elul and the onset of the *Selichot* period (Penitential Prayers). Both of these events remind us of the need to spiritually prepare for the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe), and redouble our efforts to connect with the Almighty. This is most surely the time for us to try to act toward others as we long to be treated — with *chane, v’chesed, v’rachamim* (grace, kindness and mercy). It is comforting to know that if we have failed to

do so, even if we have committed the serious sin of *melavane p'nai chaveiro b'rabim*, we should never lose hope. As the Rambam assures us, if we undertake heartfelt *teshuvah*, the Holy One blessed be He will surely forgive us. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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