



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Ki Tavo: National Treasure

When a farmer has worked for an entire season and watches the first fruits from his field ripen, what can he do with these fruits that represent an entire year of labor?

The Torah suggests that the fruits be transported to the Temple, and that the farmer enact a special ceremony.

What is this ceremony? And why is it so important for the Torah to detail this?

“you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from **the land that the Lord your God is giving you,**

put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name.

You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him:

“I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered **the land that the Lord swore to our fathers** to assign us.”

The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God:

“My father was a fugitive Aramean.

He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and **gave us this land**, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which **You, O Lord, have given me.**" (Deut. 26:1-12)

Please discuss:

- Why does the farmer say: "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land"? He might have been the tenth generation in the land! What is the point here?
- Is this ceremony about the fruit? Or is it about something larger than that?
- What is the point of the long historical proclamation?

When I look at this, it seems that we are USING the fruit to act as a SYMBOL of our entire statehood. We engage in a historical review which essentially says the following:

When we were nomads, like our Aramean father – either Abraham who came from Aram Naharim, or Jacob who sojourned with Laban in Aram, both of whom were itinerant shepherds – we were vulnerable; other nations, like the Egyptians enslaved and oppressed us.

God saw our suffering and set us free to change our reality and give us a land, prosperity and independence; a place of our own. And so, with these fruits I recognize the blessing of the land.

Essentially we are thanking God for land, statehood, independence, security. It is amazing that a new fruit can be used to embody all of that!

In this regard, Rabbi Michael Hattin draws special attention to the placing of the fruits in a "basket". He writes:

The significance of carrying the basket is not simply to convey it from one's field to the Temple, but to actually **relive the journey from homelessness to settlement!** We must carry the Bikurim because we are symbolically re-experiencing the homelessness of our ancestors who had no land. We bear the basket on our shoulder because we are recalling the anxious destitution associated with having meager possessions and nowhere to rest them....It is therefore not surprising that the Biblical ceremony concludes with the basket being gently put down. After reliving the desperation of exile by laboriously transferring that basket from place to place, we can sincerely appreciate God's gift of the Land. (<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/bringing-first-fruits-1>)

Ceremonies are formal, essentially choreographed moments, and yet, they give us the opportunity to appreciate life's blessings. We create these ceremonies to celebrate and draw attention to things that count.

Birthdays appreciate the people we care for; graduations celebrate effort and the embarking on a path to further achievement. Wedding ceremonies follow a fixed

pattern, but they are true and touching because it is through those human rituals that we express what we care about, that we give voice and celebrate our critical love and commitment.

So how do we appreciate the country in which we live, the culture, the land and government that give us identity, meaning, security and prosperity? Many in our modern world are cynical about nationalism, but in the modern State of Israel, and especially for people like myself who have made Aliyah, days like Yom Haatzmaut – Israel Independence Day – and Jerusalem Day, and other national landmarks are days filled with pride, appreciation and celebration. They take something as simple as a fruit, maybe a flag or an anthem, but they allow us to pour into them deeper values, these symbols are imbued with great significance. (In the US many will experience these feelings on Thanksgiving or July 4; in the UK, a royal wedding or the World Cup seems to elicit an outburst of national pride, although not necessarily the sense of gratitude and appreciation.)

It seems that the Bikkurim/First Fruits ceremony is akin to these moments of national appreciation. These rites allow us to probe and connect with the most significant aspects of our personal and collective lives.

Please discuss:

- Is there a need to appreciate the goodness of nation and land?
- What are we appreciating?
- Should this be a national moment or a religious moment?
- What other rituals do we create as human beings in order to celebrate important aspects of our lives?
- Are there things that you should be celebrating but do not have a ritual with which to do it?

Shabbat Shalom!