**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KI TAVO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Please daven for Malka Etel bat Chana who was in a car accident and will be undergoing surgery this Friday.

Motzaei Shabbat

Towards the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tavo, the Torah presents the obligation of *vidui ma’aser*, the verbal declaration that must be made every three years avowing compliance with the various requirements relevant to tithing produce. After making this declaration, one utters a prayer for prosperity on behalf of all *Am Yisrael*: “Look down from Your sacred abode, from the heavens, and bless Your nation, Israel, and the land that You have given us – a land flowing with milk and honey” (26:15).

The Klausenberger Rebbe, in [one of his published discourses](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36056&st=&pgnum=12), notes that in this prayer, one makes reference to God’s blessing descending “from Your sacred abode” down to “Your nation, Israel, and the land…flowing with milk and honey.” The farmer acknowledges that God resides in a “sacred abode,” infinitely distant from the mundane needs that concern us here on earth. Yet, he asks that despite the gulf separating between heaven and earth, between God and human beings, between the entirely spiritual realm of the heavens and the physical realities of our world, God should bridge this gap, so-to-speak, and grant His heavenly blessing to us lowly mortals whose minds are occupied with lowly, mundane concerns. This prayer makes reference to God’s promise to our patriarchs that He would give their descendants “a land flowing with milk and honey” – that He would provide their material needs comfortably, and not subject them to harsh conditions of depravation. God Himself promised to feed His nation “milk and honey,” to grant us material comforts so we enjoy the peace of mind and serenity necessary to devote ourselves to loftier pursuits. And thus this promise of “a land flowing with milk and honey” is the basis for the prayer that God should send His blessing from His “sacred abode” in the form of material prosperity. While it might at first seem inappropriate and petty to appeal to God for material success and comfort, in truth, God has Himself made this promise, recognizing the realities of the human condition and the natural desire for a reasonably comfortable standard of living.

The Klausenberger Rebbe draws a comparison to the practice of Chassidic rebbes to devote a great deal of time to meeting with their followers to hear about their personal problems, and to offer advice, encouragement and blessings. Many criticized this practice, arguing that if a rebbe is truly a sage and righteous figure, he should not take time away from his study and personal spiritual pursuits to deal with the petty concerns of peasants, laborers and merchants. The Rebbe averred that to the contrary, religious leaders bear the responsibility to help their followers grow, and helping them sort out their mundane problems, such as issues pertaining to physical health and finances, is a vital part of this effort. Just as we appeal to God to look down from His “sacred abode,” from the realm of pure spirituality, to take note of and address our mundane needs and concerns, which are so low and trivial from the perspective of God’s heavenly domain, similarly, great religious leaders see it as their responsibility to leave their own “sacred abode” for the sake of assisting others with their physical and mundane concerns.

The Klausenberger Rebbe adds in this context a novel and surprising explanation for the popular association between the month of Elul and the verse in Shir Hashirim (6:3), “*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*” (“I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me”). He suggests that since “*Ani le-dodi*,” we sincerely wish to faithfully and devotedly fulfill God’s will, we beseech that “*dodi li*” – He should fulfill our will by meeting our material needs, by granting our requests for “milk and honey.” Given the importance of material comfort in achieving the peace of mind we need to properly devote ourselves to Torah and *mitzvot*, we are justified in petitioning God to address even our petty and trivial concerns.

Among the lessons we might learn from this insight is that one person’s luxury is another person’s necessity, and what appears trivial to some is vital to others. While we must strive to overcome pettiness and rigidity, and train ourselves to adapt to undesirable and difficult conditions of any kind and be able to function properly under adverse circumstances, the reality is that all people have needs that might strike others as trivial. And just as we beseech the Almighty to look down from His “sacred abode,” from which our material aspirations seem unnecessary and childish, and grant all our wishes, we, too, must try to recognize the legitimate needs and concerns of others, even when they strike us as insignificant, and do what we can to meet those needs.

Sunday

Parashat Ki-Tavo begins with the *mitzva* of *bikkurim*, the requirement to bring one’s first fruits that ripen to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where a special text was recited, , briefly recounting the story of the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus. In this text, which the Torah dictates, the farmer recalls how *Benei Yisrael* cried out to God in Egypt, and God accepted their pleas, “and he saw our torment, our labor and our oppression” (26:7).

The *Sifrei*, in a passage familiar to us from the *Haggadah*, goes through each term or phrase in this text and explains it by referring to a parallel passage in the Torah’s account of the bondage and Exodus, in Sefer Shemot. Commenting on the word “*lachatzeinu*” (“our oppression”), the *Sifrei* explains that this refers to the “*dechak*,” the pressure to which the Egyptians subjected *Benei Yisrael*. The *Sifrei* cites as its prooftext the verse in Sefer Shemot (3:9) in which God proclaims, “*Ve-gam ra’iti et ha-lachatz* *asher Mitzrayim lochatzim otam*” – “I have also seen the pressure to which the Egyptians are subjecting you.”

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his [*Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14124&st=&pgnum=407), raises the question of how the verse in Sefer Shemot helps clarify or determine the meaning of “*lachatzeinu*” in this verse. *Chazal* here clearly cite the verse in Shemot as a basis for their interpretation of “*lachatzeinu*” as “pressure,” but it seems, at first glance, difficult to understand why that verse sheds light on the meaning of this term.

Rav Mecklenberg answers that the root *l.ch.tz.* in Biblical Hebrew can have two different (albeit related) meanings. It can mean “pressure” in the sense of cramped, crowded conditions, a tight time schedule, or emotional pressure that denies a person the mental “space” he needs to feel calm and relaxed. These are all different forms of “pressure” that can be described with the root “*l.ch.tz.*” Additionally, however, this term can refer to “shortage,” as in the phrase “*lechem tzar u-mayim* ***lachatz***” used in Sefer Yeshayahu (30:20) in reference to scarce rations of food and water. Accordingly, Rav Mecklenberg writes, when considering the meaning of “*lachtazeinu*” in the Torah’s description here in Parashat Ki-Tavo of the Egyptian bondage, it is not immediately clear to what precisely this refers. It may denote scarcity, in which case it refers to the Egyptians’ denying *Benei Yisrael* adequate food rations, or, it may refer to the pressure of the slaves’ intense workload or cramped quarters. The *Sifrei* therefore cites the verse “*asher Mitzrayim lochatzim otam*,” in which *Benei Yisrael* are the direct object of the verb “*lochatzim*.” This is syntactically sensible, Rav Mecklenberg argues, only if the verb “*lochtazim*” refers to the imposition of pressure, as then we can speak of the Egyptians pressuring the people. If it referred to shortage of food, the Torah would have said, “*lochtazim lahem*” – causing them shortage, as it is grammatically incorrect (even in English) to speak of people “shortaging” other people. Hence, this verse from Sefer Shemot clarifies that “*lachatzeinu*” here in Parashat Ki-Tavo refers to pressure, and not the scarcity of food.

Rav Mecklenberg adds that *Chazal* afforded great importance to this matter because the account of the Exodus in the *mikra bikkurim* proclamation had to be precisely accurate. The truth was that *Benei Yisrael* received adequate food in Egypt, as evidenced by their pining in the wilderness for the days when they “sat on the fleshpot” in Egypt, enjoying plenty of food (Shemot 16:3). (We should note, however, that according to some opinions, *Benei Yisrael* here spoke untruthfully in this regard, as they in fact did suffer from scarcity and deprivation in Egypt.) In order to demonstrate the accuracy of the *mikra bikkurim* text, *Chazal* found it necessary to clarify that “*lachatz*” refers to the pressured conditions of slavery, and not to food deprivation.

This final point made by Rav Mecklenberg perhaps reminds us to avoid exaggeration as we reflect upon our difficulties and hardships. People are occasionally tempted to overstate their suffering or the extent of the adverse conditions they endure or have endured. *Mikra bikkurim* represents the value the Torah sees in remembering and reflecting upon our past hardships, but Rav Mecklenberg’s comments warn us to reflect accurately and truthfully, without exaggeration. It is improper to view things more negatively than they actually are, or, in the case of retrospection, than they actually were. Even as we recall and reflect a period as painful and dreadful as the Egyptian bondage, we must ensure not to depict the conditions as being worse than they were.

Monday

The opening section of Parashat Ki-Tavo discusses the *mitzva* of *bikkurim* – bringing one’s first fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – and dictates the text of the *mikra bikkurim* declaration which was made when the fruits were brought. This declaration briefly recounts the story of *Benei Yisrael*’s enslavement in Egypt and the Exodus, and then *Benei Yisrael*’s entry into the land. The farmer then concludes, “And now, I have brought the first of the fruits of the land that the Lord has given me…” (26:10).

The simplest explanation of *mikra bikkurim*, perhaps, is that the farmer brings his first fruits to the Temple as a sharecropper tending to the owner’s fields brings the owner his portion before taking his own. The farmer thus explains that he offers these fruits to God to demonstrate that the land is not his, that he tends to the fields and produces crops on the Almighty’s land, which he tills with the Almighty’s permission. He tells how *Am Yisrael* were enslaved, and they earned their freedom and entered the land only through the intervention of God, who took the nation to be His servants in His land. According to this approach, the *mikra bikkurim* proclamation essentially provides the background to the *mitzva* of *bikkurim*, as it explains that the farmer’s relationship to his fields is that of a sharecropper, and he brings the first fruits to the Master to express that is aware of who truly owns the land.

Some, however, explained the brief historical account in *mikra bikkurim* differently. It might, at first glance, appear strange that a farmer brings such a small “gift” to God upon the ripening of the fruits in his orchard. Why, one might ask, is it legitimate to bring just a basket of fruits as a tribute to the King of the universe? To answer this question, the farmer recalls that God took a helpless, oppressed nation from the depths of slavery and humiliation with great miracles, in order to bring them to His special land. The purpose of this account is to show the importance of *Am Yisrael*’s residence in its land, a goal for which God performed extraordinary and unprecedented wonders. If God regards *Eretz Yisrael* with such importance, than even a basket of the land’s produce is something significant and precious.

We might sometimes wonder about the value and worth of our “small,” everyday *mitzvot*, what significance there could be in our observance of halakhic technicalities, or in our simple actions that *Halakha* demands. The *mikra bikkurim* proclamation perhaps reminds us that even our seemingly small and minor “gifts” are immensely valuable. If God Himself required us to offer such a “gift,” then it is precious, regardless of how small and insignificant it may at first appear. We should never belittle the importance of even a “small basket,” the minor *mitzvot* that we fulfill over the course of the day, as each and every one is valuable and cherished by the Almighty.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tavo of the proclamation made by Moshe and the *kohanim* to *Benei Yisrael* in Arvot Moav, “Pay heed and listen, O Israel – this day you have become a nation unto the Lord your God” (27:9).

The Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 2:16) raises the obvious question as to the meaning of this declaration. Did *Benei Yisrael* really become God’s nation only at that point, forty years after the Exodus and after they accepted the Torah at Sinai? The Midrash cites the following answer to this question in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov: “Once Moshe taught them the Torah and they accepted it with a pleasant countenance, the verse considers it as though they received it that day at Mount Sinai.”

This proclamation is made at the conclusion of the series of speeches Moshe delivered before his death, which comprises the bulk of Sefer Devarim. As Moshe now bids farewell to the people, he compliments them for their warm and enthusiastic acceptance of his teachings, for the forty years during which they eagerly and thirstily absorbed the words of Torah he transmitted. He tells them that their enthusiasm for knowledge makes each day as significant as the day of *Matan Torah*, when the Torah was first presented to them.

Interestingly, the Gemara, in Masekhet Berakhot (63b), offers three Midrashic readings of the word “*haskeit*” (“Pay heed”) used in this verse, all of which refer to guidance regarding Torah study. First, the Gemara suggests that “*haskeit*” relates to the word “*kitot*” (“groups”), and thus instructs that Torah should be studied in groups, rather than in solitude. Secondly, the Gemara interprets this word to mean “crush,” such that it speaks of the need for intensive and rigorous devotion to the pursuit of Torah knowledge and understanding, even at the expense of physical comfort and relaxation. Finally, the Gemara explains “*haskeit*” to mean that students should at first remain silent (“*has*”), and only then proceed to dissect (“*kateit*”) and thoroughly analyze the material. Meaning, one should first accumulate and absorb a large base of knowledge before embarking on in-depth questioning and analysis.

Significantly, although in this verse Moshe salutes and congratulates the people for their attention to, and enthusiastic acceptance of, the Torah he taught them, *Chazal* detected within this verse practical advice for future study. They transformed, so-to-speak, Moshe’s words of praise for the past into words of guidance for the future.

These readings of the verse perhaps remind us that the pride we justifiably feel over our achievements must lead not to contentment and complacency, but rather to a commitment to achieve more. Reflecting proudly on our successes is valid only if it motivates us to work towards even greater success and achievement. It was clear to *Chazal* that if Moshe was praising the people for their achievements over the last forty years, he was also providing them with guidance for their future growth. The Gemara thus teaches that we are entitled to congratulate ourselves for what we’ve accomplished only if our sense of achievement will encourage us and inspire further efforts to grow and to pursue even more ambitious goals.

(See Dr. Meir Grozman’s article, [“*Haskeit U-shma Yisrael*”](http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/kitabo/gruz.html))

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the various explanations presented by the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (63b) for the phrase, “*Haskeit u-shma*” – “Pay heed and listen” –which Moshe and the *kohanim* proclaim to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Ki-Tavo (27:9). One explanation given is that the word “*haskeit*” stems from the word “*kat*,” which means “group,” and thus Moshe here admonishes *Benei Yisrael* that the process of “*shema*” – of learning and understanding Torah – must be done in groups. As the Gemara comments, “Torah can be acquired only in a group.”

Elaborating on this concept, the Gemara proceeds to cite a startling statement in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Rabbi Chanina: “A sword shall fall upon the…Torah scholars who sit in solitude and involve themselves in Torah… Not only that, but they are sinners.” Rabbi Yossi’s remark makes it clear that learning independently is not only imperfect, and less than ideal, but is also “sinful,” to the point where accomplished scholars are worthy of punishment if they study alone.

How might we understand the Gemara’s comment? While we can certainly recognize and appreciate the value and importance of learning in groups, of exposure to different opinions, ways of thinking, and analytical styles, what makes independent learning “sinful”?

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his [*Yalkut Yehuda*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2812&st=&pgnum=227&hilite=), explains that since Torah is supposed to be studied in groups, one who studies independently does not study properly, and thus his learning does not qualify as valid study. As such, the scholar essentially wastes his time. If one does not study Torah in the manner prescribed by the Torah, then his involvement in learning does not fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study, and thus he is guilty of the grievous sin of wasting time. Rav Ginsburg makes the remarkable statement that just as *Chazal* considered gamblers sinful because “they do not involve themselves in settling the world,” as they do not engage in constructive work that serves mankind, those who learn Torah improperly are considered “sinful” for the same reason. Once their learning loses its value, they are guilty of wasting time rather than engaging in meaningful and productive pursuits. *Chazal* felt so strongly about the importance of group study, of scholars exposing themselves to different viewpoints and perspectives as an integral part of the *talmud Torah* process, that they considered exclusively private Torah study a waste of time, and deemed such scholarly pursuits worthless and bereft of value.

Thursday

In Parashat Ki-Tavo, Moshe conveys to *Benei Yisrael* the command to conduct a special ceremony upon entering *Eretz Yisrael* at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, proclaiming a blessing upon those who fulfill the Torah and a curse upon those who disregard it. Moshe presents a list of curses that were proclaimed, specifying different transgressions whose violators should be cursed, and these were to be followed by a corresponding list of blessings for those who observe the specified laws. This list of curses concludes, “Cursed is he who does not uphold the words of this Torah, to perform them” (27:26).

The Ramban cites the Talmud Yerushalmi (Sota 7:4) as presenting several different interpretations of the phrase, “who does not uphold the words of this Torah.” The final explanation he cites is that it speaks of a “*chazan*” – an appointed official in the synagogue – who fails to position the Torah scroll in a manner that ensures it would not fall. Surprisingly, the Ramban explains the Yerushalmi’s comment somewhat differently, as referring to what we commonly call “*hagbeha*” – lifting the *Sefer Torah* to show the congregation the sacred script. According to the Ramban’s reading of the Yerushalmi, it understood this verse as proclaiming a curse upon one who lifts the Torah improperly, such that the text is not visible to everyone present in the synagogue.

It seems likely that the Ramban’s comments need to be understood on a symbolic level, as pointing to an improper “*hagbeha*” as an allegorical image representing something far more grievous, that warrants a “curse.” Indeed, Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *[Mesilot Chayim](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=42851&st=&pgnum=141&hilite=)*, suggests that the meaning of “*hagbeha*,” and of the requirement to make the text visible to everyone in attendance, is to convey the message that the Torah is relevant to, and obligatory upon, everyone. The Torah is lifted and put into the clear view of all the congregants to show them that they all, without exception, are bound by the Torah’s laws and guidance. The Torah applies to all of us, regardless of one’s background, level of knowledge, circumstances or stage of life. Lifting the Torah in a manner that makes the script visible to only some synagogue members symbolically sends the message that the Torah is relevant to only some of us but not others. The Ramban’s comments alert us to the gravity of this misconception, and of the gravity of even unwittingly giving this impression. We must do everything we can to show the Torah to all types of Jews, to make it clear that the Torah is, always has been, and always will be, relevant to them all, without exception, guiding each and every one of us along the path that we should follow at all stages throughout our lives.

Friday

The Torah commands in the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tavo that when a farmer brings his *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, he must declare to the *kohen*, “*Higadeti hayom la-Hashem Elokekha ki vati el ha-aretz*…” – “I proclaim to the Lord your God that I have entered the land…” (26:3).

Ibn Ezra, commenting on the word “*higadeti*” in this verse, writes, somewhat ambiguously, “in order that the children will understand.” It appears that in Ibn Ezra’s view, the Torah uses the word “*higadeti*” (“I proclaim,” or “I relate”) in this verse to indicate that the proclamation must be made in such a manner that the farmer’s children will hear and understand it.

To explain Ibn Ezra’s reading of this verse, Rav Yitzchak Shrim, in his [*Be’er Yitzchak*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36237&st=&pgnum=295&hilite=), suggests that Ibn Ezra understood the verb “*h.g.d.*” to refer specifically to telling somebody something which he does not already know. Hence, if this verb is used to describe the farmer proclaiming the purpose of his bringing *bikkurim* to the Temple, then we must conclude that the farmer makes this declaration to somebody who does not already understand the message of *bikkurim*, the message of, “I have entered the land.” Ibn Ezra thus explained that although the farmer makes this declaration to the *kohen*, the objective is to inform his children that God has brought us into the Land of Israel and therefore the first fruits must be brought to Him, as it were, to acknowledge that the land is His.

Ibn Ezra’s comments may perhaps invite a novel explanation for the connection between *bikkurim* and the *maggid* section of the *Haggada* on Pesach. The Torah relates that after the first fruits are placed by the altar, the farmer recites a text – known as *mikra bikkurim* – briefly reviewing the story of the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus. These verses (26:5-8) form the basis of the *maggid* text which *Chazal* formulated for fulfilling the *mitzva* of *sippur Yetzi’at Mitzrayim* – telling the story of the Exodus on the first night of Pesach. In *maggid*, we cite the *mikra bikkurim* text, one word or series of words at a time, and then explain it, and this is how we fulfill our obligation to speak of the Exodus on Pesach night. Different theories have been proposed to explain why specifically the text of *mikra bikkurim* was chosen for this purpose, but the explanation might lie in Ibn Ezra’s understanding of the word “*higadeti*,” as implying an obligation to inform one’s children about the message underlying *bikkurim*. According to Ibn Ezra, a variation of the obligation of “*ve-higadeta le-vinkha*” (Shemot 13:8), to tell one’s children the story of the Exodus on Pesach, applied on a different occasion – when one brought his first fruits to the Temple each year. Then, too, the Torah requires “*haggada*” – to tell one’s children about our nation’s history as downtrodden slaves, and how God miraculously extricated us from this condition. Since the Torah dictated for us the text to be used for the “*haggada*” obligation when bringing *bikkurim*, *Chazal* adopted this text as the one we should use to fulfill the “*haggada*” obligation on Pesach, as well. We specifically use the text of *mikra bikkurim* on Pesach because these two obligations – *mikra bikkurim* and *sippur Yetzi’at Mitzrayim* – are, essentially, one and the same, requiring us to teach our children about the Exodus from Egypt.

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