

Parshas Ki Savo

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE – RULING THE WORLD

Moshe reiterates to the people the responsibility they took on when they agreed the covenant at Sinai:

היום הזה, ה' אלהיך מצויד לעשות את-החקים האלה ואת-המשפטים; ושמרת ועשית אותם, בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך. את-ה
הצמרת, היום: להיות לך לאלהים וללכת בדרךיו, ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו ומשפטי-ולשמע בקלו. וה' אמרך היום, להיות לו לעם
סגלה, כאשר, דבר-לך; ולשמר, כל-מצותיו. ולתתך עליו, על כל-הגוים אשר עשה, לתהלה, ולשמ ולתפארת; ולהיתך עם-קדוש לה
– Today, Hashem your God commands you to perform these laws and statutes; to guard and keep
them – with all your heart and soul. Regarding Hashem you have said today, that He will be a God to you; that you
will walk in his ways, to keep his laws and statutes; and listen to His voice.

Hashem has said of you this day, for you to be a Chosen People for Him, as He has said to you; and you will keep
His mitzvos. And He will place you supreme, above all the nations He made; for praise, honour and glory, that you
would be a holy nation dedicated to Him, as was said. (26: 16-19)

The former part relates to our commitment to the relationship, and the latter, Hashem's commitment to us. The
transition though, is quite difficult: וה' אמרך היום, להיות לו לעם סגלה, כאשר, דבר-לך; ולשמר, כל-מצותיו – Hashem
has said of you this day, for you to be a Chosen People for Him, as He has said to you; and you will keep His
mitzvos.

The opening is clearly Hashem speaking of us, but the ending is clearly back to our commitment. How is adherence
to Torah related to being called עם סגלה? Whose commitment is this about? And what is the supremacy granted as
a result?

Rabbeinu Bachye teaches that being called עם סגלה – “chosen” – is not what it seems at face value. It is not a status
we are born with; it is a title earned, an achievement, that we have to strive towards.

In a similar vein, a man does not make the blessing שעשני איש the way a woman says שעשני כרצונו – because איש –
to truly be a “man” – is what we spend our lives striving towards.

So too with circumcision, the first mitzva a newborn is party to, is a microcosm of the Jewish mission; perfecting
what we have with everything we are given, working towards the ultimate goal of perfection.

Rabbeinu Bachye says that the entire verse pertains to our commitment – ולשמר, דבר-לך; ולשמר, כל-מצותיו –

כָּל-מְצוֹתָיו – we just have to earn it.

So being chosen is in fact a bestowing of responsibility, but is in turn rewarded with being על-כל-הגוים – supreme over the other nations.

R Shamshon Refael Hirsch writes how when the responsibilities are met, the world becomes a better place. The world is damaged, and being better people bring harmony back, repairing it.

Adam was commanded to “conquer” the world, when he was still all alone. His conquest would be through exercising his free will to listen to God; this is how all the animals knew to come to him to be named – they perceived godliness in him.

The same is true of Yakov – the Torah emphasises how he left Beersheba and went to Charan. The former seems redundant – it should only matter that he arrived somewhere. Clearly, his departure does matter. When someone righteous leaves or goes somewhere, the environment and atmosphere of the place fundamentally change.

There is a story told of a young Chafetz Chaim, who saw the ills of the world, and decided to change the world. Seeing that the task was too monumentally large, he changed his mind, and set out to change his community. After seeing that this too was impossible, he downgraded his ambitions again, and decided that if he could not make them better, he’d start with the man in the mirror.

And by making himself better, he really did change the world.

R Hirsch teaches that by being better people, the world becomes a better place. There is famine, war, child slavery and kidnapping in the world, and while people attempt to deal with the symptoms, it is ultimately futile if humans aren’t more humane.

This is also what we mean when we make brachos, when we say אשר קדשנו במצוותיו; and what we mean we say וקדשתנו במצוותיך on Yomim Tovim – אתה בחרתנו.

The Torah assures us that perfection of the world comes through perfection of ourselves. Introduce a little more humility, kindness and gratitude into your life; and a little less being mundane and materialistic. The world around you may just change.

THE SENSES

As part of Moshe’s final speech, he recounts what the Jews went through on their journey through the desert, and how central the Torah was to how they perceived reality:

ויקרא משה אל-כל-ישראל, ויאמר אליהם: אתם ראיתם, את כל-אשר עשה יהוה לעיניכם בארץ מצרים, לפרעה ולכל-עבדיו, ולכל-ארצו. המסות, הגדלות, אשר ראו, עיניך-האמת והמפתים הגדלים, ההם. ולא-נתן יהוה לכם לב לדעת, ועינים לראות ואזנים ולקבל-ארוץ. המסות, הגדלות, אשר ראו, עיניך-האמת והמפתים הגדלים, ההם. ולא-נתן יהוה לכם לב לדעת, ולשמע, עד, היום הזה – And Moshe called all the Jews, and said to them: “You saw all that Hashem did in Egypt, with your own eyes, to Paroh, his servants, and his land. The great miracles and signs; you saw. Hashem didn’t give you a heart to understand, eyes to see, nor ears to hear, until this day.” (29: 1-3)

Rashi elaborates that עד היום הזה refers when Moshe wrote the Torah in the form we have it, and give it to the Levi’im, who were the tribe entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding and teaching Torah. What changed

This is monumental in its context, but equally so today. Rashi notes the use of the present tense; indicating that the same obligations exist every day, no different to the day the Torah and mitzvos were first accepted.

The curse, or lack of blessing, is dynamic. Anything can change, so the commitment has to be constantly fresh – היום החדש – today is a new day. Be all you can be.

ANCHOR OF THE UNIVERSE

Bikkurim is a fundamental mitzva. Rashi at the very beginning of the Torah notes that one of the ways the world is perpetuated is through this mitzva.

This is probably quite surprising to learn. Why is it so fundamental?

The answer is exceedingly simple: it is a microcosm of the entire corpus of Judaism.

Someone acquires a plot of land; weeds it; ploughs; sows; prunes; weeds some more; reaps; dries; processes... And so on. A phenomenal amount of labour and energy is expended to produce something to eat or sell. This mitzva teaches that credit is not due to the farmer. The first thing that flowers and sprouts is taken to Jerusalem, and given to the Kohanim, and part of the presentation ceremony requires him to say, “Thank You, God, for the land and fruit that you have given me.”

This illustrates that no matter what mankind’s status is; whatever it took to bring home the daily bread; ultimately everything is sourced from Above.

This incorporates kindness, gratitude, faith and humility. If the world was full of kind, humble, grateful, faithful people; wouldn’t the world be magnificently beautiful? It shouldn’t be so surprising then, that bikkurim is one of the reasons justifying the entire Creation.

ALL ABOUT APPRECIATION

When a farmer presents bikkurim to the attending kohen, there is a prescribed dialogue that must take place, tracking the early history of the Jewish people:

וְעִנִּיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אָבִי, וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּגְרַר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מֵעֵט; וַיְהִי-שָׁם, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וָרֹב. וַיִּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם, וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ; וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ, עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה. וַנִּצְעַק, אֶל-ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ; וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קוֹלֵנוּ, וַיֵּרָא אֶת-עַנְיָנוּ וְאֶת-עַמְלָנוּ וְאֶת-לַחְצָנוּ. וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה', מִמִּצְרַיִם, בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֹרַע נְטוּיָה, וּבְמַרְא גְדוֹל-וּבְאֹתוֹת, וּבְמִפְתִּים. וַיְבִאֵנוּ, אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה; וַיִּתֵּן-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ. וַעֲתָה, הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת-רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתָּה לִּי, ה'; וְהִנְחִיתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ. וְשָׂמַחְתָּ בְּכָל-הַטּוֹב, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לְךָ – You will answer and say before your God, “The Aramean pursued my father, and he descended to Egypt, and dwelled there, where he became a nation, great and many. Egypt evilly afflicted us, and they gave us hard labour. We cried out to Hashem, God of our fathers, and He heard our cries, and saw our suffering and affliction.

He extracted us from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great wonders and miracles; and brought us to this place. He gave us this land, flowing with milk and honey. And now, see I have brought my first fruit, which God has granted me, and I place it before God.”

He shall place it before God and bow, and rejoice at all the good he has been given. (26: 5-11)

On Pesach, part of the above is quoted in the Haggada, which tracks the development of the Jewish people. This is odd – the actual events are recorded in Shemos, this is only a paraphrase of events there; and not about leaving Egypt at all!

Why does the Haggada quote from bikkurim and not from its proper historical place?

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that the mitzva on Pesach of reciting the story of the exodus is not limited to just telling the story; it must be contextualised with an angle of gratitude, which the historical sections do not have.

Bikkurim is self-evidently about gratitude for the Land of Israel, which has extra special value in the context of liberation from Egypt. So, in reality, discussing Egypt makes a lot of sense in the context of how appreciative we are for the Land; and it also makes sense for the Haggada to quote from somewhere out of place to display gratitude.

Proper gratitude can be learned from the laws of the thanksgiving offering – the Korban Toda.

Along with the animal offering, there were 40 accompanying loaves of bread, with very little burnt or taken by the kohen. They are essential parts of the offering, and are subject to the laws of leftovers – if not consumed by the following morning, they must be destroyed.

This is an impossible task for the owner. Clearly, he is not meant to eat an entire animal and 40 loaves of bread on his own. This is a feast – one he needs to invite many guests to.

The aspect of gratitude this evidently imparts is the innate requirement to publicise it. The Korban Pesach is identical – an entire roast animal that is to be consumed after a full meal, in a tiny amount of time, before midnight. To avoid issues with leftovers problems you need to invite lots of guests and tell them about Egypt – which is precisely how the Seder begins.

The Korban Pesach is essentially a national Korban Toda – brought on release from jail; crossing a sea; crossing a desert; and recovery from illness. The Jews were in bondage and released from Egypt; went through the sea; through the desert, and when the Jews stood at Sinai, they were cured from all ailments.

To really contextualise what gratitude entails, the concluding pasuk in Bikkurim says that ושמחת בכל הטוב אשר נתן לך – you should rejoice in all Hashem does for you. One just one blanket ‘thank you’, but thank Him בכל הטוב – for each thing individually!

Gratitude means so much more when it is spelled out properly.

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