

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Ki Tavo begins with the ceremony of bringing first-fruits to the Temple. The Mishnah (Bikkurim 3) gives a detailed account of what happened:

"Those that were near to Jerusalem brought fresh figs and grapes, and those that were far away brought dried figs and raisins. Before them went the ox, its horns overlaid with gold, and with a wreath of olive leaves on its head.

"The flute was played before them until they came near Jerusalem. When they were near to Jerusalem, they sent messengers before them and bedecked their first fruits. The rulers and the prefects and the treasurers of the Temple went forth to meet them. According to the honour due to them that came in, they used to go forth. All the craftsmen in Jerusalem used to rise up for the them and greet them, saying, 'Brothers, men of such-and-such a place, you are welcome.'

"The flute was played before them until they reached the Temple Mount. When they reached the Temple Mount, even King Agrippa would take his basket on his shoulder and enter in as far as the Temple Court..."

It was a magnificent ceremony. In historical context, however, its most significant aspect was the declaration each individual had to make: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders." (Deut. 26: 5-10)

This passage is well-known. It became the text expounded as part of the Haggadah on seder night on Pesach. Its familiarity, though, should not blind us to its revolutionary character. Listening to these words, we are in the presence of one of the greatest revolutions in the history of thought.

The ancients saw the gods in nature, never more so than in thinking about the harvest and all that accompanied it. Nature does not change. Natural time is cyclical -- the seasons of the year, the revolution of the planets, the cycle of birth, death and new life. When the ancients thought about the past, it was not the historical but a mythical / metaphysical / cosmological past -- the

primeval time-before-time when the world was formed out of the struggle between the elements.

That is precisely what did not happen in ancient Israel. It might have been otherwise. Had Judaism been a different kind of religion, the people bringing firstfruits might have recited a song of praise to God as the author of creation and sustainer of life. We find several such songs in the Book of Psalms: "Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; / make music to our God on the harp. / He covers the sky with clouds; / he supplies the earth with rain / and makes grass grow on the hills, / and bread that sustains his heart." (Ps. 147: 7-8)

The significance of the firstfruits declaration is that it is not about nature but about history: a thumbnail sketch of the sequence of events from the days of the patriarchs to the exodus and then conquest of the land. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi gave the best analysis of the intellectual transformation this involved: "It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view... Suddenly, as it were, the crucial encounter between man and the divine shifted away from the realm of nature and the cosmos to the plane of history, conceived now in terms of divine challenge and human response... Rituals and festivals in ancient Israel are themselves no longer primarily repetitions of mythic archetypes meant to annihilate historical time. Where they evoke the past, it is not the primeval but the historical past, in which the great and critical moments of Israel's history were fulfilled... Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people." (Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, p.8-9)

This history was not academic, the province of scholars or a literary elite. It belonged to everyone. The declaration was recited by everyone. Knowing the story of one's people was an essential part of citizenship in the community of faith. Not only that, but it was also said in the first person: "My father... Then the Lord brought us out of Egypt... He brought us to this place". It is this internalization of history that led the rabbis to say: "In each generation, every person should see himself as if he personally came out of Egypt" (Mishnah Pesachim 10: 5). This is history transformed into memory.

To be a Jew is to be part of a story that extends across forty centuries and almost every land on the face of the earth. As Isaiah Berlin put it: "All Jews who are at all conscious of their identity as Jews are steeped in history. They have longer memories, they are aware of a

longer continuity as a community than any other which has survived... Whatever other factors may have entered into the unique amalgam which, if not always Jews themselves, at any rate the rest of the world instantly recognizes as the Jewish people, historical consciousness -- sense of continuity with the past -- is among the most powerful." (Against the Current, p. 252)

Despite Judaism's emphasis on the individual, it has a distinctive sense of what an individual is. We are not alone. There is no sense in Judaism of the atomic individual -- the self in and for itself -- we encounter in Western philosophy from Hobbes onwards. Instead, our identity is bound up horizontally with other individuals: our parents, spouse, children, neighbours, members of the community, fellow citizens, fellow Jews. We are also joined vertically to those who came before us, whose story we make our own. To be a Jew is to be a link in the chain of the generations, a character in a drama that began long before we were born and will continue long after our death.

Memory is essential to identity -- so Judaism insists. We did not come from nowhere; nor does our story end with us. We are leaves on an ancient tree, chapters in a long and still-being-written story, a letter in the scroll of the book of the people of the Book.

There is something momentous about this historical sense. It reflects the fact -- itself one of the great themes of the Bible -- that it takes time for human beings to learn, to grow, to rise beyond our often dysfunctional and destructive instincts, to reach moral and spiritual maturity and create a society of dignity and generosity. That is why the covenant is extended over time and why -- according to the sages -- the only adequate guarantors of the covenant at Mount Sinai were the children yet to be born.

That is as near as we get to immortality on earth: to know that we are the guardians of the hopes of our ancestors, and the trustees of the covenant for the sake of the future. That is what happened in Temple times when people brought their firstfruits to Jerusalem and, instead of celebrating nature, celebrated the history of their people from the days when "My father was a wandering Aramean" to the present. As Moses said in some of his last words to posterity: "Remember the days of old; / consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you." (Deut. 32: 7)

To be a Jew is to know that the history of our people lives on in us. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The opening words of this week's Torah portion, a speech to be declared by the farmer when he brings

his first fruits to the Holy Temple, presents the quintessence of Jewish history -- and sounds tantalizingly familiar to the observant Jewish ear: "A wandering Aramean was my father (Arami oved avi). He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there, but there he became a great and populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us, and laid upon us hard bondage.... And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm....and with signs, and wonders. And He brought us to this place, and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey." (Deut. 26:5-9)

In the context of our portion, the land-dweller in Israel literally sings these words as he ceremoniously sets his first fruits before the priest. And these are also the words expounded in our Passover Haggadah, the central message of the Seder night.

The inevitable question is, why did the compilers of the Haggadah choose this particular section? Wouldn't it have made more sense to turn to the book of Exodus which relates directly to the Jews leaving Egypt?

First of all, it is important to point out that giving away the first fruits is not an easy thing to do, even if you've come to terms with all the different tithes required by the Bible. The farmer has literally invested the sweat of his brow in these first fruits, breaking his back under a sweltering sun in his planting and harvesting.

When he is finally ready to celebrate the bounty, build a nice fire in the hearth, and hold up these first fruits as a sign of contentment and peace, he is commanded to give up his produce -- and the first of his produce -- as a gift to God and the Temple.

What gives the farmer the requisite commitment and the moral backbone to present the first fruits lovingly is the historical and moral perspective he acquires when he is cognizant of the place whence he has come, when he ponders his roots and his origins. He is, after all, the descendant of idolaters and slaves who have become the heirs of prophets and priests, the reapers of divine largesse. Rather than thinking of himself as an isolated figure, at best linked to one generation before him and one generation after him, the verse, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor" serves as the password into the previous addresses -- and therefore present responsibilities -- of Jewish history. The farmer is really saying, "I was not born into a vacuum; I am the product of many generations, the beneficiary of many momentous and miraculous events. I owe a great debt to my God, my forbears, and my traditions."

And the truth is, the farmer's speech takes this idea one step further. Note that the farmer's speech-song is in the first-person: "A wandering Aramean was my father...the Egyptians dealt harshly with us...the Lord brought us forth from Egypt."

This pilgrim to Jerusalem may well have lived thousands of years after the enslavement and the Exodus -- but he speaks of these seminal events as

though they had occurred to him. He has transformed sterile, past-tense, national history into a living, present-tense, personal experience. Indeed, Jews do not remember a history – his story; Jews relive a memory – a me story, a my story, a mystery, miracle story. Memory is not only dead ashes; it is rather a set of vital building blocks, which inspires present-day commitments and future obligations. The ability of the individual Jew to transform national history into personal memory is indeed the miraculous mystery of Jewish survival – and eventual triumph – into eternity.

From this perspective, it becomes perfectly clear why our sages chose this particular passage to serve as the central text of our Passover Seder. After all, the night in which we celebrate our freedom from Egypt is the most structured of the entire year – because our freedom from ser-v-ice to Pharaoh obligates our service to God. Moses, the greatest Jew who ever lived, is biblically eulogized as an eved, a servant of the Lord (Deut. 34:5).

And the author of the Haggadah is not satisfied with the mere recounting of a past historical event. We must actually taste the bitter herbs of slavery and feel the freedom which comes after drinking at least four cups of wine. “It is incumbent upon everyone to feel as if he/she had been redeemed from Egypt,” teaches the Haggadah. Is it any wonder that we are enjoined to recite and expound a first-person, experiential memory rather than a third-person retelling of an historical event?

And so why do we read this particular passage about the first fruits on the Seder night? If the individual can truly feel experientially – in the very gut-core of his being – the miracle of his freedom from servitude, then his obligation to the Almighty to bring his first fruits to the One who took him out of Egypt becomes self-understood. And this obligation is extended to include the entire 613 commandments of the Torah which we celebrate along with the first fruits in the upcoming Festival of Shavuot.

This inter-penetration of remembrance, personal experience, and obligation is clearly in evidence on Rosh HaShana, the beginning of our new year, which generally falls shortly after our Torah reading of Ki Tavo. “Today the world is conceived,” we say again and again in our Rosh HaShana liturgy – and the festival on that day is liturgically referred to as “The Day of Remembrance (Yom HaZikaron).” We even recite a special Rosh HaShana Musaf (additional Amida prayer) blessing known as Remembrances (Zikhronot), which opens: “You [God] remember the deeds of the world and provide a function for [in Hebrew: “u’foked,” usually translated “and recall,” but the Hebrew “tafkid,” “function,” has the three-letter root f-k-d] all the creatures created from earliest times.” Our remembrance that we exist because God gave us life heightens our obligation to live a meaningful life in the eyes of our Creator.

“All the creatures created from earliest times...” In effect, the liturgy is teaching us to be grateful for life

and world, to remember and re-experience the primordial moment of creation, and to be mindful of the fact that life and world participate in a cumulative history directed by God. And we recognize that we are creatures of history acting on the stage of the universe under the overall direction of the Divine – but with a large degree of flexibility which allows for actors to sometimes forget some of their lines or even to temporarily assume the wrong part, to play the wrong role. We are here because of our past, and so we are obligated to play a role to help guarantee a future. And Rosh HaShana repentance means we must examine our actions, make certain we are playing our role as best as we can – and be as assured as possible that we are acting in the right screenplay for each one of us. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Devarim: Moses Bequeaths Legacy, History and Covenant, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinDevarim. © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L

Wein Online

The main part of the parsha is concerned with the description of the woes that will befall the Jewish people in their long years of exile and persecution. The Torah sees this as being a form of redemptive punishment for the Chosen People who chose to imitate the idolatrous and immoral ways of the general society.

However, as the exile of Israel stretched into centuries and then into millennia, the Jews began to feel that somehow the punishment was rather excessive relative to the crime. Therefore other explanations for the length and bitterness of the exile of Israel were advanced.

The Talmud itself, hundreds of years after the destruction of the Second Temple, offered that the scattering of the Jewish people throughout the world was to allow non-Jews who wished to convert to Judaism be afforded the opportunity to do so. Others suggested that the dispersal of the Jewish Diaspora was to allow Judaic values and attitudes to penetrate the non-Jewish world as well.

It was through the bitter exile itself that the Jewish people would fulfill its mission of being a light unto the nations of the world. The survival of the Jewish people under the oppressive conditions of its exile also raised questions and problems for the Christian world. The concept of the “Witness People” gained currency in the Christian world – that somehow Jews had to survive to “witness” the eventual reappearance of the Christian savior and finally convert to Christianity.

Thus the Church established the institution of the “Pope’s Jews” who were protected from harm since they had to survive to be the “Witness People.” Be all of this as it may, what is clear is that every word of the

Torah regarding the fate of the Jews in exile has come true – true literally and not allegorically. As the Ramban phrased it, it is astounding that a book written thousands of years before the events occurred should record those events so truthfully and faithfully.

It is of comfort that since the tragedies recited in the parsha that would befall Israel have all come true literally that we can be certain that the blessings and redemption similarly told to us in the parsha shall also undoubtedly be fulfilled literally. Some of them have already been realized in our time with the ingathering of the exiles of Israel to the nascent Jewish state. Others are still developing.

The Torah never placed any time limits either on Jewish exile or redemption. The Lord has His own reckoning that no human can be privy to. The rabbis, therefore, strongly discouraged prognostications of dates for the arrival of the redemption and the messianic era.

Over the many centuries of Jewish exile, many dates were forecast to be the ones of redemption, but all of them have come and gone and the redemption is yet unfulfilled in actuality or completeness. Yet our hope and belief in our eventual redemption has never waned. “Next year in Jerusalem” has been fulfilled. Next year in a fully rebuilt and peaceful Jerusalem is in the wings of the drama that unfolds now before our very eyes. © 2011 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The New Covenant

Parashat Ki Tavo contains the second Tochacha, Rebuke and Warning, of the future sins and punishments that would befall the Jewish People that is found in the Torah. The first Tochacha occurred in Parashat Bechukotai, and most of the commentators say that it was the warning for the destruction of the First Temple. Our parasha's Tochacha contains the rebuke and warning of the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile which followed that event. After this warning, the Torah reminds the Jews of their covenant with Hashem and establishes a new covenant before the People enter the Land.

The Torah states: “Moshe summoned all of Israel and said to them, ‘You have seen everything that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Par’oh, and to all his servants and to all his land – the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders, but Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day. I led you for forty years in the Wilderness, your garment did not wear out from on you, and your shoe did not wear out from your foot. Bread you did not eat, and wine or intoxicant you did not drink, so that you would know that

I am Hashem, your Elokim. Then you arrived at this place, and Sichon, King of Cheshbon, and Og, King of Bashan, went out towards us to battle, and we smote them. We took their land and gave it as an inheritance to the sons of Reuvein, to the sons of Gad, and to half the tribe of Menashe. You shall preserve the words of this covenant, and you shall perform them, so that you will succeed in all that you do.”

Moshe seems to say that the B'nei Yisrael who were gathered now to hear his words were alive when Hashem performed the miracles for them in Egypt, yet we know that the men who were over the age of twenty at the time of the spies, already had died and were replaced with a new generation, only some of whom had any direct knowledge of those miracles. According to the Ohr HaChaim, Moshe included within “all of Israel” the women, the proselytes, and the children. The women were not punished for the sin of the spies, and they certainly remembered the time that they were in Egypt. Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe's purpose in including all these people was to establish with them a new covenant that would include everyone. This new covenant occurs in next week's parasha, which immediately follows our paragraph.

When Moshe went up onto Har Sinai, we were told that Moshe did not eat bread or drink water for the forty days and nights that he received the Torah from Hashem. The Ramban explains that we see a slightly different statement about the B'nei Yisrael, and with an entirely different meaning. Moshe existed outside of Nature, which meant that he did not need food or water for sustenance on Har Sinai. Here, however, Moshe was explaining to the people that they were sustained by Hashem without what one would normally eat or drink. They were sustained by the Manna from Hashem, which fell each morning and spoiled by the next morning. This forced the B'nei Yisrael to live entirely by the gifts from Hashem, “so that you would know that I am Hashem.” The Ramban also explains that the sentence here does not mean that the B'nei Yisrael never ate bread in the desert, as the Torah states that they bought bread and water for money which they offered to buy from the children of Eisav.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the transition of the people from wanderers in the desert to a nation that could prosper and survive took forty years in the desert together with the many miracles that the people experienced. Surviving as a nation also meant that the B'nei Yisrael had to recognize that “I am Hashem” is the “signature with which Hashem sealed His commandments. He is the sole true Being Who bears His Personality within Himself; He is the absolute One Who can say ‘I am Hashem.’ He is the only true I, and with His absolute free Will, He brings about every future moment of everything that exists in heaven and on the earth.”

One question which was asked by a number of

commentators concerning this rebuke that Moshe gave to the B'nei Yisrael focuses on the fact that this rebuke followed forty years in the desert. The big question is why it took so long to rebuke the people. There were many occasions when the B'nei Yisrael sinned in the desert, but Moshe still treated them as if they were righteous. Moshe upheld the righteousness of the people because he was defending them before Hashem. Of course, the people had sinned many times, but they also fulfilled most of Hashem's commandments. Compared to the rest of world, the B'nei Yisrael were definitely righteous. Yet they needed rebuke. Especially when a person reaches a high spiritual level, even greater demands are made of him. But Moshe waited until they were just about to enter the land to give them this final rebuke. The Ohr HaChaim explains that Moshe waited until he understood that "Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear [this reproof] until this day." It was only after they had been granted the ability to comprehend all of the messages of their teacher that they were now capable of accepting this rebuke.

The final words of our paragraph discuss the covenant, this new covenant, which was being established between the B'nei Yisrael and Hashem. "You shall preserve the words of this covenant, and you shall perform them, so that you will succeed in all that you do." What was this covenant? Moshe instructed them to follow the words of the Torah and observe Hashem's commandments and Hashem would give them the land that He had promised them without the scourge of heavy battle that would occur if Hashem were not guiding them. It would not be that Hashem would protect everyone, and deaths and injuries would not take place, because the People lost that protection when they had accepted the negative report of the spies. Had they accepted the words of Calev ben Yephuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun, Hashem would have caused the evil inhabitants of the land to flee without any battle. But Hashem would still give the B'nei Yisrael a level of protection that only He could give.

We have now begun to return to the land in what appears to be the return of the exiles and the beginning of the Redemption that was promised in last week's parasha. May we prove to be worthy of this Redemption, and may we do our part to fulfill our side of this new covenant by practicing all of Hashem's Laws. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Ah, August – that very special month that brings vacations to a close as it ushers in the new school year. It is a time of new beginnings and exciting possibilities.

Did you ever notice the throngs of mothers at a bus stop tearfully sending their precious children off on

their first day of school? Did you think those were tears of sadness and longing? Hardly. It is the heart's silent, involuntary confession that it has just witnessed something beautifully transcendent; namely, that for the first time in two months, their child is someone else's problem for the next eight hours.

I am reminded of the following story: A mother repeatedly called upstairs, "Get up, get dressed, and get ready for school!" It was a familiar routine and especially important when the school was administering standardized tests.

"I feel sick," said the voice from the bedroom.

"You are not sick. Get up and get ready," the woman replied, walking up the stairs and hovering outside the bedroom door.

"I hate school and I'm not going," said the voice from the other side of the door. "I'm always getting things wrong, making mistakes, and getting told off. The teachers hate me and constantly complain about me. Nobody likes me, not even the school janitor."

"I'm sorry, but you are going to school. We all make mistakes, so try not to take criticism so personally. Besides, I cannot believe that nobody likes you – you probably have lots of friends at school," she continued. "Anyway, you have to go, you're the principal."

In all the years I attended school I never once considered that maybe the principal hated being there as much as I did. But from the time I was a small child all the way through my teenage years I absolutely despised going to school. I never would have guessed that one day I'd be "going to school" by choice, but here I am showing up to work each day – mostly happy to be here.

(I remember when I accompanied my oldest son to his first day at school some thirty-three years ago. As we entered the school he was excitedly jumping up and down in anticipation. I looked at him and sadly thought, "You poor boy; you have no idea that you are about to begin a 15-year sentence.")

The essence of leadership is the assumption of ultimate responsibility. Occasionally, we may very well be that principal who is reluctant to get out of bed or a parent who is happy for someone else to watch their kids, but at the end of the day we assume the mantle because it is our job. True leadership is having the perspective that no matter the situation – or how it came to be – we must address and resolve issues to the best of our ability and for the betterment of those under our care.

Around the turn of the 20th century, as African colonialism began to wane and the continent slowly emerged as a potential economic market, two salesmen were sent by a British shoe manufacturer to different parts of the African continent to investigate and report back on market potential. After a few months the president of the company requested a progress report.

The first salesman reported, "Bring me home. There is no potential here – nobody wears shoes." The

second salesman reported, "Send large stock of various shoes. There is massive potential here – nobody wears shoes."

In essence, what really differentiated the two salesman was that the first one only saw the situation as it was, and he therefore became locked into that paradigm and saw no way out. The second salesman had a vision of what the situation could become – and was willing to take responsibility to see it through.

This week's Torah reading imparts wisdom that is relevant to this lesson.

"And God shall make you the head and not the tail; and you shall be above only, and you shall not be beneath [...]" (Deuteronomy 28:13).

This week's Torah portion discusses the amazing rewards for following the Torah path and the terrible punishments, God forbid, for veering from it. One of the rewards for fulfilling the Torah and mitzvot (commandments) is a promise that God will ensure the Jewish nation will become "the head and not the tail" – i.e. leaders and not followers.

One of the great medieval Biblical commentators was the Spanish sage known as Ramban (the Hebrew acronym for Rabbi Moses son of Nachman). Born in Girona, Catalonia around 1190 he was recognized as a prodigy from a young age. He was appointed rabbi of Girona as a young man and eventually he was selected as the Chief Rabbi of Catalonia. His written commentaries on the Torah and Talmud and works on philosophy are legendary. It would be hard to overstate his impact on Jewish scholarship. He died in the Land of Israel around 1270.

On the verse quoted above, Ramban is bothered by the seemingly unnecessary words "and not the tail." Since the Jewish people are promised that if they follow the Torah and its commandments, they will become the "head" it would seem obvious that they would not be the tail. Why then, asks Ramban, is it necessary for the verse to explicitly exclude being the tail?

He answers that often a head is also a tail. How so? Consider a large company with many employees; obviously, the CEO cannot manage hundreds of subordinates. So, a system of management is put into place with staff employees, middle managers, and executive managers. The middle managers are thus leaders to some and subordinates to others.

Similarly, a nation can be ranked as a world power, making them a "head" over other nations; throughout history various nations ranked at the "top" – the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans, etc. But as there are many nations in the world, most nations are in the middle and are therefore similar to middle managers; a "head" to some nations and a "tail" to others, with nations ranked both above and below them.

Ramban goes on to explain that in this verse the

Almighty is promising us that if we follow the Torah we will be "ranked" at the absolute top – only a head and not a tail to any other nation in the world.

I once heard a brilliant class from my father on the subject of leadership, and utilizing Ramban's insight he remarked that often leaders too are both the head and the tail. How so?

A proper leader is one who has a vision for his convictions and implements it. In other words, he sees the proper path, even if it is unpopular, and courageously guides his followers down that path. That is a true leader – one at the head of his constituency.

Unfortunately, most of the leaders of our generation are of another type – they are a head in title only, and a tail in practice. These leaders don't have a conviction of their vision; they merely observe the prevailing sentiment of popular opinion and draw their agenda based on their constituency's clamoring.

Sadly, in this situation, a head is really just a tail because this sort of leadership isn't driven by vision or the betterment of his people, he is driven instead by "the tail" – those who he is meant to be leading. Unfortunately, when a leader abandons his vision to the whims of his constituents, his agenda always suffers because it invariably ends up following the lowest common denominator: i.e. "On what can we all agree?" (Or, what is currently trending on social media.)

Of the last ten U.S. presidencies only two or three have really tried to lead with a vision without wholly pandering to the baser desires of the foolish American people (Hey! Let's try socialism!). This is how we have gotten to where we are today: An out-of-control deficit, looming disasters in Social Security benefits and other government safety nets, and a system of higher education that instead of preparing students for the real world, fills their head with the stupidest ideologies and bankrupt moral values.

Little wonder then that there is an overall disgust with the two prevailing political parties (almost half the country affiliates with neither party). This is what happens when the nation's agenda is driven by the lowest common denominator instead of being motivated by a true leader. Truth and morality always suffer in these situations because the national agenda is motivated by popular demand and not by asking "What is the right thing to do? What will create the best future for our people?"

Unfortunately, this is the essence of our current predicament. Political intractability obscures the reality of our plight because no one will stand up and state the truth. Whether it is debunking the validity of the most ridiculous claims, condemning violent acts done in the name of a religion or ideological movements, or calling out the segment of society that continually lays the blame of its ills at the feet of others without taking real responsibility, most leaders today steadfastly refuse to call out the lies within the narratives of their constituents.

They will not take a stand deemed to be unpopular because they fear losing their leadership position and "power."

The Torah is teaching us how to change that. If we follow the commandment, we will be true leaders: We will have a real moral compass and a healthy vision for ourselves and the world. This is the path to being the head and not a tail; we filter out the nonsense, we do not follow the crowd, we lead mitzvah filled lives, and we become shining examples for the world to follow. © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA

HARAV BARUCH GIGI

Summarized by Daniel Herman;

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“And you shall come to the kohen who will be in the those days, and you shall say to him: My father was a wandering Aramean..." (Devarim 26:3) Rashi (ad loc.): "[To show] that you are not ungrateful."

God, in His great mercy, permits man to be His partner in creation. After years of labor in the field -- plowing, sowing, weeding, watering, and so on -- a person goes to his field and sees the first fruit of his labors. He ties a string to the first fruit, indicating "This is bikkurim." This act, and the awareness behind it, demonstrate the person's gratitude to God for giving him the fruit.

The midrash (Tanchuma, Ki Tavo 1) tells us that "Moshe saw with prophetic vision that the Temple would be destroyed and that bikkurim were destined to cease." Therefore, the midrash continues, "Moshe instituted that the Jewish people should pray three times each day." Corresponding to the annual experience (and demonstration) of gratitude, Moshe instituted daily prayer. That way, when a person needs wisdom -- he prays for it; when he needs healing, he knows to Whom to turn. Thus a person comes to know his Creator; he knows the ultimate address for everything in the world.

Bikkurim are called "reshit" (the beginning or the first). When a person brings bikkurim, he recounts a brief history of Am Yisrael, going back to the beginning at the time of the Patriarchs: "My father was a wandering Aramean..." (Devarim 26:5). From this we learn that it is possible and desirable to go back to the beginning, which brings us to the concept of teshuva (repentance).

"Wisdom was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It replied: Evil pursues sinners.

"Prophecy was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It answered them: A soul that sins will die.

"Torah was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It answered them: Let him bring a guilt offering and be atoned for.

"The Holy One, blessed be He, was asked: What

is the punishment for a sinner? He said to them: Let him repent, and he will be atoned for." (Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6)

(The Yerushalmi here does not mention "the Torah," but the Maharal brings a different version of the text in his Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Teshuva (chapter 1).)

Wisdom and logic dictate that if a person sins, his sin should pursue him for the rest of his life and cause him continually to stumble and fail. As Chazal taught, "One transgression leads to another" (Avot 4:2) -- because that is the nature of things. Even prophecy insists that a sinner must die; there is no possibility of turning back the wheel. The Torah speaks about atonement, with the bringing of a sacrifice and with suffering. Only God Himself introduces the concept of repentance.

Atonement and repentance are two separate concepts. A person can achieve atonement without repenting, and the opposite is also true. The Gemara teaches that if a man betrothes a woman "on condition that I am completely righteous," then even if he is completely wicked, the betrothal is honored, for it is possible that he repented in his heart (Kiddushin 49b). One might ask, isn't it necessary, for the purposes of proper teshuva, that a person confess his sins verbally? This man made no mention of his sins! We must therefore conclude that teshuva is a different concept that operates according to different rules.

For the purposes of atonement, it is necessary that there be a process of confession and all the required stages of the process; the Gemara (Yoma 86a) even enumerates four different types of atonement. But repentance is something unique; only God Himself can allow for it. It is above nature, because through teshuva a person returns to the beginning, the "reshit," to his situation prior to the sin, to a situation that allows him to start over and not to be swept away by the current of "one transgression leads to another."

Who is able to repent? Only someone who recognizes God's gift of this "reshit." Only a person who is not ungrateful, and who recognizes the Source, the Giver, of this opportunity. Only someone who recognizes this can understand that the idea of teshuva is indeed possible -- for without recognition of God's immanent presence and God's kindness, the concept of teshuva could not exist at all.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Eating the First Fruits

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Parshat Ki Tavo touches on the mitzvot of bikurim (first fruits) and ma'aser sheni (a tithe consumed in Jerusalem). However, the details relevant to eating them are found elsewhere. The mitzva of eating bikurim appears in Devarim 12:5-6, and the mitzva of eating ma'aser sheni is in Devarim 14:23.

Not only are these two *mitzvot* mentioned in Ki Tavo in close proximity to each other, but they have many similarities (for example, they are both eaten in Jerusalem in a state of purity). Accordingly, our Sages apply the laws of one to the other. There are some differences, though. For example, *ma'aser sheni* is eaten in Jerusalem by its owners, while *bikurim* are presented to the *Kohanim* when the owners arrive in Jerusalem.

The declaration said when bringing *ma'aser sheni* to Jerusalem includes the phrase: "I have not eaten of it while in mourning" (*Devarim* 26:14). This means a person is required to eat *ma'aser sheni* joyfully. When he is mourning and shrouded in sorrow, he may not eat it. Because we apply the rules of *ma'aser sheni* to *bikurim*, a *Kohen* who is in mourning may not eat *bikurim*. Others derive the latter rule from the verse that states regarding *bikurim* that "You shall enjoy all the bounty" (*Devarim* 26:11). This requirement of joy applies not only to the field owners who bring their fruit to the *Kohen*, but also to the *Kohen* who is privileged to eat the fruit of the Holy Land.

The mitzva of eating *bikurim* is so important that the *Kohen* who eats *bikurim* makes a special blessing (just as he does before reciting the priestly blessing): "*Asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu le'echol bikurim*" ("Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to eat *bikurim*").

© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"It shall be just as Hashem was happy about you to be good to you and magnify you, so will He make happy about you to destroy you and wipe you out..." (*Devarim* 28:63) The Tochacha (rebuke) of Parshas Ki Savo is a terrifying litany of ninety-eight curses describing the worst calamities humanly possible befalling the Jewish People for not following Hashem and His Torah. These curses are the flip side of the boundless blessings promised to us for cherishing the Torah. Instead of being blessed, we will be cursed. Not just having the good taken away, but having it replaced with bad.

Worse, the evil will not only come from external sources, but it will even come from ourselves, in the form of paranoia, fear, and mistrust manifest in our own minds. The reason, as stated in verse 47, is because we didn't serve Hashem with joy and gladness of heart, from the abundance that we enjoyed.

The key to Torah observance lies not in simply doing the actions the Torah prescribes, but in being happy about it. We should recognize that Hashem gives us so much, not merely for our own pleasure, but as a means for fulfilling His will gladly and with excitement. Failure to understand this is what turns the blessing into a curse. Whereas we had the ability in our hands to achieve so much, the recognition of our failure to do so

will become the source of anguish and suffering.

When we do what we should with what we have, Hashem is "happy" for us, and glad to bless us with abundance. When we don't, He makes our enemies happy to harm and torment us. While they will pay the price eventually, they enjoy making our lives unbearable. It isn't a punishment, per se, but a means to bring us around to see what we are doing wrong, and need to fix.

The underlying message, which is easy to miss, is that whatever we do, we should be making the most of what we have, and that will bring us joy. When the enemies are given the task of inflicting pain on us, they relish it, even though it's a horrible, horrible thing to be doing. They find joy in it regardless, because they are maximizing what Hashem has given them, being the opportunity to harass us.

It is a sign to us of where we went wrong. The wealth we enjoyed was given for us to help others and beautify our mitzvot. If we don't use it properly, but squander it, we have no reason to rejoice. When we look at the mitzvot as a burden or anchor weighing us down, we have misunderstood what we were given, and that leads to melancholy and pain.

If we want to lead blessed lives, we should use everything we have for the best purpose, and rejoice in our opportunities to do with our gifts what Hashem wants us to. That is the source of happiness - the satisfaction of a job well done.

Each Friday, the young children of the class would have a Shabbos party. They would set a table with a white cloth, place candles, grape juice, and goodies on the table, and have a mock Shabbos meal.

One week, the teacher told Yankel it was his turn to be the Shabbos Abba/Tatty/Daddy. "Go ahead, Yankel," said the teacher, "Take your place by the Kiddush cup and begin the Shabbos party as if you were the father leading the meal."

Yankel slowly walked over to the seat, (as he had seen his own father do each week), plopped down in the chair, loosened his tie and belt and let out a huge groan. "Ooooyyyy..." he sighed. "Hob ich gehat a shvareh voch!" (Boy, did I have a tough week!!) © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

