

“Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim with a strong hand”

The Bikkurim Declaration Incorporates an Expression of Gratitude on Behalf of the Fruit that Left Their Galus in the Depths of the Earth and Emerged to Their Geulah Above

In this week’s parsha, parshat Ki Savo, it is fitting that we explore two mitzvos encompassed by the mitzvah of bikkurim: (1) the mitzvah to bring a minchah offering in the Beit HaMikdash from the bikkurim and (2) the mitzvah to recite the passage of bikkurim. Regarding the first of these mitzvos, it is written (Devarim 26, 1):

“וְהָיָה כִּי תָבוֹא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ נוֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וִירְשָׁתָה וְיִשְׁבַּת בָּהּ, וּלְקַחְתָּ מִרְאשִׁית כָּל פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תִּבְנֶינָה מֵאֲרֶצְךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ נוֹתֵן לְךָ וְשַׂמְתָּ בַטֶּנָּא, וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לְשֹׁכֵן שָׁמָּה. וּבָאתָ אֶל הַכֹּהֵן אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בַיָּמִים הַהֵם וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו, הִגְדַּתִּי הַיּוֹם לַה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ כִּי בָאתִי אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לַאֲבוֹתַי לָתֵת לָנוּ. וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן הַטֶּנָּא מִיָּדְךָ וְהִנִּיחוֹ לִפְנֵי מִזְבֵּחַ ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ.”

“It will be when you enter the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His name rest there. You shall come to the Kohen who will be in those days, and you shall say to him, ‘I declare today to Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us.’ The Kohen shall take the basket from your hand, and lay it before the mizbeich of Hashem, your G-d.”

Regarding the second mitzvah, here are the pesukim that the owner of a field must recite when he brings the bikkurim (ibid. 5):

“וְעֲנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, אֲרָמִי אוֹבֵד אֲבִי וִירַד מִצְרַיִמָּה... וִירְעוּ אוֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבוּדָה קָשָׁה, וְנִצַּעַק אֶל ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹלָנוּ, וַיִּרְא אֶת עֲנִינוּ וְאֶת עֲמַלְנוּ וְאֶת לַחֲצוֹנוּ. וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרֹעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמִוֶּרָא גָדוֹל וּבְאוֹתוֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים, וַיְבִיאֵנוּ אֶל הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ, וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת רְאשִׁית פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּ לִּי ה', וְהִנַּחְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחוּוִּיתָ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ.”

Then you shall answer and say before Hashem, your G-d, “An Arami would have destroyed my father, and he descended to Mitzrayim . . . The Egyptians mistreated us and tortured us, and placed hard work upon us. Then we cried out to Hashem, the G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail, and our oppression. Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O Hashem!” And you shall place it before Hashem, your G-d, and you shall prostrate yourself before Hashem, your G-d.

At first glance, the formula of this declaration is quite baffling. Certainly, a person who has the good fortune to bring bikkurim from the fruits of Eretz Yisrael is required to express his gratitude to Hashem—for giving us this land flowing with milk and honey and allowing us to eat its fruit and enjoy its abundant good. However, why was it necessary to recount and detail the three historical stages leading up to the inhabiting of the land? First, the descent into galut in Mitzrayim is mentioned and the oppression we suffered there. Secondly, the exodus from Mitzrayim is described. Thirdly, the entrance into Eretz Yisrael is mentioned.

It is worth noting the specific language employed by the passuk: “וְעֲנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ”. According to Rashi, this indicates that the declaration demanded raising one’s voice. We will endeavor to explain why the bikkurim declaration had to be pronounced with a raised voice. Additionally, what is the significance of the words: “וְעֲנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ”—**you will answer and you will say?** These words suggest that someone is calling out to him and he is responding

by raising his voice and pronouncing the bikkurim declaration. So, who exactly is calling out to him that he must answer?

The Song of the Wheat:

“ממעמקים קראתיך ה”

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by introducing an excerpt from Perek Shirah (Chapter 3): “שיכולת חיטים אומרת: “ה” (תהלים קל-א) שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה” **the sheaf of wheat says, “A song of ascents: From the depths, I called You, Hashem.”** The song sung by the wheat can be understood simply in light of the fact that the earth was cursed in the aftermath of the Cheit Eitz HaDa’at. After Adam HaRishon sinned, it states (Bereishis 3, 17): “ארורה האדמה בעבורך בעצבון תאכלנה כל ימי חיך, וקוץ” **“cursed is the ground because of you; through suffering shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.**

Hence, when a farmer plants grains of wheat in the ground, perforce they must pray to Hashem from the depths of the earth that the thorns and thistles will not prevent them from growing and sprouting. So, after emerging from the depths of the earth, the sheaves of wheat sing their praise to Hashem: “שיר המעלות” **“ממעמקים קראתיך ה”**. For, Hashem accepted their tefilot from the depths of the earth enabling them to grow and fulfill the task that HKB”H had assigned them—to feed and nourish mankind.

We can elaborate on this point based on a story told about the righteous Rabbanit Malka, a”h, the wife of the holy Admor, Sar Shalom of Belz, zy”a. It was her custom to distribute food to the chassidim that came to bask in the holy presence of her husband. On one occasion, she noticed that one of their guests uttered the berachah quickly, without “kavanah”; he began eating ravenously to satiate himself.

She rebuked him as follows: Please consider what these grains of wheat have had to endure since they were sown in the ground and until they were privileged to end up on a Jew’s table. After being planted in the ground, they pray to Hashem to let rains of berachah fall upon them, so that they may sprout and grow. When they successfully break through the surface of the earth and emerge into the air of this world, they pray to Hashem that worms will not consume them.

Then they pray to the Almighty, Who orchestrates everything that happens in the world, that they will be privileged to end up in

the home of a G-d-fearing Jew, who will grind them up and make them into a fine flour to be baked into bread. Then he will make a proper berachah over the bread with “kavanah,” and will thereby rectify all of the holy sparks contained in the bread. The Rabbanit concluded her words of rebuke to that chassid as follows: So, you see, now. After all the troubles these grains of wheat have endured, and all the tefilot they have uttered, until they were finally privileged to be baked into a loaf of bread that would end up on a table of those who fear Hashem, you come and utter a berachah quickly without “kavanah” and ruin everything!

This explains very nicely the words uttered by the sheaves of wheat. After successfully emerging from the depths of the earth, in the merit of their tefilah: “שיר המעלות ממעמקים קראתיך ה” —they beseech Hashem to watch over them on their long, perilous journey; they pray that they be privileged to be baked into a loaf of bread worthy of being eaten by a Jew, who will recite a berachah over it with intense “kavanah.”

Furthermore, this explains very nicely the berachah that our blessed sages instituted to be recited prior to eating bread: **ברוך** “אתה ה’ אלקינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ” —we are thanking Hashem for giving us bread to eat and to satisfy our hunger. In addition, with this berachah, we are also acting as the agents of the grains of wheat contained in the bread; we are voicing for them their intense desire to bless Hashem. After all, he took them out of the belly of the earth and protected them throughout their journey, until they ultimately were privileged to be part of a loaf of bread on a Jewish table. Since they lack the capacity to bless Hashem via speech, we become the mouths that articulate the berachah in their stead: **המוציא** “לחם מן הארץ”—**Who brings forth bread from the earth.**

Man Serves as the Fruit’s Agent Expressing Their Gratitude to Hashem

We can now begin to appreciate the wonders and profundity of Hashem’s ways. He commanded us to express our gratitude to Hashem in the Beit HaMikdash by making a well-formulated declaration over the bikkurim minchah-offering. As explained above, three distinct stages are depicted in this declaration: (1) the descent into galut Mitzrayim, (2) the exodus and geulah from Mitzrayim and (3) the entrance into Eretz Yisrael. Upon further scrutiny, it is apparent that these three stages also apply to the fruit that we bring to Hashem as bikkurim. They, too, endured three similar stages.

Let us explain. Stage one--galut Mitzrayim: The seeds of the fruit were planted deep within the earth. As such, they found themselves in the oppressive earth that was cursed due to the Cheit Eitz HaDa'at. There they waited anxiously, as if with bated breath, for rains of berachah to descend from the heavens that would enable them to sprout and emerge from their galut in the depths of the earth. Stage two—their geulah from galut Mitzrayim: HKB”H takes them out from the depths of the earth and introduces them into the atmosphere of the world. Stage three—entering Eretz Yisrael: A Jew brings the first fruit yielded by his land as bikkurim to Hashem in the Beit HaMikdash.

As we know, HKB”H took Yisrael out of galut Mitzrayim due to their outcry to Hashem. The Torah describes this as follows (Shemot 2, 23): “ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבודה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלקים מן העבודה, וישמע אלקים את נאקתם ויזכור אלקים את בריתו את יעקב—and Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d. G-d heard their moaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak and with Yaakov. In similar fashion, the grains of wheat, in the merit of their crying out to Hashem from the depths of the earth--“ממעמקים קראתיך ה”--are released by HKB”H from their earthy confinement, a form of geulat Mitzrayim.

At this point, we have succeeded in presenting a novel explanation as to why HKB”H specifically chose these pesukim to be recited in association with the mitzvah of bikkurim. For, when a man brings his gift of bikkurim to Hashem—consisting of those fruit in whom the nitzotzei kedushah from the entire field gathered—the fruit themselves cannot express their gratitude to Hashem in actual speech. Therefore, HKB”H commanded the person bringing bikkurim to thank Hashem for everything he has experienced—from the galut in Mitzrayim until entering Eretz Yisrael; so that in his declaration of gratitude he will have in mind to also include the sparks of kedushah contained in the fruit. For, they, too, have experienced all that we have experienced.

We can now explain very nicely the terminology: “וענית” which Rashi explained indicates that the declaration must be pronounced with a raised voice. Apparently Rashi was bothered by the term “וענית”—and you shall answer. Who is being answered? Yet, as we have explained, the person bringing

the bikkurim is expressing gratitude on behalf of the nitzotzei kedushah in the fruit, as well. For, they also yearn to praise and thank HKB”H. Hence, the the passuk says: “וענית”—you shall respond to the sparks of kedushah; “ואמרת”—and you shall pronounce the declaration loudly, because you are also acting as the “shaliach tzibbur” of the bikkurim.

Now, let us explain in detail how all of the specifics mentioned in this passage also apply to the fruits of the field. “וענית ואמרת”—the seeds of the fruit also descended into a form of galut Mitzrayim in the depths of the earth; this, too, was brought about by Lavan HaArami, who was an embodiment of the “nachash hakadmoni,” who caused Adam and Chava to sin. This association is explained in Sha’arei Orah (10): “והנה נחש הקדמוני הנמשך מכוח לבן הארמי, הטיל פגם בלבנה על ידי אדם: (10) “and behold, the primeval servant, drawing from the power of Lavan HaArami, introduced a defect in the moon by means of Adam HaRishon. The source for this notion is found in the Zohar hakadosh (Behar 111b). There it states that Yaakov Avinu released Rachel and Leah: “מון לבן הארמי הנחש”—from Lavan HaArami, the serpent. As a consequence, the earth was cursed. Ever since then, it requires a tremendous amount of labor and exertion to remove the thorns from the vineyard.

“וירעו אותנו המצרים ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה”—just as we suffered terrible hardships at the hands of the Egyptians, so, too, do the fruit seeds suffer hardships due to all sorts of harmful winds and external influences that affect the fruit’s growth. “ונצעק אל ה’ אלקי”—just as Bnei Yisrael cried out and were heard by Hashem, so, too, do the fruit seeds cry out to Hashem from under the ground, in keeping with the passuk: “ממעמקים קראתיך ה”. They pray to Hashem that they will be privileged to develop and emerge from the darkness of the earth to experience the great light!

“ויוציאנו ה’ ממצרים ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובמורא גדול ובאותות ובמופתים”—just as He took us out of Mitzrayim, HKB”H takes the fruit seeds out of their galut in the depths of the earth, enabling them to grow and develop in the air above the ground. —just as we were brought to the “חלב ודבש” holy land of Eretz Yisrael, so, too, the fruit are brought to the holy site of the Beit HaMikdash-- “ועתה הנה הבאתי את ראשית פרי האדמה אשר נתת לי ה’, והגחתו לפני ה’ אלקיך והשתחוית לפני ה’ אלקיך.”

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