

Ki Tavo: Bikkurim and Charity

- Nisson Shulman.

This season, charity is on our minds, because of those left homeless after the evacuation of Gush Katif, because of the homeless and hungry from the Hurricanes that battered the Gulf Coast, and because of Teshuva UTefila UTzedaka maavirim et roa hagezera. Sefer HaMedrash VeHamaase is the inspiration for this sermon. The uniqueness of Jewish charity is part of the message of this sermon. It is based on the lesson of Bikurim.

(The Idea for this sermon came from "Sefer Hamedrash VeHamaase", one of the classic sifre drush, and which won the praise of the Rav zt"l, himself. He occasionally referred to this set of sefarim, especially during the period of his shiurim in Moriah Synagogue.)

The Torah reading today opens with the commandment of Bikurim, the First Fruits. The First Fruits were brought to Jerusalem and given to the Kohen. They are part of a system of charity whose beneficiaries were the Kohen, the Levite, the poor, they who were landless in Israel. This system included the First Fruits and all the tithes a Jew was required to give. The Midrash, commenting on this portion, declares: "How great the commandment of charity: it changes God's judgement from strict justice to mercy and compassion. kama gedola tzedaka, shemehapechet midat hadin lemidat harahamim. On the basis of this Midrash, the Unetane Tokef prayer of the High Holy Days declares that not only prayer and repentance, but also tzedaka, charity, averts the stern decree: Uteshuva utefila utzedaka maavirin et roa hagezera.

Now each year, when a Jew brought Bikurim, he would recite a declaration which is found in our Torah reading. In this declaration he mentioned how Jacob was saved from Laban who had tried to destroy him: how he and his family went down to Egypt; were saved by God from bondage: where brought to the Promised Land from which he was now bringing this year's "First Fruits". Every third year each Jew would recite a further declaration stating that he had given all the tithes properly; not from the ritually impure, nor in a state of bereavement, mourning, anguish: In fact, in strict observance of God's commands. And he concluded with a prayer that God look down from on high and bless His people and His land: Hashkifa mimeon kadshecha ubarech et amcha veet haadama.

The Midrash makes a strange statement about a word in this concluding prayer, saying Kol hashkafa leraah, lebar mizu, shehi letova, sheneemar hashkifa mimeon kadshecha ubarech.... The word hashkifa, "look down", says the Midrash, almost always connotes a consequence that is bad, whether punishment or sorrow. There is one exception. Here, in this context, used with charity, it denotes a consequence of blessing and gladness.

Why? What did our Rabbis mean by stating such a rule? leHashkif literally means "to look". Can "looking" be good or bad? Doesn't it depend upon what one sees when one looks? Furthermore: there are many other passages in the Torah about charity. This, however, is the only one using the word hashkifa. There must have been a reason why our rabbis pointed this out, and I suggest indeed there is, a reason very important during this time, little more than a week before Rosh Hashana.

There is another word in Hebrew that means, "to look": lehabit. But there is a great difference between lehabit and lehashkif. lehabit indicates that one looks at a particular object or part of it. lehashkif is to behold a whole panorama. It is all-inclusive.

For instance: Our rabbis teach that when the angels came to destroy Sodom, they were instructed - because of Abraham's plea - that God spare the city if ten righteous people could be found there, to look over the entire city all at once to see if this was so; searching on every side, omitting nothing, to be sure that there were no unknown tzadikim there who might be the cause of sparing the city. So the word lehashkif is used: Vayakumu vayashkifu al penei Sodom. When Deborah defeated Sisera, she sang a song of triumph in which she describes Sisera's mother. She tells how Sisera's mother waits for her slain son in vain, looking out the windows, searching on every side: Nishkefa vateyabeb em Sisera.

Now there is no person who is so nearly perfect that he does only good and sins not. If the Lord looked at every one of our deeds and judged us entirely, taking all our failures into account, it would go hard with us. If all our deeds were to be scrutinized so carefully as lehashkif implies, no one could succeed in judgment before the Almighty. All of us would be found wanting.

The Talmud tells us that there are three things, which remind God of a person's sins. If he endangers his life needlessly, relying on God's miracles to save him, the Heavenly Court questions whether he is worthy of the miracles upon which he depends. "Let's examine the whole account - nashkifa. If he demands an immediate and affirmative answer to his prayers, as if to say he is surely deserving of the fullness of God's blessing and has a right to it by demand, the tribunal again opens up the whole account to see if indeed that is so, nashkifa. And if he is critical of his fellow human being, again the Heavenly Tribunal looks at the complete ledger, saying, "You who are so careful to scrutinize your neighbor's every deed, omitting nothing, you who are so capable of discovering his every flaw and failure, let's see if you yourself can stand such scrutiny, nashkifa". So we do not pray for, or desire hashkafa except in one instance, and that is tzedaka.

Why? No one denies that all people on earth are capable of charity. There are community funds, bequests, telethons, and appeals of all kinds. There are great foundations, and countless other organizations and institutions of charity giving, not only local and parochial, but worldwide. Yet we always say that Jewish charity is different. Maimonides, in fact, declared that charity is the sign of the Jew, the evidence of the Jew's uniqueness. For there is something about Jewish charity that sets it apart from the charity practiced by others. I am convinced that the difference is not only how much we give, but also, how we give. And that is a lesson taught by the First Fruits and the Tithes.

What makes these gifts unique? First, the poor man doesn't have to come to the wealthy one to collect his gift, much less to plead with him for it. But rather every Jew who owned land and harvested its fruit came to Jerusalem there to find the beneficiaries of these gifts. Secondly: The giving was the occasion of great happiness. There was universal rejoicing by the givers! Great parades used to pour into Jerusalem of pilgrims bearing bikurim, singing and dancing as they approached the Holy Temple. "Even Agrippa the King of Israel took his basket on his own

shoulder and sang and danced before the Lord." Thirdly: The gifts consisted of the first, the finest, the best. We who are used to giving with an eye to tax deductions can perhaps better understand what it means to give non-deductible items, generously, with glad hearts, and even before we satisfy our own needs, instead of giving from that which is left over. We gave bikurim, "first fruits", not last fruits. We set aside the Maaser, the Tithe, before we could ourselves have the first taste of the fruit of our labor. Is there a finer example of charity of the heart? And this was repeated by the entire people, each and every year!

In order to emphasize this, our sages in the Midrash, reading between the lines of the Bible verses in the declaration the Jew would make concerning all his tithes, added some words that make the verses even clearer. "I did not give from the ritually impure", say our sages, means I did not give the poor leftovers or undesirable goods, but rather did I give of the very best. "I did not give in mourning", means I gave with joy, rather than sorrow. "I did not give through death", means I gave in life, not only as a bequest after death; I gave from goods I might have used for myself, not only from that for which I no longer have use. Shamati bekol Adoshem, means, as the Sifri explains, I did not force the poor to come to me, but I came to the House of God to find them. Asiti kekol asher tzivitzani, "I gave with happiness and caused the recipients to be happy together with me".

A beautiful picture of tzedaka; and underlying it all is the lesson of bikurim. For the lesson of bikurim is that the world belongs to God. We are not self-made. We aren't even made in partnership, man-made with God's supervision. Since the world is His, then everything in it is His doing and we are but His helpers. We are helping God, not the other way around! To teach this, the bringer of bikurim reminds himself of our past history. In the bikurim declaration he remembers Jacob who struggled against immense odds to survive. Jacob is in an alien world; married to Laban's daughters. Would Lavan tolerate him? Watching Laban's sheep, making Laban rich, sacrificing for him, would Laban tolerate him? It is to be expected! Yet, in spite of this, Laban seeks to destroy it all, even to his own hurt! Even his own children, root and branch, and only with God's intervention did Jacob survive. So also was it in Egypt. "We were going to Egypt only for a short, temporary sojourn", we said: lagur shama. We did much to insure our return, maintaining our own language, our own clothing, to no avail. Oppression, bondage, genocide followed. Only through God's intervention did we get out of Egypt. Such is our declaration. Like Jacob, in our own personal lives everything comes from the Almighty.