

Shoftim: Bikurim; Tzedaka

- Nisson Shulman.

The uniqueness of Tzedaka, as understood by the classic sefer Drush, HaMedrash Vehama'aseh

KI TAVO

Bikkurim

[Based on Sefer Hamedrash VeHamaase. This remarkable classic Sefer Drush, now republished in three volumes, is known to be one of the sources Harav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l liked to cite occasionally, in his own superb derashot. (Ed.)]

The Torah reading today opens with the commandments 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 Levi and the poor, those 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 G-d'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 that 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 G-d 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 or anguish: He would further declare that in fact, he gave them in strict observance of God's commands. And he would conclude 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 our context, when used with charity, it denotes a consequence of blessing and gladness. Why? What did our Rabbis mean by stating such a rule? Hashkifa literally means "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 that is very important during this time, scarcely a fortnight before Rosh Hashana. There is another word in Hebrew that means "Look": Habit. But

there is a great difference between Habit and Hashkif. Habit indicates that one looks at a particular object or part of it. Hashkif 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 Hashkif is used: vayakumu vayashkifu al penei Sodom.

When Deborah defeated Siserah, she sang a song of triumph in which she describes Siserah's mother. She tells how Siserah's mother waits for her slain son in vain, looking out the windows, searching on every side: Nishkefa vateyabeb em Siserah.

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 acts or attitudes that remind God of all 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 a 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 in connection with 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” (Mishnah, Bikkurim, III:4). 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 the entire people repeated this, 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 to make the verses even clearer. "I did not give from the ritually impure"; say our sages, this means "I did not give the poor leftovers or undesirable goods, but rather I gave of the very best". "I did not give in mourning; this 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 Hashem; this means, as the Sifri explains, "I did not force the poor to come to me, but I came to the House of G-d to find them". Asiti kekol asher tzivitzani, "I gave with happiness and caused the recipients to be happy together with me".

This is 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 G-d. We are not self-made. We aren't even made in partnership, man-made with G-d's supervision. Since the world is His, then everything in it is His doing and we are but His helpers. We are helping G-d, not the other way around!

To teach this lesson, 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 was in an alien world; married to Laban's daughters. Would Laban tolerate him? Watching Laban's sheep, making Laban rich, sacrificing for him, would Laban still tolerate him? It is to be expected that he would be grateful to Jacob! Yet, in spite of this, Laban seeks to destroy it all, even to his own hurt! He seeks to destroy even his own grandchildren, to destroy Jacob, root and branch, and only with G-d's intervention did Jacob survive.

So it was in Egypt as well. Jacob went down to Egypt only temporarily; lagur shama. We did much to insure our return. We kept our own language, own clothing, our pedigree, to no avail. The result was oppression, bondage, genocide. Only through G-d's intervention did we get out of Egypt.

That is the significance of the Bikurim declaration we made. Like Jacob, in our own personal lives everything comes from the Almighty.

And in this spirit, we can easily understand why Tzedaka, given in the Jewish way and in the spirit of the Jewish people, is one of the three great pillars upon which stands the judgment of each Jew during the High Holy Day season.