

"Selihot -- First Fruits of the New Year"

At the beginning of today's Sidra we read of two institutions which were legislated for our ancestors by Moses. The first is the bikkurim, the commandment to bring the first fruit to the Kohen or Priest. The second is the maasrot, the various tithes which were obligatory for the Jew: a tenth of one's income to the Levite every year and, on alternate years, an additional contribution to the poor and underprivileged, and the bringing of one's fruit to Jerusalem and eating them there joyously. There are a number of similarities between bikkurim and maaser. For one thing, both are compulsory contributions. Further, each of them is accompanied by a set recitation. And finally, both of them became effective only upon the entrance of Israel to the Holy Land: ve'hayah ki tavo el ha-aretz.

But even more significant than the similarities are the differences between these two great institutions. In introducing the recitation that is to accompany the giving of the tithe or maasrot, the Torah merely says v'amarta, "and you shall say." Before the recitation for the bikkurim, however, the Torah prefaces the words v'anita v'amarta, "and you shall call out and say." That extra word v'anita was interpreted variously by our Rabbis. Thus, they said that the bikkurim are to be brought and the recitation is to be read be'kol ram, in a loud voice; whereas the recitation for the maasrot is to be pronounced be'kol namokh, in a whisper.

Furthermore, the recitation for bikkurim must be bi'leshon ha-kodesh, in the Holy Tongue or Hebrew; whereas the maasrot reading may be be'khol lashon, in any language.

A third difference involves the terminology used: the bikkurim recitation is called mikra, a reading or proclamation; whereas the maasrot reading is called viduy, which means a confession. And then there is also a historical difference between the two. The bikkurim was offered in the Holy Land as long as the Temple was in existence. The reading for the maasrot, however, was interrupted in the middle of the Second Commonwealth by Yohanan, the Kohen Gadol, or High Priest, (see last Mishnah, Maasrot).

Why this apparent discrimination favoring bikkurim over maasrot? Why did both Halakhah and history give preference to the institution of first fruits over tithes? Three answers commend themselves.

The first relates to the difference in mood and temperament between these two mitzvot. When a man brought his bikkurim, he spoke of his and his people's low origins. He said, arami oved avi, a wandering, or perplexed, Syrian was my forefather Jacob. No myth here of being descended from a sun-god! Our ancestors were not great conquerors; instead, we were slaves who were persecuted and driven from one indignity to another. It is only because of God's intervention that we were saved: va-yotzienu ha-Shem mi-mitzrayim, it was God who took us out of Egypt. It was only because of Him that we came to this marvelous inheritance of the Land of Israel: va-yiten lanu et ha-aretz ha-zot, and He gave us this land. Without the Almighty we would likely as not have remained a slave people, crushed imbetween the grinding millstones of degenerate Egyptian civilization, so that this day nothing would have been left of us. All of the mikra bikkurim, is, therefore, an expression of thankfulness and gratitude based upon the acknowledgement of our own helplessness without God.

The maasrot recitation is in a completely different category. One can easily misunderstand this string of verses as reflecting a sense of complacency and smugness. The donor recites the words biarti ha-kodesh min ha-bayit, I have paid all my debts, there is nothing that I owe to anyone. "I have also given them unto the Levite, and unto the stranger, to the orphan and the widow, according to all Thy commandments which Thou has commanded me." I have taken care of my obligations; I have done nothing wrong. Asiti ke'khol mitzvotekha, I am a pious man and I am a good Jew. This was a speech that accompanied the bringing of the maaser. An innocent bystander might have expected that, at this point, the worshipper would remain wilent, waiting for a divine pat on the back!

Now, whereas the facts mentioned in this recitation may be true and accurate, it is certainly unbecoming to pronounce them be'kol ram, aloud. The facts may be correct; but the publicity given to them is by no means right. The feeling that one has given enough, done enough, observed enough, should remain just that: a feeling, nothing more. Because if this is not kept be'kol namokh, to a whisper, but is proclaimed be'kol ram, in a loud voice, then devoutness degenerates into superciliousness, righteousness into self-righteousness, and piety into pomposity. The mark of the Jew, however, is that he is a bayshan, a shame-faced person; we are a unique people whose high morality has often been mistaken for masochism. We have traditionally underplayed our achievements, while publicly acknowledging our guilt and our faults. Our prayers speak of u-mipnei hata'enu galinu me'artzenu, we accept the blame upon ourselves for our exile: it was caused by our moral failures. And our Scriptures is largely the record of our failures and insufficiencies. What a contrast to the atmosphere of political conventions, to which we have been subjected these past weeks, in which orator after orator "points with pride" to the virtues of his own party exclusively, and "views with alarm" -- exclusively the faults of his opponents!

Perhaps it is time that we Jews in the contemporary era were now mature and bright enough to apply the lessons of the recitation of bikkurim to the State of Israel in the kind of image we are trying to present to the world. We may be justifiably proud of Israel's achievements in science and in industry, in security and housing and economics. But instead of publishing this record be'kol ram, in a loud voice -- "over-exposing" it so that non-Jews will say: Yes, Israel is that country of those inventive and ambitious Jews -- the weight and burden of our image, the kol ram, ought to be the presentation of Israel as a Land of the Bible, where an ancient divine promise to our forefathers was redeemed in our day. For this is the theme of the bikkurim. A holy people never blows its own horn. Indeed, the only time it does do so is at the tekiat shofar, and the sounding of the shofar reminds us of our errors, not our greatness.

A second answer commends itself. It concerns the nature of our religious orientation. The man who brought bikkurim expected nothing in return for his pious gesture. On the contrary, in offering gratitude, he implied that what he had received heretofore was undeserved. Therefore he offered his thanks and ~~expected~~ nothing more -- although he might have hoped for it with all his heart.

Contrariwise, the giving of the maasrot was concluded by a short prayer, beginning with the words hashifah mi'meon kadshekha, "look forth from Thy holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless Thy people Israel, and the land which Thou has given us..." How easy to misinterpret this beautiful passage as: I have done my duty toward You, O Lord; now it is up to You to reciprocate and do Your duty towards me! I have fulfilled my obligations; now, O God, pay me back. It is the kind of feeling that informs a person who, in conditions of distress and adversity, will complain that he is deserving of much better from God; and when he revels in prosperity and plenty, never entertains the thought that maybe he is undeserving of all this bliss and blessing. Now, it may be just that he is deserving -- who are we to judge our fellow man? But while it may be just, it certainly is not authentic piety. A mature religious person does not exact payment from God, just as a mature married couple does not base its life upon an exchange of duties legally exacted and juridically delimited. There is a danger that this concluding prayer of the recitation of the Maaser can be misunderstood by the donor as a kind of quid-pro-quo, an attempt to strike a bargain with God and demand immediate payment. Compared with the mikra bikkurim, the viduy maaser can be characterized as a kind of crass commercialism, a deal with the deity. When a man speaks thus, and intends this, it is indeed a viduy, a "confession" that he does not understand the Torah and that he does not understand man's destiny in the face of God.

Whereas the recitation for bikkurim is called a mikra, a proclamation of maturity, because man knows his shortcomings, and appreciates that he deserves nothing, the reading for maasrot is viduy, a confession of misunderstand and failure. That

is why the bikkurim was recited only bi'leshon ha-kodesh, in Hebrew, the Holy Tongue; for the entire concept which one enunciated bespeaks a holy wisdom. Whereas the business-like attitude towards God reflected in the viduy maasrot is recited be'khol lashon, in any language, for it reflects the vulgar jargon of the market-place.

And there is a third and final difference between these two institutions: that is, the difference in timing. The reading for the maasarot was done at the end of the third year of the triennial cycle, after all else had been done. Ki tekhaleh la'aser, when you finish giving your tithes, then you must recite the following. The Maaser itself was offered towards the end of the season; only after all else had been done, then one would give God and His charges their contributions. Now, this is certainly generous -- it involves over 10% of ^athe man's earnings -- and far better than nothing. But how much greater and more generous of the spirit is the giving of the bikkurim. For even if a man could afford no more than a kol she'hu, even a pittance, still he gave it joyously and enthusiastically: reshit peri ha-adamah, the very first fruits, the symbol of a man's achievement, his triumph, and his success were devoted to God, indicating the sense of gladness and joy in which he gave to his Lord.

[Indeed, a Hassidic teacher explained in this manner the difference between Cain and Abel. You recall that the offering of Cain was rejected, whereas the offering of Abel was accepted. Why the difference between them? Our Hassidic Rabbi points to a seemingly irrelevant verse in the Torah: va-yehi mi-ketz ha-yamin, and it was at the end of days that Cain brought his gift to God. Herein lies the difference: Abel brought his gift in the flush of youth, as his first gift; whereas Cain waited to the end of days, after his retirement, after he had made his fortune and taken care of himself and his family. That is why Cain was rejected, while Abel was accepted.]

[It is in the same spirit that the Zohar offers a remarkable interpretation of a famous verse. In the portion of Kedoshim we are commanded mi-pnei sevah takum,

"before a hoary head thou shalt rise." This means, as is its literal intent, that we are to rise in respect for an older person. But the Zohar adds another interpretation to the word mi-pnei. It means, the Zohar says, not only "in front of" spatially, but "before" chronologically. In other words, before you yourself have developed a hoary head, before you turn gray and old, it is time for you to rise in your Jewishness, in your service of God! It is, of course, always time to return to the Almighty, no matter how old one is. But how much greater and better when we return, not after retirement, but while still young and strong and virile.]

Rabbi Yitzhak Arama, the author Akedat Yitzhak, informs us that it is for this reason that all our major prayers are offered at the beginning of different parts of the day. Thus, shaharit is prayed at the beginning of the day time; maariv at the beginning of the night, as the stars come out; minhah at the beginning of the afternoon; and the tikkun hatzot which David first offered and which especially the mystics later recited, is offered at the beginning of the day according to those who reckon from midnight to midnight.

These, then, are the three reasons why the bikdurim were more cherished and emphasized. And all these three are present and stressed in the Selihot prayer which we shall recite tonight. They are, for one thing, the very opposite of self-righteousness. For we shall say at the very beginning of our Selihot service, lekhhah ha-Shem ha-tzedakah, ve'lanu boshet ha-panim -- you, O Lord, are just, whereas we are ashamed of ourselves. Second, we will acknowledge that we do not deserve any special favors: lo be'hessed ve'lo be'maasim banu le'anekha, we do not come before Thee boasting of great deeds or great acts of love on our part. And, instead of a business-like trade, we announce ki al rahamekha ha-rahim anu betuhim, we can rely not upon our deeds, but only upon Thy great mercies. And finally, as the same Rabbi Yitzhak Arama tells us, the Selihot too are offered at the beginning -- at the beginning of the season when the nights grow longer, so that u-imah na'im

she'yaavod ha-El me-reshito... kedei she'tevorakh la-hem melekhet ha-lelot kulam, how pleasant it is for man to serve God at the beginning of this time of the [↑]lengthening nights, devoting them to prayer and supplication, so that _↑thereby all the nights of the year may be sanctified and hallowed.

As the old year draws to a close and a new year is about to begin, ushered in by the Selihot prayers, may we learn to approach our maker, the God of Israel, in true humility and in the spirit of gratitude of the bikkurim. And may we be privileged to fulfill especially the concluding words of the mikra bikkurim:
ve'samahta be'khol ha-tov asher natan lekha ha-Shem Elokekha v-le'vetekha "and you shall be happy in all the goodness that the Lord [↑]thy God has given thee, and [↑]thy household." Amen.