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Parshat Ki Tavo

Prayer, The Fruits of Our Labor

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Parshat Ki Tavo begins with the laws regarding the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits to be given by the farmer to the Kohen in the temple and the laws of the tithes given to the Levites and the poor. These commandments are then followed by the following verse:

This day, the Lord your God commands you to observe all these statutes and laws; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul
(Deuteronomy 26:16)

הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-הַחֻקִּים
הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶת-הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וְשִׁמְרָתָם וְעָשִׂיתָ אוֹתָם
בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ (דְּבָרִים כו:טז)

Midrash Tanchuma, asks a simple question of this verse. Why would Moses choose to use the words “This day” regarding the observance of the Mitzvot when the commandment of *Bikkurim*, the first fruits, will not be applicable until much later after the conquest of the land of Israel? The ensuing midrashic discussion around this verse and other biblical verses yields an unexpected answer:

“Moses saw with divine intervention that the Bet Hamikdash (Temple) would be destroyed and the bringing of the first fruits would be abolished. So he went ahead and instituted that Yisrael should pray three times a day, for prayer is cherished by the Holy One Blessed Is He, even more than all the good deeds and even more than all the sacrifices.” (Midrash Tanchuma Ki Tavo Siman 1)

Our daily prayers were in fact established by Moses to ultimately replace the commandment of first fruits that would one day no longer be performed once the Temple was destroyed. This idea is very different from the classic rabbinical thoughts regarding the origin of daily prayer (prayer originates from sacrifices or the patriarchs, see Berachot 26b).

How is prayer like *Bikkurim*, the first fruits?

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the Sefat Emet, enlightens us with a simple and profound thought from his grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter.

“My grandfather of blessed memory said that prayer was a way of giving the first of each day to God” (Sefat Emet, Parshat Ki Tavo).

The Sefat Emet continues with his exegetical discussion and asserts that everything (like the first fruits) is dependent on the success of its initial start. He then brilliantly observes:

And all things from its inception requires guarding/protection

וכל דבר בראשיתו צריך שמירה

It is transformative to think of prayer as a gift we give, multiple times a day, to God. In fact those very prayers are more meaningful to God than good deeds. Yet, at the same time the Sefat Emet understands the human struggle we have daily with our own individual prayers and ultimately he provides a formula for success. Just as the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits from the seven species of the land of Israel, were considered fragile during their development, and therefore required special attention and care, so is the same with our prayers. Our prayers will need to be tended to, and nurtured often, so that each time we offer them to God, they can deepen and grow.

In this season of self-reflection, repentance, and renewal, meaningful prayer has the power to change us, but only with the recognition that our Tefilla requires ongoing attention and constant maintenance. The midrashic idea that God cherishes our prayers inspires us to strive harder and to continue to meet God in conversation with holy prayer.



Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham feels blessed to have the privilege of living her two callings as both a doctor and a member of the Orthodox clergy. Rabba Carmella has interned at the Hillels of Westchester, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital Chaplaincy Program and served as a Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Created Equal Seminar Fellowship. Rabba Carmella earned her bachelor's degree from Barnard College and her medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She practiced at the Women's Health Program, where she held a dual appointment in Internal Medicine and Obstetrics and Gynecology. She currently works in Oncology Medical Affairs for pharma. Rabba Carmella is married to physician Dr. Steven Kubersky and has three children.