

Ki Tavo – Sept. 17, 2022

By Pam Adelstein

My name is Pam Adelstein.

Welcome new members! I am so happy you are here.

I am giving this dvar in memory of my father, Harvey Adelstein z”l, who died this past January. He was an elementary school teacher. During the late Augusts of my childhood, he brought me with him to “fix up his room”. This meant replenishing school supplies, sprucing up bulletin boards, and getting his classroom in order. I loved sharing this ritual with my Dad.

Now, as an adult, I find late August and September a bit discombobulating. The exuberance of summer is fading, the long hours of daylight are waning, and it is harder to find time for outdoor adventures. School starts, preparation for the Yamim Nora'im begins, and transitions – not my favorite – abound.

Today I will share my thoughts with you about why Ki Tavo is a fitting parsha for this time of year. We will explore the bikkurim ritual as described in the Torah, Mishna in tractate Massekhet Bikurim, and by Maimonides in his Laws of First Fruits. Then we will consider what we can take from this ancient ritual into our lives today.

Moshe delivered a lengthy reminder to the Jewish people about G-d's commandments in Ki Tavo, in the 11th month in the 40th year of the Jews wandering and on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Note that we read Ki Tavo in the 11th month of the Jewish calendar.

The bikkurim – the first-fruits ceremony – is detailed in the first Aliyah. We read the familiar phrases from the Passover seder – about that wandering Aramean and our history of enslavement. We read about first fruits which we associate with Shavuot. And we think of the harvest time – Sukkot. One bikkurim ceremony conjures up the three pilgrimage holidays- the shlosh regalim.

Let's examine the first fruits ceremony.

Finally! The Jews in the Torah are about to enter the Promised Land. Ki tavo, - “when you enter”, “when you come into”, “when you go into”. Are the people

excited? Nervous? Exhausted? Discombobulated and not-so-eager for more transitions?

The instructions are clear. Per verse 26:2– those who till the land must “take some of every first fruit of the soil,” place these first ripe fruits in a basket and go to the place where “the Lord your G-d will choose to establish [G-d’s] name” – the Temple altar in Jerusalem.

Then, the farmer must go to priest at the altar and state per verse 26:3: 'I declare this day before G-d your Lord that I have come into the land that G-d swore unto our ancestors to give us.' Next, the priest takes the basket and puts it in front of the altar.

Then the farmer must state verbatim, as follows in verses 26:5-11:

"You shall proclaim before G-d your Lord: 'A lost Aramean was my father. He went down to Egypt and sojourned there few in number, and there became a great, powerful and populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and afflicted us and put upon us difficult labor. We cried out to G-d the Lord of our ancestors, and G-d heard our voice, saw our affliction, our burden and our distress. G-d took us out of Egypt with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, awesome acts, signs and wonders. G-d brought us to this place and gave us this land ...flowing with milk and honey. And now I have brought the first fruits of the earth that you have given me G-d.'

Then the Torah instructs: “...you shall put them down before G-d ... and prostrate yourself before G-d You shall rejoice in all the good that G-d ...has given to you and to your household, you and the Levite, and the convert that dwells in your midst”.

Reading this, I tried to visualize exactly what was happening. Picture the Bikkurim, the first fruit of the soil, vines and trees.

Which fruits? Initially, it was the bikkurim for every species. Later the Rambam said one should only bring first fruits from the seven (native) species: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates.

How much of each fruit? Per the Talmud – 1:60th of crop. I wonder- was 1/60th a lot or a little?

How do you know which is the first fruit? Per Talmud – tie cord or reed or blade of grass to the stem identify it.

What would giving away the bikkurim feel like? Before you could reach out and plop those fruits into your mouth, or share the bounty with your family, you had to put aside the first growth and wait. Would this feel frustrating? Or would it bring the farmer closer to G-d and help him express gratitude?

Note that fruit is the ripened ovary of the plant. The reproductive structure. I wonder if fruits were chosen for this ceremony from all the food that is grown because they are the quintessential reproductive part.

The bikkurim ritual gets described in greater detail in the Mishnah where we learn that the bikkurim ceremony began with all citizens of region gathering in the regional capital and sleeping in the streets rather than in their homes. The next morning, an appointed leader exclaimed: "Arise and let us go up to Zion, to the House of our Lord!" Sleeping outside symbolizes homelessness – a theme in this ceremony. Then, the pilgrimage to the Temple began, as everyone gathered their fruits and set out together.

Let's look at the symbolism of the basket transport. The basket is 'carried on the shoulder' - At the time of the Exodus, the people left so hastily that they carried their unleavened bread and belongings on their shoulders. This indicates the action of bringing an object from point A to point B, without the ability to put it down. In the bikkurim, the labor of carrying the basket helped our ancestors re-enact the Exodus journey from homelessness to settlement. Putting the basket down metaphorically meant that our possessions had a home, ending our collective wandering.

The Mishnah described a dancing flutist and an ox adorned with gold and olive twigs leading the procession. A chorus of Levites welcomed the pilgrims at the Temple.

According to the Rav Kook Torah website, the ox represented productive labor and symbolized the farmers' solid, respectable way of life. The ox's horns were plated with gold, a sign that the most honorable way to acquire wealth is through

productive labor. The ox was crowned with olive twigs because olives symbolized enlightenment and wisdom. The ox's olive-twig crown indicated that our aspirations should go beyond labor and wealth to include wisdom.

The flute, commonly played at happy occasions, would bring joy to this ceremony.

When the procession neared Jerusalem, city officials and craftspeople stopped their work to greet it and say: "Our people of [such and such a place], enter in peace!"

When they reached the Temple Mount, even the King took the basket upon his shoulder and entered the court where, the Levites sang out: "I praise You, G-d, for You have raised me up and have not allowed my enemies to rejoice over me!"

With the basket still upon the pilgrim's shoulder, he recited part of the proclamation from Ki Tavo. This is the only time in the Torah when a formula is proscribed IN HEBREW-- for a layperson. A prompter assisted everyone regardless of their Hebrew fluency, so no one would be embarrassed or identified as not speaking Hebrew. Consider the proclamation's wording. It begins in the singular - "I acknowledge...", "My father...". Using the singular illustrated that each person was responsible for fulfilling this mitzvah for themselves.

But then the language changed to the plural with the recounting of the history of the Jews. This acknowledged being part of a collective nation. Individual responsibility coexisting with our togetherness is a frequent theme in Judaism.

The basket was taken down from the shoulders and held it by its rim. The Cohen placed his hand under the basket and ceremoniously waved it. The pilgrim then completed the proclamation and placed the basket on the southwest corner of the altar, laid prostrate and exited.

Note that those who performed this ceremony could not leave Jerusalem that day, but had to remain overnight and return home the following day. The ceremony began with sleeping outdoors in the streets or countryside, as if lacking a home. The ritual concluded by spending the night in the nation's capital of Jerusalem, to illustrate that the people of Israel had a place to rest.

Thus far we have learned about the bikkurim ceremony as detailed in the Torah, Mishna and by Maimonides.

Let us discuss its meaning for us today.

We can learn humility from this ritual. We remember from where our people came – from enslavement to freedom, from homelessness and wandering to safely housed.

We are reminded to merge our individual obligations and our collective mitzvot.

Since the bikkurim were required of all people, regardless of their societal status and roles in society, we are taught to honor and appreciate all roles in society. We are one people. No one is superior to another.

We learn to thank G-d for our bounty and remember there are forces beyond us. We must be grateful.

We should bring joy to our rituals and take pleasure in the celebration.

And finally, the anticipation of waiting for those first fruits reminds us that we don't have full control in life – we need to accept what we can control and what we cannot.

Tonight is Slichot. R"H and Y"K, and then Sukkot, S"A and S"T are upon us.

The holidays and their sequence echo the bikkurim ritual. We must do our tshuvah – our work to tend to our souls – watering, cultivating and weeding. Then we need patience as we wait to see what sprouts. Next, we gather our spiritual harvest, journey with old friends and new acquaintances - today we welcome Minyan Ma'or's new members - and ultimately, we rejoice in our gifts.

Regarding that discombobulated feeling I shared at the start of my dvar – thinking of the bikkurim ceremony helps me lean into my discomfort and the unknown by grounding me in gratitude, joy, and ceremony, and by connecting me to the earth and community. Perhaps the bikkurim can serve as a touchpoint for us all as we begin the Jewish year together. Shabbat shalom.