

# *Parshas Ki Savo*

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## *1. The Uniqueness of the Jew*

The Torah states, **“You shall take the first fruit (Bikkurim) of the ground that you bring in from your Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose to make His Name rest there.”** The verse is referring to the mitzvah of Bikkurim - from the same word as *Bachorim (first born)*. This is the Positive Commandment to bring for Hashem the first of the newly ripened fruits of one’s crop from the Land of Israel to the Temple Mount. There, it is given to the Kohen who is the only one qualified to partake of these holy fruits. At the time of this ceremony, the donor must declare his gratitude to Hashem for the land that produced them. Subsequently, he prostrates himself to indicate his subservience to Hashem and his recognition of Him.

Rabbeinu Bachya in his introduction to the Portion of Ki Savo elucidates and expands on the concept of *Reishis (first)* which is central to the ritual of Bikkurim. He states that the Jewish people themselves are referred to as *Reishis (first)* – “The Jews are holy to Hashem as they are the equivalent of the first tithe of the wheat (*Reishis Tevuasa*).” As the Chosen People (*Reishis*), they must acknowledge the existence of Hashem, (*Reishis*), the one from whom all existence emanates. The manner of acknowledging Hashem is through the ritual of bringing the Bikkurim (first ripened fruits) to the Temple Mount, the location that is *Reishis* since it is the spot from which all existence began. The Bikkurim are given to the Kohen who is also *Reishis* since he comes from the special tribe chosen for the service of Hashem. Rabbeinu Bachya is saying that there is a single thread which weaves through the entire Bikkurim ritual that reflects the characteristic of *Reishis*.

The Torah is revealing to us that anything which reflects the characteristic of *Reishis* has an innate holiness and special status because it mirrors that characteristic of Hashem - who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that shares a common characteristic with Hashem can be associated with Him and the basis for all relationships is commonality. The Bachor (the First Born) innately shares the trait of being **the** first, since he is the child that opened his mother’s womb- “*Kadosh Me’Rechem;*” this makes him holy.

Initially the Bechorim were the ones meant to be the Kohanim (priests), designated to officiate in the Temple. However, since they were involved with the Chet Ha’Agle (Sin of the Golden Calf) they became tainted and no longer qualified for this position. However, the Tribe of Levy did not participate in the Chet Ha’Agle and the Kohanim, the most special of the Tribe of Levy, assumed the status of *Reishis* (unique and one of kind) and thus qualified to be the officiants of Hashem.

The Midrash tells us that the letters of the word “B’Hebarom” meaning “And He (Hashem) created them (existence)” are the same letters that are contained in the name Avraham. This indicates that Avraham is the beginning of a new existence within creation. The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Adam was the first human being to refer to Hashem as “*Master*” (*Adni*). The commentators point out that this was only because he was the handiwork of G-d and therefore he recognized Him as the Master. Avraham on the other hand was born into a pagan world, where G-d’s existence was unknown to mankind. Despite that, he was able to recognize that G-d is the Master. According to this understanding Avraham possessed the characteristic of *Reishis* - being the first to recognize Hashem through his own understanding. Therefore, Hashem refers to Avraham as, “My beloved” because they shared this commonality. As a result, we see that because of Avraham the Jewish people have a special relationship with

Hashem; this is why we share a commonality with Him, unlike any other nation.

There is a Positive Commandment to “Cleave to Hashem – *Bo Sidbuk*. ” The Gemara asks – How could one cleave to Hashem, who is fire? It answers that a person who marries his daughter to a Talmud Chacham or gives his possessions to him cleaves to Hashem through him. The reason why a Talmud Chacham is considered special is because of the wisdom that he possesses - which is the Torah itself - the Wisdom of Hashem – *Reishis*.

The more we perfect and value our uniqueness as Jews, the Chosen People of Hashem, the more we will have relevance to Hashem – the ultimate *Reishis*.

## ***2. The Value of Focus***

The Torah states that when one brings the newly ripened fruits (*Bikkurim*) he must make a declaration and say, **“An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a great nation – great, strong, and numerous. The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us, and placed hard work upon us. Then we cried out to Hashem, the G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail, and our oppression. Hashem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold! I have brought the first fruits of the ground that You have given me, O Hashem!”** After making this declaration, the one who brought the new fruit prostrates himself before Hashem as a sign of self-negation in the presence of Hashem.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the person who brings the Bikkurim indicates that he is not an “ingrate” because he acknowledges that the source of all his blessing is Hashem. It is interesting to note that the obligation of tithing the dough (Challah), grains and produce (Terumah), and other tithes, were implemented immediately upon entry into the Land. However, the mitzvah of Bikkurim only became an obligation after the Land was conquered and divided – when the Jewish people were “settled in the Land”. If one is obligated to show his appreciation to Hashem through the bringing of the Bikkurim and acknowledge the cause of his blessing, then why did this obligation only come about when the Jews were “settled in the Land”?

The explanation is that in order for a person to be able to focus on and internalize the value of being a beneficiary of Hashem’s Blessing, one needs an environment without distraction. When one is personally settled, he has the clarity of mind to internalize that the source of all blessing is Hashem. Therefore the Torah only obligated the Jews to bring Bikkurim after they were “settled in the Land” because it was only then that they were free of distractions.

One of the blessings of the Amidah (Silent Prayer) is the prayer for the restoration of justice – **“Restore our judges as in the earliest times and our counselors as at first; remove from us sorrow and groan; and reign over us –You Hashem, alone...”** Rabbeinu Bachya in his commentary in the Book of Bereishis asks – what relevance does removing us from sorrow and groan have to restoring justice? He answers - if one is consumed with his own sorrow and pain, he will not be able to appreciate the advice of the judges and counselors. These feelings would also interfere with one’s capacity to appreciate the value of Hashem’s supreme reign. Therefore we ask Hashem to remove them in order to be able to fully benefit from the restoration of justice.

Rambam states in *Hilchos Deos* (The Laws of Conduct), **“One should have in**

**mind that his body should be complete and strong in order to dedicate himself to the service of Hashem. For it is impossible to understand and contemplate wisdom if one is hungry or sick, or if any of his limbs are in pain.”** Rambam explains that it is impossible for one to be able to understand or contemplate wisdom fully if one is distracted by any physical ailments. One must be free of health challenges in order to appreciate Hashem and His wisdom.

If we acknowledge Hashem as being the Master of the Universe and the benefactor of all existence, and that we are His beneficiaries, then why do we not feel beholden to Hashem for all that we continually receive from Him? The answer is that we are drawn away by the challenges and responsibilities of life. After Adam sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem cursed him and all mankind, **“Through suffering shall you eat of the ground...By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread...”** Firstly, since man must take the initiative to be responsible for his own physical existence, one tends to believe that his level of success and existence is due partially to his own efforts. Additionally, once man was cursed -“by the sweat of his brow, he shall eat bread” – he became preoccupied because of the degree of effort which is needed, thus causing him to lose focus. Consequently he is not able to internalize the reality of Hashem’s blessing.

In order for one to be able to recognize and internalize the value of Hashem’s blessings, one needs to maintain a continuous level of clarity and focus. This is gained and reinforced by reciting the Birchas HaMazon (Grace after Meals) - which identifies the source of our satiation, and by reciting the Amidah (Silent Prayer) - three times a day [morning, afternoon, and evening]- which causes us to understand that we are truly in need. The blessings prior to eating give us a cognizance that whatever way we benefit from this existence is through the blessing of Hashem. By limiting the diversions in our daily lives we are able to focus and appreciate Hashem’s blessings.

### ***3. Joy - An Integral Part of One’s Function***

The Torah states, **“It shall be that if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all of His commandments that I command you this day, then Hashem, your G-d, will make you supreme over all the nations of the earth. All the blessings will pursue you and overtake you, if you hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d...But if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all of His commandments and all of His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses will pursue you and overtake you.”** If one adheres to the Torah, he will have endless blessings, but if he does not, then endless curses will pursue him and overtake him.

The Torah continues, **“All these curses will come upon you and pursue you and overtake you, until you are destroyed...because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with joy (*simcha*) and goodness in your heart, when everything was abundant.”**

This verse seems to contradict the earlier one. It states that the reason why the curses will pursue you and overtake you is because you did not serve Hashem with joy of heart when everything was abundant. The previous verse stated that the reason why the curses will pursue you and overtake you is because you did not heed the Word of Hashem - which is unrelated to one’s joy of heart. How do we reconcile the two?

If one is experiencing abundance and blessing in life why does he not do everything within his power to acknowledge and serve Hashem? It seems that this is an indication that performing the mitzvah is not something that he wants to do but rather something he feels obligated to do. He is only fulfilling the mitzvos because Hashem is demanding it of

him. If one does not understand the value of doing the Will of Hashem, then he will not serve Hashem with joy in his heart. As a result of this burdensome feeling, it is just a question of time before he will become fatigued and disinterested in the mitzvos. In fact the basis for not heeding the Word of Hashem is only because he did not serve Hashem with Joy when everything was abundant. If one feels privileged and appreciative for all that Hashem has given him, even if one would not be obligated, one would be motivated to bring pleasure to G-d.

We are currently in the month of Elul. It is cited by many of the commentators that the word “Elul” is an acronym for “Ani L’ Dodi V’Dodi Li - I am to my beloved as my beloved is to me.” During this month Hashem is closer to the Jewish people than any other time of the year and it is easier to be more spiritually sensitive during this time period. “I am to my beloved,” means that if one takes the initiative to become close to his beloved (Hashem), then Hashem will assist His beloved (the Jewish People) to become closer to Him. The word Elul, as an acronym, indicates that if we relate to Hashem as our beloved then He responds to our initiative in kind. However, if one sees the performance of mitzvos only as an obligation and not as a privilege (as one would feel when he serves his beloved), then Hashem does not respond.

Before we recite the Amidah (Silent Prayer) we recite a verse from Tehillim (Psalms - the Words of King David). We say, “Hashem open my lips and allow my mouth to utter Your praises.” Why do we need to ask Hashem to give us the ability to speak – to utter His praises - when speech is a natural function of human being? The answer is that the words which one articulates are only considered praises of Hashem if one truly feels what he is saying. We ask Hashem to give us that sense of appreciation so that when we stand before Him we sincerely utter His praises. When engaging in an audience with Hashem, it is only when we feel privileged to be his servant that we experience true joy. We must pray to Hashem to give us the ability to recognize and appreciate the value of being a member of the Chosen People.

#### ***4. What is the Essence of the Torah?***

The Torah states, **“If you will not be careful to perform all the words of this Torah that are written in this Book, to fear this honored and awesome Name: Hashem, your G-d, then Hashem will make extraordinary your blows and the blows of your offspring...”** It is evident from this verse that the cause of the tragedies that will befall the Jewish people is not failing to keep the Torah itself, but rather the non-performance of the mitzvos. Failure to keep the mitzvos is an indication that people do not fear and revere the awesome Name of Hashem, their G-d.

Rabbeinu Yona writes in his work *Sharei Teshuvah (The Gates of Repentance)* and in his commentary on *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers)*, that all of the mitzvos of the Torah are “*parparaos (appetizers)*” to *yiras shamayim (Fear of Heaven (Hashem))*. Just as the appetizer is not intended to satiate the person but rather to stimulate his appetite, so too is the value of all the mitzvos of the Torah vis-à-vis *yiras shamayim*. The intrinsic value of performing a mitzvah is not for its own sake alone, but also as a demonstration and an expression of one’s *yiras shamayim* (fear of heaven). When one observes the Shabbos, tefillin, dietary laws, etc. one is demonstrating his *yiras shamayim* because the only reason why he is adhering to any of the mitzvos is because of his fear and reverence of Hashem. The performance of mitzvos is therefore a proclamation of one’s fear of the Honored and Awesome Name of Hashem.

However, if one chooses to compromise or even abandon the Torah, it is an affront

to the Honored and Awesome Name of Hashem. It is an expression of arrogance and brazenness stating, “I could not care less.”

The verse refers to Hashem as “your G-d,” indicating that He has a close personal relationship with every Jew – He is not a stranger to the Jews. In fact, the Mishnah in Tractate Shabbos refers to the Jewish people as “princes – sons of kings”. Because of our special relationship with Hashem we are truly considered royalty. The Torah tells us that when G-d took the Jewish people out of Egypt He had said, “You are my subjects, exclusively Mine.” This infers that a Jew is not permitted to subjugate himself to another. Thus it is not permitted to sell himself into slavery. .

The Midrash on Shir Ha’Shirim (Song of Songs) interprets one of the opening verses to mean, “The words of the *Sofrim* (the Rabbis) are more beloved (to Hashem) than the wine of Torah.” This indicates that Hashem values rabbinic enactments to a greater degree than the Divine Word – the Torah itself. Rabbeinu Yonah explains that the reason for this is because through the adherence to the Rabbinic fence one is demonstrating a greater degree of *yiras shamayim*. The basis for a Rabbinic fence is human frailty. Because of a person’s vulnerability and lack of continuous cognizance, there is a concern that he may violate the Torah law. Therefore, the Chachamim (Rabbis) legislated the various fences to address all conditions so that the Torah law should not be violated. Since the essence of all mitzvos is one’s demonstration of *yiras shamayim* - how much more so is one’s adherence to Rabbinic enactments!

One is not permitted to transport an object four cubits in public domain on the Shabbos. For this reason the Rabbis prohibited the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah if it should fall out on Shabbos. They had concern that one may not be proficient in blowing the Shofar and he may transport it through public domain to a teacher (to be taught). The concern of the Rabbis that the Shabbos may be violated (even in the context of a mitzvah) was sufficient enough reason to suspend the Torah obligation of blowing the Shofar. Their protection of the Torah, such as in this case, is the reason why the enactments of the Rabbis are more beloved to Hashem than the Torah law itself.

The Torah states, **“Cursed is the one who does not uphold the Torah.”** Rabbeinu Yona points out that the Torah does not state, “cursed is the one who “violates” or does not keep the Torah,” but rather one who “does not uphold the Torah.” If one accepts the Torah in its entirety and acknowledges that he is fully obligated in every aspect of its mitzvos, but he fails in adhering responsibly to its precepts, he does not deserve to be cursed. However, if one selectively accepts laws of the Torah (even if he accepted all except for one), this person is classified as not “upholding” the Torah. He deserves to be cursed. A Jew is Hashem’s subject and the mitzvos are the dictates of his Master, Hashem. If one says to his master, “I am subservient to you in all aspects of my life except for one area,” he would be considered a rebellious subject and deserve to be put to death.

Accepting Hashem’s Torah on a selective basis is the ultimate in brazenness and arrogance. It is an affront and a desecration of the Awesome and Honorable Name of Hashem, who is the King who coronates all kings.

If a Jew would understand that he is of princely status and he is part of G-d’s Chosen People (The Creator and Master of the Universe), then he would understand and revere the awesomeness of his master. It would not be possible to transgress the Torah because he would understand how privileged he is to do the Will of Hashem. Through the study of Torah, may we all come to understand the value of ourselves as Jews and the

specialness of being part of the Jewish People. Then we will merit the blessing of “Blessed is he who upholds the Torah.”

## 5. The Value of Being on Call for Hashem

It is stated in the Torah, **“You shall not wear combined fibers of wool and linen together. You shall make for yourselves twisted threads on the four corners of your garments with which you cover yourself.”** The Torah tells us that one is prohibited from wearing a garment, which contains a combination of wool and linen (*shatnes*). The Torah juxtaposes the Negative Commandment prohibiting *shatnes* to the Positive Commandment of wearing tzitzis (fringes). If a man wears a four-cornered garment there is a Positive Commandment of attaching tzitzis to its corners. Chazal explain that the juxtaposition of the two teaches us a fundamental principle that if there is a conflict between them then the Positive Commandment supercedes the Negative one. For example, if one has a four-cornered linen garment he is obligated to attach woolen tzitzis dyed with techalis (special dye from the chazon) to its corners. Although through this attachment one has created a garment which contains a combination of wool and linen, one is nevertheless permitted to wear it in this state.

According to the Torah, if one attaches the tzitzis to such a garment, the value of doing the mitzvah elevates it. Also, when one’s wardrobe includes such a garment, which represents mitzvah and has relevance to doing the Will of Hashem, then all the apparel is elevated. The Ramchal concludes that the Jew has the ability to elevate the mundane to a status of holiness by associating it with something that is holy – even if at that particular moment the mundane item is itself is not within a mitzvah context.

The Torah empowers the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel) to sanctify time. It is through the mitzvah of the sanctification of the new moon which determines the Jewish calendar. The innate sanctity of every one of the festivals and other days of holiness are determined when the month begins. This determination was given to the Jewish people. The ramifications of being able to determine time in this manner are far reaching. The Ramchal in his work *Derech Hashem (The Way of G-d)* asks – what is the value of sanctifying time? Is the value limited to the specific time that is sanctified? Or is it that since within the realm of time there is sanctity and all time itself is interconnected, then even the ordinary moment takes on an elevated level. The Ramchal explains that if a Jew observes Shabbos, which is a period of time that is sanctified by Hashem, then his weekday is connected to something that is intrinsically holy. Consequently, even one’s ordinary time is connected to holiness and thus elevated.

This principle applies to every aspect of our lives. Although much of our speech may be ordinary nevertheless, since its power is also invested in mitzvos such as the recitation of the Shema and the study of the Torah, all of our speech (even the ordinary) has special value. By utilizing it to perform a mitzvah even one’s speech in the context of business is elevated.

We are told that after the giving of the Torah at Sinai Moshe Rabbeinu was not permitted to cohabit with his wife and this was unlike all other prophets, who were permitted to return to their conjugal responsibilities. As the Torah states, **“You (Moshe) remain with Me (Hashem) here.”** Moshe did not require any special degree of preparation to be able to communicate with Hashem. His level of prophecy was considered as “face to face” with Hashem who was continuously available to communicate with him. No other prophet was at this level because in contrast to Moshe, their physicality was not a receptacle of holiness. Moshe had to be continuously in a pure state so that the Divine Presence could come upon him at any moment. Therefore he was not permitted to return to his conjugal responsibilities because he would have become spiritually contaminated as a result of cohabitation.

The Gemara states a principle that if one comes upon a mitzvah he must perform it without delay. Therefore a Jew must always be “on call,” in a state of readiness, to perform a mitzvah at any given time when it presents itself regardless of the situation. In the morning, one must put on tefillin and declare his belief in Hashem. If a Jew is not engaged in a mitzvah activity he must

interrupt whatever he is doing to perform a mitzvah when it presents itself to him. A Jew's perspective of life must be that he is always "on call".

If a Jew lives his life with this level of commitment, then even at a time when he is not engaged in a mitzvah his entire existence is dedicated to Hashem. Therefore, based on Ramchal, a person can elevate his entire existence, even the mundane aspects of his life, by being "on call." One may ask – Why did Hashem give us so many mitzvos which bind us in every possible way and restrict our behavior? The answer is that Hashem gave us the gift of mitzvos to allow us to sanctify every aspect of our being whether it be directly associated with the mitzvah or being involved with a mundane activity which is elevated because of our readiness to perform a mitzvah.