

Torah Table Talk

Can We Still Bring Our First Fruits

Parshat Ki Tavo

Deuteronomy 26:1 – 29:8

With the Land of Canaan just beyond the horizon, Moses and the people of Israel begin to turn their attention to their inheritance of the land. The people are commanded to bring the Bikkurim, First Fruits, to the temple each year and to make a declaration which summarizes their recent history and their connection to the land. They are also to make periodic declarations that they have fulfilled their obligation by bringing proper tithes from the land.

The second half of Parshat Ki Tavo contains a list of blessings and curses which are the consequences for their observance or failure to observe the commandments. This section is called the Tochecha, the reproof. Some of the commentaries claim that it is always read just before the High Holy Days, so that we can, in the words of a popular saying, “End the old year and its curses and begin the New Year on a positive note.”

Deuteronomy 26:1-4

When you enter the land...you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil which you harvest from the land that the Lord Your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord Your God will choose to establish his name...the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then recite before the Lord your God, My Father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt....The Lord freed us....He brought us to this place...wherefore now I bring the first fruits....

1. What is the connection between the bringing of the first fruit to the temple and the declaration which each person had to recite recited when he came to the Temple?
2. You may recognize this declaration. It is the central statement which we recite as part of the Haggadah on Passover. Originally it was said on Shavuot by each individual when the first fruit was brought to the temple. Why do you think the Sages adopted this passage and used it as part of the celebration of Passover? What was so unique about this passage?

1. Moses Maimonides; The Guide for the Perplexed, 3:39

For the first of everything is devoted to the Lord; and by doing so man accustoms himself to being generous and to limit his appetite for eating and his desire for property.

2. The reciting of a portion of the law when the first fruits were brought to the temple promotes humility as well. For he who brings the first fruits takes the basket on his shoulders and proclaims the kindness and goodness of God...

3. Rabbi Isaac Arama, Akaidat Yitzhaak

The essence of the commandment of the First Fruit is to uproot and to remove from the heart the idea the false idea that the land upon which you live is “Your Land,” and to bring each person to the recognition that this is “the land which the Lord Your God has given you.”

1. Maimonides and Arama each offer different explanations for the presentation of the first fruit. What are they? Note that Maimonides offers at least two different explanations for this practice. How are they different from one another?
 2. Why was it so important to bring the first fruits? How does success sometimes corrupt and effect the way we respond to the world? How does this Mitzvah attempt to address this problem?
 3. According to these two scholars what is so significant about giving up the First Fruits and not other produce from the yearly yield?
 4. Most Jews today live in a non-agrarian society so the idea of bringing the first produce of one's fields may seem strange unless one happens to live on a Kibbutz or a Moshav in Israel. What might we think of as our first fruits in our non-agricultural world? How can we modernize this practice of first fruits?
 5. To what extent do you think that our accomplishments belong to us ("I did it") and to what extent are they a gift from God? Is it healthy for us to see our accomplishment as in some way a product of God's generosity?
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Glossary

Moses Maimonides – 1135-1204, The leading philosopher and rabbinic scholar of the Middle Ages, also known as the Rambam. His best known Philosophical work is the Guide for the Perplexed.

Isaac Arama - 1420 – 1494, One of the great rabbinic scholars and preacher in Spain in the generation prior to the expulsions of the Jews.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

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