

KI TAVO

AUGUST 28, 2010

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Shabbat Shalom.

I would like to dedicate these remarks to two people:

My wife Debby, on the occasion of our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary last week; and

My wife Carol, zichrona livracha, on the occasion of her yartzeit this week.

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Today's parsha begins with recitation of Bikkurim, the offering of first fruits. Would like to share a piece of Talmud about the practice and then ask three questions.

Bikkurim calls for each farmer to take some of the first fruits that the land has produced, give them as offering to priest and recite specific prescribed formula:

“My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an out-stretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O LORD, have given me.”

This should sound familiar to you. Incorporated in Passover seder.

Now there's one problem with way I read it. I did in English because my Hebrew isn't good enough. But law was this particular formula had to be done in Hebrew because of the importance of the subject matter. Mishnah [Bikkurim 3:7, Sotah 7:3] tells us that the way this worked, at first, was that those were able to recite it in Hebrew did so and those who could not were assisted by a prompter.

But an interesting thing happened. Those who would have needed a prompter stopped coming to offer the first fruits because too embarrassed to show that they couldn't recite the Hebrew on their own.

So the practice changed and everyone was led by a prompter.

I was quite impressed by this. Thought that it said something very nice about the value of making people comfortable and welcome in the community.

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But a dvar should be built around a question.

So the first question to ask is why is Bikkurim recited. What's the purpose.

It's purpose is to express gratitude to God for bringing us to land of milk and honey and, more generally, to express the view that all the good things that come to us come from God.

Rabbi Marc Wolf answers the question this way: "At the root of the declaration is the recognition that the land is God's purview-and that it's product is thanks to God. . . . The intention is clear: all comes from God. . . . By stating that our efforts are due to the grace of God, we reduce the focus on human agency and attribute the success to divine providence."

We can think of Bikkurim as acknowledging that God has answered our prayers to provide for rain, to feed and sustain us, to make us prosperous.

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But this leads to a second, more troubling question.

If we attribute the good things in our life to divine providence, to God answering our prayers, then what should we make of the times when our prayers are not answered.

Many of us recite psalms and join in mishaberach to promote healing of those who are ill. But what happens when our loved ones don't recover and instead die.

We're approaching the Yamim Noraim when we focus on praying for forgiveness and to be sealed in the book of life. As inspiration regarding the power of prayer, we read the story of Hannah and how her fervent prayer to have a child

is answered by her giving birth to the prophet Samuel. But what message does that story give to those of us who've prayed for children and not had that prayer answered.

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So one question we can ask is why are prayers not answered?

Most of the commentary I've read on this focuses on one of two answers to this question.

First answer is that our prayers are in fact answered if we pray for the right things and if they are consistent with God's greater plans for us. This is reflected in the words we recite when we learn of a death: *Dayan ha Emet*. God is the true judge.

For example, Rabbi Noah Weinberg writes that God does want to answer our prayers. But God also has our best interests at heart. So if prayer isn't answered or if troubles come our way, the reason is because God is trying to teach us something or has something more appropriate in mind for us.

Rabbi Weinberg gives as an example a time when he was young and prayed to find a dollar that would allow him to play hooky from school and go to the World's Fair. He didn't find the dollar, but now says that's evidence that God wanted what was better for him, to go to school.

To my mind that example is too convenient. It's easy to say God has our better interests in mind by directing us to go to school instead of playing hooky. But this theory becomes more problematic if we're asking why our prayer for healing for a loved one isn't answered.

The second answer that's often suggested for why prayers aren't answered takes the opposite position of the view that God has the power to grant all prayers and will do so if consistent with God's greater plans. It says instead that our prayers aren't answered because God isn't omnipotent; God does not have the power to grant all prayers.

This is what Rabbi Harold Kushner says in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He writes that he believes of God: "He is limited in what he can do by laws of nature and by the evolution of human nature and human moral freedom. I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I

blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.” [WBT 134]

This answer is problematic too. It’s difficult to think about a God that does not have the power to answer our prayers.

I’ve thought a lot about these competing answers in the years since Carol and I prayed that she would survive her battle with cancer. And I can’t say I’m comfortable with either one of them. For me personally, the answer that I’ve found most comforting is: We simply don’t know. It’s not something we’re capable of knowing. It may seem ironic, given our constant striving to answers for the questions that face us, but I find the lack of an answer is the answer that works best for me.

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What that really suggests to me is that asking why prayers are not answered is asking the wrong question.

Rabbi Kushner agrees. He writes in his book: “The question we should be asking is not ‘Why did this happen to me? . . . A better question would be ‘Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?’”

So that’s the third question I’d like to look at.

There are many good answers to that question, now that this has happened, what are we going to do about it. Let me suggest four that I think are especially helpful.

**First**, let’s look back to the purpose of Bikkurim, the first fruits ceremony. It reminds us to be grateful. Even when our prayers haven’t been answered, we should remember what the good that has happened, not just focus on what we lost.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb tells of meeting with a group of women from his congregation who met every week to recite psalms and pray for those in the community who were seriously ill. Several of them asked him what the point of their prayer was when almost nobody on the list was cured and when names came off the list only when people died.

He tried to answer, didn’t give what he thought was a very good answer. But later in the week he got a note from one of the participants, a nurse in an

intensive care unit. She pointed out that there is much to pray for other than a total cure, such as the sick person be treated with care and dignity, that they not endure too much pain, etc. She said if you pray for these things, you will find that many of your prayers will be answered.

So I try to look at my losses and still feel gratitude. While I am sorry Carol and I did not have more time together, I am happy we had as much time as we did.

In another of Rabbi Kushner's books, *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, he writes that when we reflect back on our lives, we should "make the effort to look back with gratitude more than with regret, with fondness more than with bitterness." [166] That I think is good advice.

If you'll permit me another personal example, I worked for 20 years on behalf of those harmed by the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. I often prayed that we would achieve a just result for them. Ultimately, we lost. And while I am sorry that that prayer was not answered, I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked for them for 20 years with a great team in a just cause.

**Second** thing we can do. We can look for ways to contribute to the world that are inspired by our loss.

Jonathan Alter's book about Franklin Roosevelt, *The Defining Moment*, describes Roosevelt following his contracting polio. He went through a period of withdrawal and depression. But then he spent almost 2/3 of his inheritance from his father to create Warm Springs, the center for those suffering from the disease.

But he didn't just found it. He was the driving influence. He often administered muscle strength tests personally. He developed a form of hydrotherapy. He led group activities. Alter writes: "The experts had coined a term for a certain mental stage during a patient's illness: 'polio progress.' This was not when the patient walked again, but the moment at which he begins to concern himself with others—a priceless ingredient in any recovery."

There's a **Third** thing we can do, and again Bikkrum guides us here. First fruits is about acknowledging our relationship with God. So when our prayers aren't answered, we can be angry with God, but we shouldn't turn our back on our relationship with God. It's important to stay in communication. Notice the words of the mourner's kaddish. They're all about praising God, at a time when we may not feel like it.

**Fourth and final**, thing we can do: Just as we stay in relationship with God, stay in relationship to our community.

We might feel isolated from community when our prayers aren't answered, that we are different and that nobody will understand our loss. But that's not true. Here's Rabbi Kushner again: "Always remember that misfortune should not set you apart from happy, healthy people. It should connect you to all the other hurting people, and that means pretty much everybody." [132]

Again, if we turn back to Bikkurim, where we started, it demonstrates the relationship to community. Remember that when the priests saw that those who weren't fluent were not coming to make the first fruits offering out of embarrassment, they changed the practice to say everyone was to be led by prompter.

Two things happened here. First, the community reached out to the individual who was tempted to withdraw. Second, those tempted to withdraw turned back to the community. Both sides reached out.

That's important in helping individuals to move ahead with their lives when their prayers are not answered. And it's also important in helping the community. Because the community is those individuals in relationship with each other, sharing their gratitude when their prayers are answered and sharing their pain when their prayers are not answered.

Shabbat Shalom.

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