

“It will be when you enter the land...and you possess it and dwell in it, that you shall take of the very first fruit of the ground.” (26:1-2)

Rashi derives from the words, “and you possess it and dwell in it,” that the Jews were not obligated to bring *Bikurim*, the first fruits, until after *Eretz Yisrael* had been captured and divided according to each tribe. Why is *Bikurim* different from the *mitzvah* of *Challah*, which was imposed on them as soon as they entered the land? Why should they have been required to wait until the land was divided up? In his *sefer Simchas HaTorah*, *Horav Simchah Shepps, z.l.*, explains that the underlying motif of the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* is to actualize the hidden potential of *hakoras ha'tov*, gratitude, that *Klal Yisrael* is to manifest to Hashem for giving them the land. Indeed, when they recite the accompanying liturgy, they begin by recounting their history, detailing how Lavan *ha'Arami* sought to destroy Yaakov *Avinu*. They recall the various kindnesses that Hashem did for them. *Eretz Yisrael* and *hakoras ha'tov* go hand in hand. Only after the Jew realizes that he is in the land solely through Hashem's kindness, does he become worthy of inheriting the land. True gratitude can come only with *Eretz Yisrael*, and *Eretz Yisrael* can be attained only through gratitude. Thus, when the people became worthy of possessing the land, they concomitantly became deserving of its first fruits.

True *hakoras ha'tov* is the recognition that everything that has contributed to the favor that one receives comprises a factor in his favor and, thus, must be appreciated. Everything is the result of many little parts – each one a necessary cog in bringing about the gift that he receives.

With this in mind, *Rav Shepps* explains the *Midrash* that posits that *Bereishis bara Elokim* should be understood as, “In the beginning of Hashem's Creation.” “In the beginning” is a reference to *Bikurim*, the first fruits, indicating that the world was created in the merit of this *mitzvah*. This is an incredible statement! The suggestion that the world's *raison d'être* is *Bikurim* is a powerful statement. What is the unique significance of this *mitzvah* such that no other *mitzvah* warrants this comment?

Rav Shepps explains that *hakoras ha'tov* is the glue that keeps us connected to Hashem. When we recognize how much we owe Hashem for the innumerable benefits of which we are the beneficiaries, our relationship becomes stronger. The *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* is unique in the sense that through it Hashem reveals to us the principle of *hakoras ha'tov*. *Bikurim* teaches us that our debt of gratitude to Hashem extends far beyond the immediate benefits we receive from Him. Indeed, we must recognize the genesis of Hashem's kindness, the original source of every benefit we receive. Hence, we thank Hashem for sparing Yaakov from Lavan, and we focus on Yaakov's going down to Egypt, the Egyptian bondage and ensuing redemption, until we finally arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* and built the *Bais HaMikdash*. Yes – *hakoras ha'tov* goes all the way back to the point that we come to realize that everything – every benefit – has one source, one origin: Hashem. *Hakoras ha'tov* is the foundation of the world. *Hakoras ha'tov* defines our relationship with Hashem.

In an alternative understanding, the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* has another aspect. Besides the actual appreciation of Hashem's beneficence that is the hallmark of the *mitzvah*, there is *hodaah*, expression of gratitude, with the public fanfare that accompanies it. The end result is the raised public awareness of Hashem's kindness towards us. In this light, *Bikurim* serves as the vehicle for public recognition of Hashem's beneficence. The entire creation was worth it for the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* and the consequent sanctification of Hashem's Name.

Just as we are enjoined to thank Hashem for all the good that He bestows upon us, we are, likewise, instructed to show that same gratitude to anyone that benefits us. *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, z.l.*, understood the parameters of *hakoras ha'tov* and served as a paragon of ethical behavior for others to emulate. He would often say concerning the saying in *Pirkei Avos* 4:1, "Who is honorable? He who honors people.' If one thinks that he can be honorable without honoring others, he is wrong!" He understood the enormity of the individual's responsibility towards others. *Rav Chaim* would make every effort to attend the wedding of any student who attended his *shiur* – even if he was from a different *yeshivah*! So great was his sense of *hakoras ha'tov*. It made no difference whether the favor he received was great or small, whether the benefactor went out of his way or had done very little on his part. If *Rav Chaim* had benefited from him, he felt he must show his gratitude.

Horav Meir Don Plotzki, z.l., author of the *Klei Chemdah*, was in London to raise funds for the European *yeshivos*. After a day of visiting a number of London's wealthy philanthropists, trudging from door to door and neighborhood to neighborhood, *Rav Meir Don* finally returned to his host to rest up for the next day's trip to Belgium and then on to America. Waiting for him was *Reb Michoel Levi*, a distinguished lay leader in the London Jewish community. He brought regards from his aged father who regretted that he was too frail to personally pay his respects to the Torah leader. After about an hour of conversation, it became known to *Rav Meir Don* that *Reb Michoel's* father was the one who in his younger years had discovered the commentary of *Rabbeinu Chananel* on *Meseches Pesachim* and had it printed. Immediately upon hearing this, *Rav Meir Don* put on his coat and said, "There is not enough honor that I can bestow upon such a person, to whom the entire Torah world is in his debt for this great gift. Come, we must go to your father, so that I can thank him for what he has done." *Rav Meir Don* understood that he had benefited from this person; even though he was one of many and it was an indirect benefit, he felt it behooved him to show his appreciation. This is the mark of a great person.