

Then you shall call out and say before Hashem, your G-d. (26:5)

Bikkurim, offering the first fruits to the *Kohen*, symbolizes the Jew dedicating everything in his possession to Hashem. (Incidentally, our greatest possession is “ourselves.” Thus, we should keep in mind that we should wholly dedicate to Hashem, all of “ourselves”.) As part of the *Bikkurim* ritual, the one who brings the first fruits makes a declaration recording our history and salvation from such ignominious scoundrels as Lavan – who attempted to uproot the very underpinnings of our people by destroying Yaakov *Avinu* – to Pharaoh, the despot who enslaved us for over two centuries. He relates how we prayed, cried, and pleaded with Hashem to redeem us from the bondage – which He did. He recognizes that Hashem brought us to *Eretz Yisrael*, the special Land which is home to the Jewish People. Why is it necessary to make a verbal declaration? As long as the bringer of the fruits has a sense of gratitude in his mind, should it not suffice?

The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that by articulating his gratitude, “a man arouses his thoughts and draws out the truth in his heart with the power of the words of his mouth.” In other words, one must express his gratitude in order for others to perceive his appreciation. By reiterating the many kindnesses that we benefit from Hashem, we develop and nurture a stronger sense of recognition that Hashem is the Source of all the good in our lives. Indeed, *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, notes that he knows a number of *talmidei chachamim*, Torah scholars, who dedicate a few moments daily to verbalizing their acknowledgement of everything Hashem does for them. We must remember that, to thank Hashem, we must do so respectfully, focused on to Whom we are speaking and to articulate our true, sincere feelings. We are talking to the Almighty! The least we can do is show that we mean it!

Sadly, we sense the obligation to offer gratitude when an organ in our body is in dire straits. Only then do we realize how much we have benefitted from Hashem. A man in Bnei Brak lost the use of his kidneys. He was fine until, one day, his kidneys stopped functioning. (Apparently, he had not been fine; he had just not realized or paid attention to its slow descent.) He was compelled to sell his *dirah*, apartment, in order to pay for a kidney transplant to replace his diseased kidney. He sold the apartment into which he had put years of toil, blood, sweat and tears scraping together the funds to purchase. Clearly, the man now understood the value of his other organs. He no longer took everything for granted. The question that presents itself: Why wait until we lose an organ to thank Hashem? Why do we not wake up and acknowledge to Whom we owe everything?

A ninety-three-year-old man in Italy became ill. After he recovered and was about to leave the hospital, he was presented with a bill of 5,000 *lira* for the use of a ventilator for one day (on that day, his lungs were not working properly, and he was unable to breathe on his own.) The old man began to cry. The doctor told him not to be distressed over the bill. The hospital would work things out with him.

"I do not cry over the money I have to pay. I can pay all the money. I cry because I have been breathing G-d's air for ninety-three years, and I have never had to pay anything for it. For using a ventilator for just one day, however, I have to pay 5,000 *lira*. I realize now how much I owe G-d. I never thanked Him for it before. This is why I cry."

Rav Zilberstein relates the story of a righteous Jew who took it upon himself to keep a "keepsake" with him at all times to remind him of a challenge that he had encountered in the past that, *baruch Hashem*, was over. He did not want to forget it, because in order to truly express his gratitude to Hashem, he required a reminder of times past. This man went everywhere with a plastic bottle of mineral water in his hand. He took it to *shul*, to a lecture, to a *simchah*, celebration. Wherever people saw him, he always had his bottle of water with him. Rav Zilberstein asked this man why he did this "strange" thing. People do not usually walk around with a bottle of water.

The man explained, "A number of years ago, it was discovered that Israeli water had become contaminated. We were told not to drink tap water; it was unhealthy. As a result, people were compelled to purchase their drinking water in the *makolet*, grocery store, or wherever water was sold. The price of bottled water skyrocketed. Members of the community who were of little means had nothing to drink. Others spent a small fortune stockpiling water in their homes. The vendors who had earlier warehoused the water were having a field day with the inflated prices. I remember going to the store and paying 150 *shekel* for a bottle of water! *Baruch Hashem*, the problem was resolved, and prices returned to normal. During this short period, the true character of people became evident. Some merchants jumped at the opportunity to fleece their customers. It was supply and demand. They had the supply, and the customer needed the water. Others were decent and caring, knowing that making a profit from the misfortune of others was uncharacteristic of the Jewish people.

"I was able to purchase water. The nadir to which some people plummeted, however, troubled me. I asked myself, 'Is this the price that we must pay for a bottle of water? Is a bottle of water worth debasing one's *tzelem Elokim*, Divine Image, in which he was created? Now that water is readily available, I carry a bottle of water with me everywhere that I go, so that I never forget the kindness of Hashem. We take so much for granted until, one day, it is suddenly taken away from us."