Parashat Ki Tavo and Rosh HaShana: A Chance to Renew

View PDF



Parashat Ki Tavo and Rosh HaShana: A Chance to Renew

By: Jake Nussbaum

(Jake Nussbaum and his wife Chani live in Teaneck, NJ. Jake wrote this article some years ago when he was a student at Yeshiva College.)

Rav Mordechai Machlis, a Rabbi at Yeshivat Lev Hatorah, spoke about the value of renewal in Judaism, particularly within the context of Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of a new month. The word “hodesh” has the root of “hadash,” meaning new. He also spoke of renewal everyday, every week and every year. Each Kabbalat Shabbat, we chant the words (Psalms 96:1 and 98:1) “Sing to the Lord a new song.” The question is: what is the new song we sing on Shabbat? We are singing the same songs to the Lord as on every Shabbat of our lives! Rav Machlis explains that we don't sing a new song of different words, rather we sing the same words with a different fervor, a different concentration. The Baal Shem Tov said that if your prayer today is the exact same as your prayer yesterday, then you didn't really pray today. Although the prayers one says are going to have just about all the same words every day, the important thing is to build upon the prayers of the past, or to focus on one aspect that has been lacking.

This week’s Parasha, Parashat Ki Tavo, opens with the Mitzvah of Bikkurim, the obligation to take the first fruits from the seven species of the Land of Israel and bring them to offer on the altar to Hashem. The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzvah 606) writes that the reason for this mitzvah is that it is important for a farmer to be reminded that the success of his crops comes from Hashem, not himself. Every year, when it comes time to bring the bikkurim, the farmer will think of how

blessed he was in the past year. The purpose of the mitzvah is to entrench a constant renewal of appreciation for Hashem.

Rabbi Daniel Hartstein, a Rabbi at Lev HaTorah, quoted Rav Avraham Pam Z'l, who pointed out the contemporary relevance of this Mitzvah even if we are not farmers and even if there is no Beit Hamikdash. The Torah presents the statement the farmer was to make when offering the Bikkurim. This statement reviewed the history of Israel, and how God redeemed us from years of servitude in Egypt. The lesson: review Jewish history, be grateful that we now have a renewed Jewish State of Israel.

Nowadays, we have a tremendous blessing to be able to visit Israel in mere hours, while for generations the journey was long and treacherous. The obvious upside is that so many more Jews have a chance to visit our homeland with little inconvenience. However, the easier something is to achieve, the harder it is to appreciate. The Mitzvah of Bikkurim reminds us of the challenges the Israelites went through to reach the promised land even after being driven out of Egypt. All the more so should we appreciate our return to the land sworn to our forefathers after centuries of exile! What the Mitzvah of Bikkurim offers us each and every year is to renew our inspiration and thankfulness to Hashem for the blessings and opportunities we have been given.

It is no coincidence that this Mitzvah is read in the Torah two weeks before Rosh HaShanah, the special time of renewal. Every year, we are faced with the challenge of finding a new way to bring in the year. This could be picking a Mitzvah to focus on deeply during the coming year; it could be setting out to learn something new. Whether big or small, accepting upon oneself something before Rosh Hashanah can make saying the same selihot and prayers "a new song to the Lord." With the Mitzvah of Bikkurim on our mind, may we be blessed to renew our inspiration for serving Hashem in the coming year and to make sure to constantly try to "Sing to the Lord a new song".