

The Joy of Surrender

The *Mishna* in *Masechet Bikkurim* describes the elaborate and joyous process of bringing the First Fruits to *Yerushalayim* (particularly in chapter 3). The farmers would deliberately gather in local cities before embarking on their journey to the *Beit HaMikdash*, creating great processions of *Bikkurim*-bearers and glorifying *Hashem's* name as throngs of people converged upon *Yerushalayim* to perform this *mitzvah*.

An ox, its horns gilded in gold, would ceremoniously lead the procession of *Bikkurim*-bearers. It would eventually be brought as a *shelamim* sacrifice, specially accompanying the *Bikkurim* upon arrival in the courtyard of the *Beit HaMikdash* (see *Bartenura* to *Bikkurim* 3:3). The special *chalil* – the ceremonious flute that was played on particularly joyous occasions in the *Mikdash* – also accompanied the procession.

When the farmers reached the edge of *Yerushalayim*, distinguished officials and leaders would come out to greet them. As the *Bikkurim*-bearers walked through the streets of *Yerushalayim*, everyone stood in their honor, even those engaged in work or occupied in Torah study (*Bikkurim* 3:3 with *Mishna Rishona*).

All of these highly unique celebratory practices created an extremely festive environment in *Yerushalayim* as the *Bikkurim* season was underway. But they raise a basic question. As the *Mishna Rishona* points out, there is another agricultural *mitzvah* that necessitates bringing sanctified produce to *Yerushalayim*. The *mitzvah* of *Ma'aser Sheni* also involves setting aside a significant amount of produce that can only be consumed within the walls of *Yerushalayim*. Farmers likewise converged upon *Yerushalayim* to fulfill this *mitzvah*.

So where were the *Ma'aser Sheni* oxen? Where were the flutes and the processions? Why did those bringing *Bikkurim* merit such extraordinary honor and celebration, while those fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Ma'aser Sheni* did not?

Tucked away in the *Mishna Bikkurim* is a curious formulation that may provide the key to understanding this fundamental difference. The *Mishna* (3:2) records that the *Bikkurim*-bearers would first gather in their local cities and sleep over in the streets of the city before departing for *Yerushalayim*. The next morning, they would rise and begin their journey. In describing this awakening, the *Mishna* uses a striking word: *ולמשכים*.

At first glance, the word simply means that they arose early in the morning. But a careful reader cannot miss its resonance with one of the Torah's most fundamental journeys to this very place.

When *Avraham Avinu* was commanded to travel to *Har HaMoriyah* and offer *Yitzchak* as a sacrifice (*Bereishis* 22), he too arose early in the morning to begin his journey towards

the future *makom HaMikdash*. The verse describes his rise with a familiar phrase: וַיִּשָּׂם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר – and *Avraham* arose early in the morning.

The *Mishna*'s deliberate usage of this term in reference to *Bikkurim* is not simply to emphasize alacrity: it points toward the very essence of *Bikkurim*.

When *Avraham Avinu* was commanded to sacrifice his precious son, he was being called upon to return everything he had achieved in this world back to his Creator. Before the *Akeidah*, *Avraham* had come to realize that his entire legacy of monotheism, morality, and kindness would be perpetuated through *Yitzchak Avinu* alone; and yet, he was now being called upon to surrender this back to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*.

His alacritous rise to perform this command reflects his total and absolute *bittul* – self-nullification and surrender before *Hashem*. This allows us to understand why this awesome sacrifice was specifically intended to occur on *Har HaMoriyah*. The *Har HaBayis* was the very place from which Creation first emerged. It was the place where we were first granted “independent” existence that allows us to imagine that what we possess is truly ours. And it was there that *Avraham* was called upon to return everything.

The journey of the *Bikkurim*-bearer is a microcosm of *Avraham*'s journey.

In contrast to *Ma'aser Sheni*, which closes the process of agricultural *mitzvot*, the *mitzvah* of *Bikkurim* reflects an essential initial act of surrender that defines and contextualizes everything that follows. By taking the first fruits to the *Mikdash* – the gate to the heavens and cradle of the universe – and reciting the verses of אֲרָמִי עֹבֵד אֲבִי that harken back to our forefather *Avraham* (see *Ibn Ezra* to 26:5), a farmer is symbolically surrendering his toil and tears to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. In order for this to reflect a true sense of *bittul*, in which the totality of Jewish history and destiny wholly submits itself before the King of Kings, the *mitzvah* must be glorified with a unique sense of *simcha* and honor.

The farmer came to *Yerushalayim* carrying his first fruits—but, like *Avraham* rising early toward *Har HaMoriyah*, he was really bringing something far greater; his very essence and the totality of existence.