"*Ki Tavo*: Lessons from the Bikkurim ritual"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The opening section of our sidrah – descriptive of the annual ceremony of the bringing of the first fruits (Bikkurim) to the central sanctuary – yields an abundance of ethical ideas and values, as well as some exegetical and historical perspectives. It also provides a declaration for the landowner to recite which takes the form of a historical and national retrospect:

> [1]When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, **2** take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name **3** and say to the priest who was living in those days, "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." **4** The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. **5** Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. **6** But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labour. **7** Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. **8** So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. **9** He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; **10** and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me." Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. **11** Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household (Deut. 26:1-11).

This represents a projection by Moses into the future when the Israelites will have conquered their land, cleared away the debris of invasion and war, distributed to each tribe its specifically allotted territory, sown the seeds and tilled the soil, to enjoy for the first time some of the seven fruits with which the land of Israel is especially blessed.[1] These were already enumerated as 'wheat and barley, vines, figs, and pomegranates, olive trees and honey' (Deut. 8:8). The sages found a textual hint for that small selection of Bikkurim fruits

in the phrase 'And you shall take some of the first fruits of all that you produce' (v.2). In the words of the Talmud, '*some* of the first fruits, but not *all* of them.'[2]

Shavuot was the festival designated for the bringing of Bikkurim to the Temple; but, for the convenience of busy farmers who were prevented from travelling to Jerusalem for that one-day festival, they were given until Chanukah to make their offering. However, the biblical declaration – with its instruction to 'rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you' – could only be recited until the end of Succot, 'the festival of rejoicing.'

Though the wording of the landowner's declaration may seem to indicate that the ceremony was only to be performed once, on the very first year's harvesting of the land following on from its conquest, that was not the case. Rather, it became a highlight of the agricultural year, celebrated for the first time at the temporary central shrine at Shilo,[3] and, subsequently, at Jerusalem for as long as the Temples stood.

The declaration's reference to the Egyptian toil and oppression as the backcloth to the possession of Israel underscored the fact that the ceremony was not only a thanksgiving to God for each year's abundant yield but also a symbolic recall of the very first time their ancestors had been privileged to gain possession of the land and to enjoy its rich fruits (see vv.8-10). An objective of that recall was to remind the Israelites never to take possession of their land for granted. And their subsequent history of exile, dispersion and oppression tragically demonstrated the validity of that message. It remains a message that too many of our own left-leaning brethren, in Israel as well as in the diaspora, would do well to take to heart.

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On the Torah's directive that the landowner 'shall go…and say to the priest *who was living in those days*' (v.3), the Talmud, with uncharacteristically mock humour, offers the query, 'But

could it possibly enter one's mind to go to a priest who was *not living* in those days! But – continue the sages – the message that the Torah wished to impart through the employment of that phrase is that we only have the religious leadership "of our own day," and should accept its authority as prime, and not attempt to compare our particular leaders negatively with those of past ages.[4] (During my decades as a community rabbi I have to admit to having come across some members who revelled in that pastime!)

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There is a principle, based on the verse, *This is my God and I shall glorify Him* (Ex. 15:2), of *hiddur mitzvah*, enhancing the performance of a ritual by means of aesthetics, such as by buying the finest tallit that one can afford, building the finest succah, acquiring the finest lulav or Torah scroll.[5] So one may wonder how this was applied to the ritual presentation of the first fruits.

Well, the passage uses the word טנא to describe the container for the first fruits (see vv. 2, 4). However, as this word occurs only twice more in the whole of the *TaNaCh* (28:5, 17) – and all in the book of Devarim – we cannot know precisely what type of container it was. That it only occurs in the section descriptive of the desert period might suggest that it was a durable portable container particularly suited to desert use, and subsequently discarded by the settled Israelites. The word טנא was carried over, however, into Mishnaic Hebrew, in the form טני, where it has the sense of 'a travelling box' and 'a physician's portable medicine box.'[6] Targum, the official (1st cent. CE) Aramaic translation, consistently renders טנא as *sal,* 'a basket,' as used in the latter period of the second Temple.

The Mishnah has more to say about the containers in which the Bikkurim were presented:

> The rich would bring their Bikkurim in baskets overlaid with silver or gold, while the poor used wicker-baskets of peeled willow-branches, and the baskets were given to the priest together with the Bikkurim[7]

So, while the rich had their costly baskets returned to them, those brought by the poor were kept by the priests. The popular explanation for this was that it was an implicit blessing that the rich should retain their wealth in the year ahead, while the fortunes of poor should be reversed so that, in the following years, they would no longer require their wicker baskets but would afford to bring the costly ones of the wealthy.

As regards the biblical declaration to be recited by those bringing their first fruits, the Mishnah states:

> Originally all who knew how to recite would recite, while, for those who did not know how to recite, others would read it for them [and they would repeat the words]. But when [embarrassed by their illiteracy] they refrained from bringing, it was decreed that they should read the words for both those who could and those who could not recite them so as not to show up the latter.[8]

An obvious difficulty arises, however, with regard to the above two situations, namely, if the priestly authorities were so concerned for the embarrassment of those who couldn't read, and legislated therefore to save their face, why were they not equally concerned for the embarrassment of the poor who could only afford wicker baskets, while the wealthy in the queue were showing off their silver and gold ones?

The answer is simple. The authorities did not regard poverty as anything for people to be embarrassed about, for no one could be sure that their financial situation would not be

reversed, for better or worse, during the following year. Furthermore, one could be poor, but possessed of a good name and of the richest qualities, of heart, soul, and mind, far in excess of those possessed by many of the wealthiest people. Illiteracy, on the other hand, was perceived by all as something to be embarrassed about!

In practice, however, this concern for the illiterate – referred to in the Talmud as the *ammei ha-aretz* ('peasants') – was not implemented consistently, and for centuries there was a massive social gulf between the religiously educated classes (referred to as *chaverim* 'members of our fraternity') and the former, to the extent that the two sections of society even prayed in separate synagogues, referred to rather disparagingly by R. Dosa b. Harkinus as *Battei knesi'ot shel ammei ha-aretz.*[9] Worse still, as the members of the latter group were suspected of not giving tithes from their crops or observing the laws of ritual purity, the general religious community would not fraternise or even intermarry with them. It is only as a reference to the *ammei ha-aretz* that we can explain the intemperate denigration of those outside the learned fraternity and therefore unable to discuss Torah when sitting together at table, as reflected in the following statement:

> R. Shimon said: Three who eat at one table, and do not speak words of Torah, are as if they had eaten of sacrifices of dead idols, as it is said, 'For all their tables are full of vomit and filth, from which God is absent' (Is. 28:8). However, three who eat at one table and speak words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten at God's table…'[10]

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The landowner's declaration includes the expression *Arami oved avi* whose precise meaning is problematic:

> Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean (*Arami oved avi*), and he went down into Egypt… and became a great nation" (v.5).

The popular translation of *oved* as 'wandering' reflects the fact that the patriarch Jacob undertook many journeys in his eventful and difficult life until he finally 'went down to Egypt.' These travels were from Haran to Edrei to Ramot-Gilead to Penuel to Machanayim to Succot to Shechem to Bet El to Bet Lechem, to Goshen in Egypt.

The first problem is that the verb אבד means 'to perish, vanish, do away with, lose,' rather than 'to wander.' Secondly, the description of Jacob as an Aramean is hardly complimentary or even respectful given that that is the Torah's designation of his father-in-law, Betuel, and his deceiving brother-in-law, Laban![11] It is for that reason that Jewish tradition viewed Laban as the subject being referred to, and rendered the phrase *Arami oved avi* as 'the Aramean sought to destroy my father (Jacob).'[12] The only difficulty with that rendering is that there is no reference to 'sought to' in that phrase. *Arami oved* can only (be stretched to) mean, 'the Aramean *did away* with my father.'

The answer of the Midrash is that, when Laban pursued after Jacob, his intention was violent, and God views an evil intention as if the evil had already been perpetrated.[13] And this also explains the otherwise problematic statement in the Pesach Haggadah that 'whereas Pharaoh only decreed against the males, Laban sought to destroy them all.' The implication is that, had Laban carried out his initial plan to destroy Jacob, there would have been no surviving Israelite offspring. Laban would indeed have 'destroyed them all.'

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Our final observation takes account of the final verse of the passage:

> 'Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the goodness the Lord your God has given to you and your household' (v.11)

This summation of the joy, gratitude, and thanksgiving to God, on the part of the landowner accurately reflects our order of priorities. Tellingly, his good fortune and prosperity is not only to be enjoyed by him and his family – after having paid his dues to the Levites who had no land of their own – but is also to be shared with 'the foreigners residing among you.' Jewish concern for and practical support of the less fortunate is repeated so frequently in our Torah that it became ingrained in our psyche. But our good fortune, we are told, is never to be taken for granted. To the contrary: it is to be celebrated. *V'samachta b'chol ha-tov* – 'You shall rejoice in all the goodness the Lord your God has given to you and your household.'

In stark contrast, the New Testament states:

> 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.'[14]

Judaism rejects that view. The Torah acclaims the fact that 'God blessed Abraham with everything' (Gen. 24:1). It views wealth not as something to be embarrassed about, but as a blessing to be enjoyed and to share with the less fortunate. Those who do so become, in effect, honorary priests, conferring blessing upon the community.

Shabbat shalom,

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NOTES

1. This is derived from the opening words of the chapter. See also, Tal. *Kidd*. 37b and Rashi on 26:1-2.

2. Tal. *Men.* 84b.

3. See *Sifre* on the phrase, 'to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for His Name' (v.3), which, according to tradition, also included the temporary shrine at Shilo.

4. Tal. *R.H.* 25b.

5. See Tal. *Shabb*.133b.

6. Mish. *Kel*. 14:6; 16:7.

7. Mish. *Bikk*. 3:8.

8. *Loc. cit.*

9. *Avot* 3:14.

10. *Avot* 3:4.

11. See Gen. 25:20; 28:5; 31:20, 24.

12. See Targum and Rashi on v. 5.

13. See Rashi *ad loc.*

14. Math. 19:23.