



## Growing Gratitude • Parshat Ki Tavo

*Parshat Ki Tavo* opens with an inspirational commandment to celebrate new beginnings. “When you enter the land,” Moses tells the Israelites, “you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, put it in a basket” and bring it to the Temple (Deut. 26:1-2). This precept, known as *bikkurim*, is viewed by the commentaries as a character-building exercise. *Sefer HaChinuch* emphasizes how the act of designating and dedicating the first fruits, and the subsequent pilgrimage and ceremony in the Temple, instills gratitude towards God not only for the first fruits but for “all of the good” that comes from God.

In his book, *Gratitude and the Good Life: Toward a Psychology of Appreciation*, Philip C. Watkins identifies several inhibitors of gratitude. Many people have an aversion to feeling indebted and are, therefore, reticent to acknowledge their dependency on others. Additionally, envy and materialism can generate a continual dissatisfaction with one’s possessions and lot in life, making it difficult to appreciate the blessings. Arrogance is the most pernicious trait that obstructs gratitude. Narcissists have a difficult time admitting dependency because they have a sense of entitlement and an “illusion of self-sufficiency.”

The precept of *bikkurim* served to counteract these barriers to gratitude. There was no lower limit to how much fruit one was obligated to dedicate. Even the smallest measure required the entire procedure. The farmer overcame these inhibitors by appreciating even the tiniest amount. As Rabbi

Dr. Norman Lamm notes in his *Derashot LeDorot*, “[f]or even if a man could afford no more than a *kol shehu*, even a pittance, still he gave it joyously and enthusiastically – the very first fruits, the symbol of a person’s achievement, one’s triumph, and one’s success were devoted to God.”

Gratitude expert Robert Emmons in his book *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* adds “the business of life” as a barrier to gratitude. People can get too caught up in their daily routine and responsibilities to appreciate their blessings. This is counteracted in the commandment of *bikkurim* with an intense focus on intentionality. The Mishna describes the procedure for designating the first fruits. “How does one set aside *bikkurim*?” the Sages ask. “A person goes down into his field, he sees a fig that ripened, or a cluster of grapes that ripened, or a pomegranate that ripened, he ties a reed-rope around it and says: “Let these be *bikkurim*” (Mishna, *Bikkurim* 3:1). Being deliberate and mindful was an essential part of the process from its very beginnings.

The Mishna continues by describing the festive procession to the Temple. “The flute would play” as they approached with their adorned fruits. “The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] would go out to greet them... All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them.” Why this elaborate celebration for what may have been a small basket of fruit? There is no such pomp and circumstance when it comes to other commandments. Dr. B.J.

Fogg in his book *Tiny Habits* writes that to create a new habit, it is essential to start small and celebrate even minor accomplishments. Perhaps the grand celebration was necessary to help inculcate the habit of gratitude.

When the farmer finally reached the Temple, he approached the priest and recited a brief text which summarized the Exodus story and culminated with appreciation for the land and the “first fruits of the soil which you the Lord have given me” (Deut. 6:10). The gratitude was not just expressed through ritual deed. It required explicit verbalization and submissive body language, bowing before God. Maimonides notes that

this verbal recitation “creates humility. For he who brings the first fruits takes the basket upon his shoulders and proclaims the kindness and goodness of God” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:39).

Research indicates that gratitude is correlated with happiness. There is even evidence for a causal link: increasing gratitude can lead to more happiness. After detailing the *bikkurim* procedure the verse concludes that “Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your God has given you and your family” (Deut. 22:11). This elaborate ritual, which strategically counteracts the obstacles to gratitude, will inevitably generate lasting happiness.

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**Character Challenge:** Identify a small blessing which you generally take for granted and verbally express your gratitude to God.

**Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l:** “Gratitude encourages the savouring of positive experiences. It bolsters feelings of self-worth. It helps people cope with stress. It inhibits invidious comparisons with others. It encourages moral behaviour – grateful people are more likely to help others. It tends to dissipate negative emotions such as anger. And it counteracts the hedonic treadmill. Gratitude is the opposite of the mindset of a market-led, consumer society. It is about satisfaction with what we have, not hunger for what we do not have” (*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, p. 112).