



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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SERMON TITLE:

Luck of the Rich and Mazel of the Poor

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Ki Tavo

Luck of the Rich and Mazel of the Poor

Good Shabbos!

Have you tried to get a loan from a bank recently? Many people feel that although slavery has not been legal in the United States for 150 years, they are still slaves of the banks. The loan rates are strangling people especially if they need business loans—which are often impossible to get.

The absurdity of matter is that people well-established economically are being happily given loans by the banks, and at loan rates and easy terms, just because they have good credit. But those people who actually *don't* have money and who really *need* the loans, those people get their souls squeezed out of them until they actually get the loan from the bank—and then, it's only with very difficult conditions and high interest, because they are considered to be a high-risk group.

It truly feels unfair – but interesting enough, the Talmud pointed out this absurdity over 2,000 years ago.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Ki Tavo, we read about the mitzvah of Bikkurim, of bringing the first fruits. When the Jewish Nation lived in its own native land, everyone who grew on their fields one (or more) of the “Seven Species” by which the Holy Land is praised had to fulfill the mitzvah of Bikkurim.

This means that the landowner would have to take the first fruits that ripened on his trees and put them in a basket and physically bring them himself to the Beis Hamikdash, the Temple, in Jerusalem.

The custom was that the entire village or settlement would gather and go up to Jerusalem together. Upon arrival, the residents of Jerusalem would come out to greet them and give them a warm reception. And then, the entire procession would make its way together to the Beis Hamikdash, accompanied by live music and great joy, and then and there give the Bikkurim to the Kohanim.

The Sifri on our Parshah comments on the verse, “and the Kohein will take the basket from your hand” (Devarim 26:2), asking why the Torah writes that the Kohein takes the basket—it should

have said that “the Kohein will take it from your hand” or “the Kohein will take the fruits, or, “the Bikkurim from your hands.” Why does the Torah specifically mention “basket”?

But the Sifri says that this is to teach us that not only do the Bikkurim go to the Kohein, but also the basket too.

However, the interesting thing is that if the Bikkurim were brought in a silver or gold basket, then the Kohein would simply empty out the fruits and return the basket to the Bikkurim-bringer. And on that, the Talmud (Tractate Bava Kama 92a) says, “From where comes the saying, ‘After poverty come poor people’? From that which we learned [from the Bikkurim ritual] about rich people.”

That means that just like the silver and gold baskets, meaning, money, were brought forth by the rich people who brought their Bikkurim in them, so too does money bring on rich people—and, conversely, poverty brings on poor people. And in the rule for how Bikkurim are brought, we see that the saying is true.

The poor man who has no silver or gold vessels would bring his Bikkurim in a simple basket woven of leaves and wicker—and such a basket would be kept by the Kohein. However, the rich man, who has enough resources to bring his Bikkurim in a silver or gold vessel, from him only the fruits are taken and the vessel returned.

And we see this phenomenon in life too. It was only in the last generation that we saw people who were quite rich in Europe fleeing to the United States or Israel or to any other country in poverty and with nothing but the clothes on their backs—but within a short time, they became rich once again. It could be that they had a lot of their money, or even most or all of it, overseas in the first place, but regardless, it seems that their good fortune crossed the Atlantic with them.

On the other hand, those who weren’t quite successful in Europe apparently didn’t forget to bring their fortune along with them to the United States, too.

Nevertheless, we still try to find some consolation here. To say that this is how it always was somehow isn’t good enough. It’s unseemly that the Torah itself should align itself with selfish capitalism. So we can still ask the question: Why indeed does the Torah stipulate that from the poor, we take the baskets, but from the rich, not?

Some explain that since the poor only brought a few fruits, and those fruits that they brought weren’t always exactly fresh, either, if the Kohein would empty the basket out in front of everyone, he would humiliate them—and so the Kohein would simply take all the fruits together with the basket and send them off on their way.

Others explain that the basket symbolizes the poor fortune that follows poor people—and so when the poor man would bring his Bikkurim, the Kohein would not want to return to him his basket along with his poor fortune, too. And so the basket would remain with the Kohein.

On the other hand, the rich man's gold vessel symbolized his good fortune—and so the Kohein would most definitely want to return that to him! By doing so, he would give him back his good fortune so that it would continue to shine upon him.

And perhaps we can even look at this from a different perspective altogether. With regards to the Korbon Ani, the sacrifice brought by the poor man, the Torah uses the wording “V'nefesh ki sakriv”—“should a soul sacrifice.” On this, Rashi (Vayikra 2:1) says, “The only voluntary sacrifice in which the word ‘nefesh’ is used is the Minchah sacrifice. And who typically brings a Minchah, a poor offering made of flour and oil? The poor man. Says G-d: ‘I consider it as if he sacrificed his very soul.’ ”

But why is this so? The Rebbe explains that the rich man brings a sacrifice out of a sense of deep satisfaction that flows from the thought that he is bringing valuable and expensive sacrifices. The poor man, on the other hand, can't be boastful over the poor man's sacrifice—and so it is a sacrifice that comes with a sense of humility. And therefore G-d loves him. (Likutei Sichos Vol. 27, pg. 15.)

And we can say something similar when it comes to Bikkurim.

The poor man has a quality above the rich man—G-d only takes the fruits from the rich man, but the Bikkurim of the poor man are so beloved by G-d that He wants not only the fruits but the basket, too.

Why is this so? Because the rich man brings his Bikkurim with a sense of self. With an ego. He's all full of himself over the important gift that he is bringing to the Kohein. The poor man, however, who brings whatever few little fruits he can bring with humility and a broken heart... it is the heart that G-d wants, and it is those fruits that G-d cherishes. And so G-d wants his basket, too.

Now the Jewish Nation is compared to Bikkurim, as the Prophet Hoshea (9:10) says, “Like the first among dates at their head did I view your fathers.” The Jewish soul is compared to fruits, with the body compared to the basket—and what G-d is saying here is that He doesn't just want the fruits, the soul. He wants the basket, the body, too.

And the Rebbe explains that when a Jew serves G-d, G-d wants him to devote his “basket” to him, too—his body and his lot in the world. In other words, serving G-d and being spiritual also means that this material world and all the physical things in it should be spiritual, too—your house, your car, your office... all of it should be “Bikkurim” too.

How do you accomplish that? By putting a mezuzah on your door, eating kosher in your kitchen, and so on.

When we do so, we also bring the “basket” to G-d, too.

And so when it comes to spirituality, it doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor—G-d wants the basket, too. (See Likutei Sichos Vol. 29, Parshas Tavo I, pg. 145.)

May we all find our roads to being more spiritual, and may we all do our parts in making every part of this physical universe more spiritual, until the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

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