

A Heavenly Blessing

הַשְּׂקִיפָה מִמַּעוֹן קִדְשְׁךָ מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבֵרַךְ אֶת עַמְּךָ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת
הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לָּנוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתֵּינוּ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב
וְדָבָשׁ. הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצַוֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶת
הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וְשִׁמְרָתָם וְעָשִׂיתָ אוֹתָם בְּכָל לְבַבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ

Deuteronomy 26:15-16:

“Gaze down from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people, Israel, and the land that You gave us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey. This very day, G-d your Lord, commands you to perform these statutes and judgments. You shall observe them and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul.”

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These verses follow the two subjects mentioned at the beginning of the Torah portion: bringing the first fruits (*bikkurim*) and giving the tithes to their intended recipients. In that vein, on the phrase “You shall observe them and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul,” *Rashi* explains that the intent of these words is that a heavenly voice will bless the person, saying: “You brought the first fruits today. May you bring them the following year.”

There is, however, somewhat of a difficulty with *Rashi*’s statement: The subject immediately preceding this verse is giving the tithes. Why then does *Rashi* omit mention of giving tithes and cite only the first fruits?

This question can be resolved by taking a closer look at the passage concerning the tithes. That passage states:²⁵ “When you have finished giving all the tithes of your produce in the third year....” The commentaries explain that the implication of bringing “all the tithes of your produce,” is that the first and second year tithes have been held over and are delivered in the third year. This — delaying the observance of a *mitzvah* in such a manner — is certainly not a practice that a heavenly voice would bless a person to repeat.

Flowing with Milk and Honey

The interpretation of the blessing as referring to the first fruits is still, however, somewhat problematic, for there is a gap of several verses between the two. That difficulty, however, can also be resolved, because there is an allusion to the first fruits in the conclusion of the first verse cited above: “A land flowing with milk and honey.”

²⁵ *Deuteronomy 26:12.*

Our Sages interpret²⁶ that phrase as referring to “milk that flows from the goats and honey that flows from dates.” According to the simple meaning of the Biblical text, there is no obligation to tithe either of those substances.²⁷ There is, however, a Scriptural obligation to bring the first fruits from dates, for the first fruits are brought from the seven species of produce for which the land of Israel is blessed²⁸ which include dates. Indeed, the verse which mentions those seven species²⁹ refers to dates as “honey.” Hence, there is a basis for interpreting the blessing to repeat the *mitzvah* the following year, as referring to the first fruits.

Measure for Measure

There is another point of connection between the heavenly voice issuing forth a blessing and bringing the first fruits. Bringing the first fruits is an expression of thanks for G-d's kindness. As such, in appreciation of G-d “bring[ing] us to this place,”³⁰ “you shall go to the place which G-d chose.”³¹ In recognition of G-d “giv[ing] us the land,”³² the first fruits should be given as an offering.

The motif is also reciprocal. Since the Jews make a declaration of thanksgiving when bringing the first fruits, proclaiming their gratitude to G-d,³³ G-d responds by having a heavenly voice proclaim a blessing for the Jewish people.

G-d's First Fruits

The prophet proclaims:³⁴ “Israel is sanctified unto G-d, the first of His produce.” Our Sages state:³⁵ “There are two entities that are called ‘first,’ the Torah and the Jewish people. I do not know which came first, the Torah or the Jewish people. When the Torah states: ‘Speak to the Children of Israel,’ ‘Command the Children of Israel,’ one can

26 *Rashi, Exodus 13:5.*

27 For only grain, grapes, and olives are mentioned in *Deuteronomy 14:23*, the verse which obligates the separation of tithes. Moreover, even according to *halachah* (Jewish law), there are authorities (see *Rashi, Berachos 36a*; *Kessef Mishneh to Hilchos Terumah 2:1*) who maintain that the obligation to tithe other species is Rabbinic in origin.

28 *Rashi's gloss to Exodus 34:26; Deuteronomy 26:2.*

29 *Deuteronomy 8:8.*

30 *Ibid.* 26:10.

31 *Ibid.* 2.

32 *Ibid.* 9.

33 See *ibid.* 5.

34 *Jeremiah 2:3.*

35 *Tanna D'bei Eliyahu Rabbah*, ch. 14.

conclude³⁶ that the Jewish people came first.” Similarly, the *Midrash* states:³⁷ “The thought of the Jewish people came before all things.” (*Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. 19, p. 229ff.)

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Direct and Winding Paths

אֶת יְהוָה הָאֱמֶרֶת הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים...
וַיְהוֶה הָאֱמִירָה הַיּוֹם לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סְגֻלָּה

Deuteronomy 26:17-18:

“You have distinguished (האמרת) G-d today to be a G-d for you.... And G-d has distinguished you today for you to be a cherished people.”

In his commentary to this verse, *Rashi* explains that he is unfamiliar with a similar usage of the root אמר. He then states:

It appears to me that the term means to set aside or to separate. [The Jewish people] have distinguished G-d from the false gods to be [their] G-d and He has separated them from the nations of the world to be His cherished people.

Afterwards, *Rashi* continues:

I found a similar usage. The intent is to imply glory, as in the verse:³⁸ “All the workers of iniquity glorify (יתאמרו) themselves.”

These two interpretations — “to set aside or to separate” and “glory” — reflect two paths of Divine service. The first is a direct path. A Jew sets himself apart from all connection to false gods and the nations of the world, placing himself above all connection to evil. At times, however, Divine providence³⁹ causes a person to approach G-d through an indirect path — the path of *teshuvah*. Through this path, even “workers of iniquity” ultimately bring about the revelation of G-d’s glory.

36 Since the Torah speaks about G-d addressing the Jewish people, one may conclude that at the time the Torah came into being, both G-d and the Jews already existed.

37 *Bereishis Rabbah* 1:4.

38 *Psalms* 94:6.

39 See *Along a Winding Path* (SIE, 5771).