

Bringing Bikkurim Today and Our Choicest Fruits Rav Bendavid, Parshat Ki Tavo 5786

Parashat Ki Tavo teaches us about one of the final mitzvot introduced in the Torah, the mitzvah of Bikkurim. In many ways, Bikkurim spans the entire Jewish experience. A Jew would take the first and choicest fruits of the Land of Israel, bring them to the BHKM, and present them to the Kohen. There, while holding the fruits, he would retell the story of the Jewish people from our earliest beginnings, through slavery and redemption, until our arrival in Eretz Yisrael.

But what about today? Does the mitzvah of Bikkurim have any relevance when there is no BHKM? And what would happen if someone today actually designated fruit as Bikkurim?

The Mishnah (Shekalim 8:8) teaches: השקלים והביכורים אין נוהגים אלא בפני הבית. The mitzvah of Bikkurim applies only when the BHKM is standing. This follows naturally from the Torah's formulation: ראשית בכורי ארצך (Shemot 23:19).

But the Mishnah then raises a fascinating question: What happens if someone nevertheless designates fruit as Bikkurim today? The Tanna Kamma maintains that such fruit becomes sacred - הרי זה קודש. Rabbi Shimon disagrees and rules: האומר ביכורים קודש, אין. If someone declares produce to be Bikkurim when there is no BHKM, it does not acquire sanctity.

This disagreement has real practical significance. Some Rishonim, including the Ra'avan, rule according to the Tanna Kamma. According to this approach, declaring fruit to be Bikkurim today could confer sanctity upon it. Since we cannot bring it to the BHKM and eat it properly, the fruit would have to be set aside and allowed to decay rather than be consumed improperly.

Rav Ovadia MiBartenura, however, rules according to Rabbi Shimon. The Torah specifically says תביא בית ה' אליו which means Bikkurim are to be brought to the House of God. Without the BHKM, even if one designates produce as Bikkurim, בדיעבד לא קדש, the fruits do not become sanctified.

The Rambam also addresses the status of Bikkurim in the absence of the BHKM. In Hilchot Bikkurim (2:1), he writes: מצות עשה להביא בכורים למקדש, ואינם נוהגין אלא בפני הבית ובארץ ישראל בלבד

For centuries, this discussion remained largely theoretical. But with the return of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael, it suddenly took on new significance. In 1923, a number of kibbutzim and agricultural communities in Emek Yizrael, including Ein Harod and Kfar Yechezkel, began organizing Bikkurim ceremonies

around Shavuot. The idea was to bring the new fruits and dedicate them to the Keren Kayemet Le'Yisrael.

There was something powerful about this. After nearly two thousand years, Jews were once again farming the soil of Eretz Yisrael and celebrating its produce. But the ceremonies also raised serious halachic concerns. First, some of these celebrations involved Chillul Shabbat. Second, there was a concern about the status of the fruits themselves. If participants actually designated them as Bikkurim, perhaps their words carried halachic weight.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook was deeply involved with this issue. On the one hand, he wanted to support the initiative. It symbolized the rebuilding of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael and the return of Jewish agriculture to the land. At the same time, Rav Kook was opposed to the ceremony taking place on Yom Tov itself and he was also concerned about actually designating the fruits as Bikkurim, particularly in light of the halachic opinions that such a declaration could have real significance.

Rav Kook therefore emphasized an important distinction. This should not be called Bikkurim. It should be called זכר לביכורים, a remembrance of Bikkurim. We do similar things in other areas of halachah as a זכר למקדש. For example, we take the lulav for all seven days of Sukkot and blow the shofar on Shabbat near a designated Beit Din (see the machloket in Rosh Hashanah Ch 4) Similarly, Rav Kook believed there was value in a זכר לביכורים, as long as it was clear that this was not the actual mitzvah of Bikkurim. And indeed, these rabbinic concerns bore fruit and the ceremonies were moved from Yom Tov.

Bringing Our First Fruits

We do not bring Bikkurim today. We have no BHKM and no Mizbeach but the idea of Bikkurim remains deeply relevant. We are now in Elul. And perhaps Elul is precisely the time when we are asked to bring our choicest fruits.

Bikkurim were not about giving Hashem what was left over. They were about bringing our first and our best. Elul is a time to raise the bar of our religious lives. We step into shul more. We daven better. We open up our siddur. We increase our mitzvah observance. We try to become more aware, more focused, and more intentional about our relationship with Hashem. We step up a notch. In other words, Elul is when we bring our A-game. We bring our choicest fruits to the table. The actual mitzvah of Bikkurim must wait for the rebuilding of the BHKM. But its spiritual message is very much alive.

As we enter Elul, perhaps the question we should ask ourselves is: What are the choicest fruits of my life and am I bringing them to Hashem?