

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tavo
September 2020 / Elul 5780

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Tavo – Declaring our gratitude

In this week's Parasha of Ki Tavo, we read about the Bikkurim ceremony - the mitzvah of the first fruits. Once a year, Bnei Yisrael were required to bring an offering of the first of their crops to the Kohanim in the Bet Hamikdash. In order to identify which fruits were 'first', the farmers tied a ribbon around the fruits that appeared first. Around the time of Shavuot, those who had grown fruit that year would bring the first fruits to Jerusalem with a huge parade and joyous celebration. After they handed over the basket of fruits to the Kohen, the donors recited out loud the following pasukim, remembering Yetziat Mitzrayim and thanking Hashem for Eretz Yisrael:

“An Aramean [Lavan] tried to destroy my forefather [Yaakov]¹ and he went down to Mitzrayim and he lived there with a small number of people and there he became a large, powerful and numerous nation. And the Egyptians treated us cruelly and they oppressed us and they made us do hard labour. And we called out to Hashem the G-d of our fathers and Hashem heard our voice and he saw our suffering and our hard work and our oppression. And Hashem brought us from Mitzrayim with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great awe and with signs and wonders. And he brought us to this place and he gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now I bring the first fruits of the land that Hashem gave me.”
(Devarim 26:5-10)

After reciting this passage, the donors were required to bow down before Hashem. Then they were commanded to rejoice in all the good that Hashem had bestowed on them.

This commandment centres on gratitude and appreciation. However, a question arises – what if the crop yields were disappointing? Perhaps it was a time of drought? Perhaps it was a time of war? Or perhaps the crops were stolen by marauding enemies? Some years things just don't go according to plan. Or perhaps we are not in the best of moods for other reasons, and just don't feel grateful and happy. How can one be commanded to 'rejoice with all the good that Hashem gave [him]' when he just does not feel like it!?

In 1957, Leon Festinger proposed a psychological theory called cognitive dissonance.² This psychological principle refers to a situation where one's attitudes or beliefs conflict with their behaviour, causing discomfort. Since human beings naturally seek comfort, this internal discord puts pressure on the person to amend either their beliefs or their behaviour in order to restore harmony. For example, consider someone who is addicted to smoking (i.e. a behaviour) but knows that smoking is unhealthy (i.e. a belief). The dissonance between their behaviour and their belief causes them to feel uncomfortable. They may try to minimise this discomfort by either changing their belief or their behaviour. If they are addicted to smoking, it may be very difficult to alter their behaviour. Instead, they may feel psychological pressure to alter their belief instead through various rationalisations (e.g. smoking is actually not as unhealthy as people believe, there is a conspiracy against cigarette companies for political reasons, the pleasure one receives from smoking outweighs the damage to their lungs etc).

¹ Some commentators translate this pasuk as “My father was a wandering Aramean”.

² <https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html>

Eisav appears to have exhibited this sort of behaviour after he sold the birthright to Yaakov³. The pasuk tells us what took place after the transaction was agreed:

*And Yaakov gave Eisav bread and a pot of lentils, and he ate and he drank and he got up and left, and **Eisav despised the birthright**. (Breishit 25:34)*

Why did Eisav despise the birthright? Though Eisav obviously failed in that moment to attribute a high value to the birthright – as he agreed to swap it for a bowl of lentils! – why does the Torah tell us with such strong language that he **despised** it? Perhaps after the swap, Eisav felt guilty, because deep-down he knew how precious the birthright really was (i.e. his belief). However, he had already sold it and acted contrary to this belief. He could not resist the temptation to sell the birthright in order to satisfy his immediate desire for food. This conflict between Eisav's behaviour and belief may have caused him pain which he sought to minimise by convincing himself that the birthright was terrible.

During the Korean War (1950-1953) the US army came to the defence of South Korea in a bid to prevent the expansion of communism by North Korea. Many US soldiers were taken prisoner during the course of the war. In an effort to increase communist propaganda, some of the US POWs were forced by their captives to write letters back home describing the wonderful nature of communism and stating that the North Koreans were friendly and considerate people. Researchers discovered something very interesting.⁴ Those soldiers who had recorded in writing that communism was a good system, actually felt more positively inclined towards communism - even though they had written against their will! There was a conflict between their behaviour (i.e. writing letters) and their belief (i.e. that conditions in North Korea were terrible). They could not change their behaviour because they were forced to write the letters. Therefore, they changed their belief!

Marketing departments of large corporations are well aware of this phenomenon. A common advertising campaign runs as follows: "To win a wonderful prize please write in 25 words or less what you like about our product". Marketers know that if we commit to writing why Crunchy Sugar Pops is the best breakfast cereal ever, we will be more likely to buy that product in the future.

This may be one underlying benefit of the mitzvah of Bikkurim. If we participate in a joyous celebratory parade and recite out loud how grateful we are for Hashem's kindness, even during years where we feel disappointed, the words themselves can inspire us to feel grateful and happy. If our thoughts don't match this practice, our inner feelings may strive to co-ordinate with our external behaviour in order to minimise internal discord.

This mitzvah thus teaches us an important lesson for life and a key to happiness. Even if we do not feel happy, it can be helpful to just smile and act grateful and happy anyway. The external cheer may inspire us and evoke an inner lift and it may also help to influence others to be happy.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson of the Bikkurim – if we focus on the positive and talk about all the good that Hashem gives us, then even when we don't feel happy, we may find our mood becoming more positive.
2. Make an effort to smile and act happy even if we don't feel like it. Let our external actions of smiling and gratitude gradually affect our internal beliefs. This will help to boost our feelings and it may help to influence others as well.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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³ Breishit 25:29-34.

⁴ Discussed in "Influence – The Psychology of Persuasion" by Robert Cialdini, 1984.