

5781 - Deuteronomy 26:29 – Ki Tavo (When you come)

*The Secret to a Good Relationship*¹

Naomi is married to a goal-oriented individual. Due to his overloaded schedule, they rarely spend quality time with each other.

One day, Naomi phoned her husband. An important client had called. She had taken the initiative and scheduled a meeting for 8:00 that evening at an elegant restaurant.

Naomi's husband thanked her and assured her that he would rearrange his schedule to make the meeting.

By 7:55, Naomi's husband was seated in a quiet corner of the restaurant. By 7:57 PM, he had instructed the waiter to come to the table as soon as his guest arrives. At a minute to 8:00, he clicked off his cell phone.

A few moments later, to his utter astonishment, Naomi entered the restaurant. Purposefully, she made her way to his table and gracefully sat down.

His perplexed expression briefly turned to annoyance, then to anger, but finally settled on admiration as it dawned on him that his wife was the "important client who had been trying to meet him for a long time."

¹It will be, when you come into the land which G-d gives you for an inheritance ... ²that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, and you shall put it into a basket and go to the place that your G-d will choose to have His Name dwell there. ³You shall come to the *kohen* who will be serving in those days (and say "I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us") ...—DEUTERONOMY 26:1-3

The *bikkurim*, the "first fruit" offering, had to be the very best quality, produced in the Holy Land, from the very first fruits to ripen. **These fruits were brought to the Holy Temple to express gratitude to G-d for the opportunity of settling in the Land of Israel and for blessing its produce.** (Mishneh Torah,² *Hilchot Bikkurim* (Laws of the First-Fruits) 2:1 and 2:3)

Maimonides explains, **"Everything that is for the sake of G-d should be of the best and most beautiful.** When one builds a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than his own dwelling. When one feeds the hungry, he should feed him of the best and sweetest of his table. Whenever one desig-

nates something for a holy purpose, he should sanctify the finest of his possessions, as it is written (Leviticus 3:16), "The choicest to G-d"

In devoting the "first-ripened fruits" of our life to G-d, we are in effect saying: Here is the focus of my existence. Quantitatively, this may represent but a small part of what I am; but the purpose of everything I do is to enable this portion of spirit to rise above my matter-clogged life.

Bikkurim teaches us to establish priorities. In the myriad responsibilities of the "daily grind," it reminds us to give precedence—and devote our strongest, freshest resources—to the people and values that we most cherish.

Have we neglected to schedule quality time with our spouses, to reignite the spark that originally attracted us to each other?

Do we allocate time for our children at the end of our day, after we've been depleted of energy or initiative to adequately relate to the issues of their lives?

Are we so occupied with pursuing material success that we leave but a few crumbs of energy to nourish our spiritual growth? Do we connect with our Creator in only a few rushed moments of distracted prayers, to assuage our guilt before tackling the "real" tasks of our day?

Step back and prioritize—the first and best of your fruit, time, energy, and resources, must be devoted to G-d. Realize what's important in your life and schedule that first. Recognize who you most cherish, and connect regularly with those individuals

Don't allow your life to become so entangled with trivialities that you forget the main purpose of why you're here.

1. *These fruits were brought to the Holy Temple to express gratitude to G-d for the opportunity of settling in the Land of Israel and for blessing its produce.*

- Not the first of every kind of fruit, but only of the seven kinds mentioned in Deu 8:8 as typical of the fruitfulness of the land. They are: **wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates.**
- According to *Bikkurim* 3:1, when the farmer sees the first ripe fruit of each species he ties a cord or blade of grass on it for identification.
- ^{3b}and say ... ^{3c}I have come ...

"I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us."

1) Apparently it was important to say **these specific words.**

2) The "Form - Substance" debate.

¹ Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (Chabad.org), pp. 279-281.

² The *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Torah") is a code of Jewish religious law (*Halakha*) authored by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon). The *Mishneh Torah* was compiled between 1170 and 1180 CE, while Maimonides was living in Egypt, and is regarded as Maimonides' *magnum opus* ("greatest work").

3) The thank-offering would be **visible proof** that the land was now in the possession of the Israelites, and that the Divine Promise had been faithfully fulfilled.

4) Perhaps that is **one of the reasons why the offering and its accompanying profession** was so important—**It prompted people to acknowledge** (recognize, affirm, accept) **God's integrity** (truthfulness, reliability, faithfulness).

a) Deuteronomy 4:39-40

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.

⁴⁰Keep his decrees and commands ... so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.

2. *Maimonides explains, "Everything that is for the sake of G-d should be of the best and most beautiful.*

a. Genesis 4:3-7

³In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, **but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor**. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. ⁶Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? **7If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?** But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

1) It is sometimes said that Cain's offering was not accepted because it was not an animal sacrifice, like Abel's. But, there is nothing in the text to suggest that an animal sacrifice was required.

2) Genesis Rabbah 22:5

And Kayin brought from the fruit of the land an offering [mincha] to God (Gen. 4:3)—**from the leftovers**, [similar to] the evil tenant that eats the first fruits and gives to the owner of the field the stunted ones.

b. Genesis 18:1-8 (CJB)

¹ADONAI appeared to Avraham by the oaks of Mamre ... ²He raised his eyes and looked, and there in front of him stood three men. On seeing them, he ran ... to meet them ... ³and said, "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight ... ⁴Please let me send for some water, so that you can wash your feet; then rest under the tree, ⁵and **I will bring a piece of bread** ... "Very well," they replied ... (so) ...

⁶Avraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "**Quickly (using)**

... the best flour! Knead it and make cakes." ⁷Avraham ran to the herd, took a good, tender calf and gave it to the servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸Then **he took curds, milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it all before the men**; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

c. Genesis 45:16-20

¹⁶When the news reached Pharaoh's palace that Joseph's brothers had come, Pharaoh and all his officials were pleased. ¹⁷Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Tell your brothers, 'Do this: Load your animals and return to the land of Canaan, ¹⁸and bring your father and your families back to me. **I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land.**' ¹⁹"You are also directed to tell them, 'Do this: Take some carts from Egypt for your children and your wives, and get your father and come. ²⁰**Never mind about your belongings, because the best of all Egypt will be yours.**"

d. Isaiah 25:6-8

⁶On this mountain (i.e., Mt. Zion) the LORD Almighty will prepare **a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines**. ⁷On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

e. Luke 15:17-24

¹⁷"When (the "prodigal son") came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! **Bring the best robe and put it on him**. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

3. *Are we so occupied with pursuing material success that we leave but a few crumbs of energy to nourish our spiritual growth?*

a. Avot 1:15

15. Shammai² says: **Make your Torah [study] a fixed practice; say little and do much; and receive everyone with a cheerful face.**

1) Many commentators and translators have dealt with the ambiguity of the dictum, "Make your Torah fixed," by assuming that it refers to the study of the Torah. That is, **it is widely held that Shammai is admonishing that one should set fixed times for the study of the Torah** or that the study of the Torah should be made a fixed obligation ... with the implication that **"the study of Torah must not be something casual or occasional"** ...

There can be no doubt that such teachings are fully in accord with rabbinic tradition ...

An alternative interpretation of the sage's intent is that the statement refers to the tendency on the part of some people to reinterpret the teachings of the Torah to suit the perceived needs of the time and place. Seen from this viewpoint, Shammai would be saying, in effect: "Torah is the word of God to man, to be received with reverence and accepted ... **It is 'fixed' and not to be modified to suit human convenience.**"

... the sage's teaching has also been understood as asserting that one's interpretation of the Torah should be fixed, in the sense that **one should not interpret it one way when applied to oneself**, either more conservatively or liberally, **and differently when applied to others.**³

a) Romans 2:1-3

¹You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, **because you who pass judgment do the same things** ... ³So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them **and yet do the same things**, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

2) Psalm 1:1-2 (cf. Josh 1:8)

¹Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ²but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, **and who meditates on his law day and night.**

3) Psalm 119:14-18 (cf. Psa 145:1-12)

¹⁴I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. ¹⁵I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. ¹⁶I delight in your decrees; **I will not neglect your word.** ¹⁷Do good

to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. ¹⁸Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

4) Ezra 7:10

¹⁰For Ezra **had devoted himself to the study and observance** of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

5) Menachot (Meal Offerings) 99b

Ben Damah ... once asked R. Ishmael, May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom? He thereupon read to him the following verse, This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night. Go then and **find a time that is neither day nor night and learn then Greek wisdom.**

4. *Step back and prioritize—the first and best of your fruit, time, energy, and resources, must be devoted to G-d.*

a. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵Love the LORD your God **with all your heart** and **with all your soul** and **with all your strength.** ⁶These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

b. *Kavanah*

When you say the same prayers day after day, you might expect that the prayers would become routine and would begin to lose meaning. While this may be true for some people, this is not the intention of Jewish prayer ... **the most important part of prayer is the introspection it provides. Accordingly, the proper frame of mind is vital to prayer.**

The mindset for prayer is referred to as *kavanah*, which is generally translated as **"concentration" or "intent."** The minimum level of *kavanah* is an awareness that one is speaking to G-d and an intention to fulfill the obligation to pray. **If you do not have this minimal level of kavanah, then you are not praying; you are merely reading.** In addition, it is preferred that you have a mind free from other thoughts, that you know and understand what you are praying about and that you think about the meaning of the prayer.

Liturgical melodies are often used as an aid to forming the proper mindset. Many prayers and prayer services have traditional melodies

³ Martin Sicker, *The Moral Maxims of the Sages of Israel: Pirkei Avot*, (iUniverse Inc.), pp. 67-68.

associated with them. These can increase your focus on what you are doing and block out extraneous thoughts.

I also find it useful to move while praying. Traditional Jews routinely sway back and forth during prayer, apparently a reference to Psalm 35, which says "All my limbs shall declare, 'O L-rd, who is like You?'" Such movement is not required, and many people find it distracting, but I personally find that it helps me concentrate and focus.⁴

5. A lesson from the *Bikkurim*

a. Romans 11:13-16

¹³I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶**If the part of the dough offered as first-fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.**

b. 1Corinthians 15:20-23

²⁰But Messiah has indeed been raised from the dead, **the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep ...** ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Messiah all will be made alive. ²³**But each in turn: Messiah, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.**

c. James 1:18

¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, **that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.**