

## 5784 - Deuteronomy 26:29 – Ki Tavo (When you come in)

Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to *Parshat Ki Tavo ...*<sup>1</sup>

Today I want to talk with you about two curiosities at the beginning of this week's parsha.

### **Bikkurim: Understanding the Meaning of the First Fruit Offering**

In the story having to do with the law of בכורים (*bikkurim*), the first fruits, the Torah declares that once a year farmers should ascend to the temple with a basket of their first fruits and it gives a procedure for what is to happen next. The procedure at face value is very straightforward; when you look at it a little bit more carefully, it becomes rather mystifying.

Let me show you what I mean.

So here is the farmer, he shows up at the temple, וּבֹאֵת אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן אִשָּׁר (u-vata el-ha-kohen asher yih'yeh bayamim hahem), he comes to the priest that's there (Deu 26:3). וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו (v'amarta eilav), and he says to him, הִגַּדְתִּי הַיּוֹם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ (higadti hayom laHashem Eloheicha), 'I have declared today, before God, your God', כִּי־בָאתִי אֶל־הָאָרֶץ (ki-vati el-ha-aretz asher nishba Hashem la'avoteinu latet lanu), 'that I have indeed come to the land that God has sworn to give to my forefathers.'

Well, sounds pretty straightforward—until you begin to take a closer look at the grammar. הִגַּדְתִּי הַיּוֹם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ (higadti hayom laHashem Eloheicha), he says, 'I have declared today, before God.' **What's that supposed to mean? He didn't already declare that**, I mean he is standing there and now he is talking, he is making a declaration but doesn't say 'I am declaring, I hereby declare.' 'I have already declared,' but he didn't declare anything, he didn't say anything, how could he have declared this already? That's disconnect number one.

Here is disconnect number two, look what happens next. וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן (v'lakach hakohen ha-te-ne miyadecha), the kohen takes the basket from his hands and places it before the alter of God (26:4). וְעָנִיתָ (v'anita v'amarta), that farmer should then answer and should say

before God (26:5), the following: אָרַמִּי אֲבִד אָבִי (arami oved avi), 'My father was wondering Aramean', וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִמָּה (va-yei-red mitz-raimah), 'he eventually wandered and came down to Egypt', וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם (vayagar sham), 'he sojourned there for a while and became a great nation in Egypt', וַיִּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִיִּים (vaya-reiu otanu hamitz-rim), 'the Egyptians mistreated us (26:6) and they oppressed us and God heard our voice when we cried out to him and then he took us from the land.'

And the farmer goes and continues and gives this really mini summary of Jewish history; and the disconnect here I think comes from one word, this introductory word, וְעָנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ (v'anita v'amarta), 'and he shall answer and say.' **What do you mean answer, did anyone ask him a question?** I mean he was the last one talking, it's really just a continuation of his first declaration, 'I have declared to you today that I have come before you ... to this land' I mean if so, he is continuing talking, **why do we call this an answer? He is not answering anything, no one talked to him.**

It seems to me, that **the Torah is intentionally setting up the soliloquy of the farmer as something other than a soliloquy, a kind of dialogue.** There are breaks in this dialogue which are silences, but they are not really silences at all. Something is happening in that silence.

Let's try to figure out what it is.

### **A Closer Study: What Does the Bible Say About the First Fruit Offering?**

The first silence, the farmer takes his basket, he comes to the temple, he gives it to the kohen, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו (v'amarta eilav), and he says, הִגַּדְתִּי לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ (higadti hayom laHashem Eloheicha), 'I have declared before God that I have come to the land that God has sworn to my forefathers.' What that seems to mean is that even before he has opened up his mouth, **just the simple fact of his presence is a kind of declaration.** The only thing that happened before he started talking was he was standing there.

It must be that, that 'standing there' says something, it says what he then gives voice to through words just a moment later that 'I have come to the land'. The greatest testimony is that he has come to the land is just the fact that he is standing there, even before he opens his mouth.

What does it say? Look at exactly what it is that the farmer says when holding it. He doesn't just say that 'I have declared that I have come to the land', which land? אִשָּׁר הִיא לָאֲבוֹתֵינוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ (asher nishba Ha-

<sup>1</sup> <https://members.alephbeta.org/playlist/bikkurim-first-fruits-offering>

*shem la'avoteinu latet lanu*), 'The land that the God swore to my forefathers;' why is he saying that? The fact that God has sworn the land to his forefather seems to be the issue that the farmer is addressing.

**What he seems to be saying is that God is the Promise Keeper, the One who has kept His oath to my forefathers, I am here to tell those forefathers wherever they are in heaven now, that God did keep His oath and if you look a little bit back in the history, you can have a sense of why that something must be said.**

You can almost imagine Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all of their descendants sitting there in heaven with the Lord of Hosts, saying over the edges, 'well, when will it finally happen?' That promise that Abraham's progeny was going to get the land, was made so many centuries before it happened. It was a promise that would have frustrated Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of their descendants.

You're Abraham, God comes and tells you, it is going to be great, you are going to have land, you are going to have children. You think it is going to happen and it doesn't happen. By the end of your life, the only land that you have is the burial plot that you have bought for Sarah and for even that you had to haggle with Evan for it.

You are Isaac, you think it falls to you to actualize Abraham's promise, you are going to be the one who is finally going to be able to take possession of this land. Here you are, you are spending your life digging wells and then the Philistines comes and they stop up the wells and at the end of your life, you have actually lost yardage, you have nothing to show for it in terms of actual קנין (*kinyan*), possession of the land.

And what about children? All you have is two kids and now, in the next generation, you are Yaakov, it falls to you to actualize the promise and you think it is finally going to happen but at the moment that you get the mandate to carry on the great legacy of Abraham, you find yourself on the run, escaping from the land of Israel to escape the wrath of the brother you tricked. And suddenly you are in exile and you are not in the land and at that moment that you are leaving the land, you have this dream and God comes to you and says, 'Don't worry. I am going to bring you back, you are going to have lots of children. Your children are going to be like the dust of the earth and you will have the land, as far as you can see.' And you say to yourself, 'Yes, I am going to be the one, finally it is going to be me.'

And decades later, you do come back to the land and you have all these children and you think it's you. And וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְרֵי אָבִיו (*vayei-shav ya-a'kov b'erezt megurei aviv*), **you hear the exhilaration of the text. Yaakov finally settles down** (Gen 37:1). Where does he settle? He settles in the land that his fathers until then had just been גָּרִים

(*gerim*), they have just been sojourners. 'I am finally going to settle down to actualize the promise that they failed to actualize,' only to see that slipped to his grasp.

When Joseph is taken down to Egypt and sooner than later, he and his entire family follow; and on the way to Egypt God comes to him in a bone chilling prophecy and says 'don't worry about going to Egypt, I am going to make you into a great nation there'. Sounds so wonderful until you remember the promise—land and nationhood—and God is saying that I am splitting up the promise. You are going to be a nation, a great people but it's not happening in Israel, it is happening in Egypt where you and your entire family are going to be in exile for a long, long time.

When Genesis ends, the promise is unfulfilled; when the five books of Moses end, the promise is unfulfilled. It takes centuries for the promise to be fulfilled, until we meet this little farmer.

### Explaining the Meaning of Giving Your First Fruit Offering to God

The little farmer feels like nothing; Jewish history is about Abraham, it is about Isaac, about Jacob, about Jews and Egypt. It is not about me, I am just a little old farmer somewhere west of Nahariya; but it is about you, you are the end and the end makes all the difference.

הִגַּדְתִּי הַיּוֹם (*higadti hayom*), 'I say, I declare, **my very presence, my being here in the land with this basket testifies to the forefathers up in heaven with you God, that you are a Promise Keeper**, you didn't say this in vain, it is true. I am here and my basket of fruits proves it to be true.' And now, he lays down that basket and then, he answers the question.

What question is this the answer to? No question was asked—except maybe a question was asked in the silence. He laid down the basket before the altar, he put it before God. That basket sitting there on the ground in that silence, a question has been asked to the farmer by God. The question is, 'you claim that your presence is a statement, do you understand that statement? Do you understand the larger context for your existence here? Show me that you understand.'

וְאָמַרְתָּ וְעָנִיתָ (*v'anita v'amarta*), and then you answer and you go throughout Jewish history, starting from the very beginning, and you show that **you understand that this long deferred promise is twisted and turned through the ages and that you are the combination of that promise.**

And when you are done with that, you are done with your declaration and then, you can finally rejoice with these first fruits knowing what their significance truly is.

1. *It must be that, that 'standing there' says something, it says what he then gives voice to through words just a moment later that 'I have*

come to the land'. The greatest testimony is that he has come to the land is just the fact that he is standing there, even before he opens his mouth.

a. Exodus 19:16-18

<sup>16</sup>On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup>**Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.** <sup>18</sup>Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

1) It is from passages like this one that the practice of “standing” in the presence of HaShem when we recite the *Shmoneh Esrei* (the Eighteen Benedictions also known as the *Amidah* [Standing]), is chanted during synagogue services.

b. Numbers 16:41-50

<sup>41</sup>The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. "You have killed the LORD's people," they said. <sup>42</sup>But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the tent of meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared. <sup>4</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, <sup>44</sup>and the LORD said to Moses, <sup>45</sup>"Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once." And they fell facedown. <sup>46</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer and put incense in it, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started." <sup>47</sup>So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, **but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them.** <sup>48</sup>**He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped.** <sup>49</sup>But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. <sup>50</sup>Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, for the plague had stopped.

c. Psalms 106:19-23

<sup>19</sup>At Horeb the (people) made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. <sup>20</sup>They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass. <sup>21</sup>They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, <sup>22</sup>miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. <sup>23</sup>So he said he would destroy them—**had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.**

d. John 19:25-27

<sup>25</sup>Near the cross of Yeshua **stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.** <sup>26</sup>When Jesus saw his mother there, **and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby**, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," <sup>27</sup>and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

1) Sometimes just “standing nearby” is enough of an expression of support to make possible whatever it is that HaShem wants to accomplish in/through you.

e. Hebrews 10:32-35

<sup>32</sup>Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. <sup>33</sup>Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; **at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.** <sup>34</sup>You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. <sup>35</sup>So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

2. *What he seems to be saying is that God is the Promise Keeper, the One who has kept His oath to my forefathers, I am here to tell those forefathers wherever they are in heaven now, that God did keep His oath and if you look a little bit back in the history, you can have a sense of why that something must be said.*

a. Numbers 23:19

<sup>19</sup>God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak (אָמַר) and then not act?

**Does he promise and not fulfill?**

1) וְדִבֶּר וְלֹא יְקִימֶנָּה (v'diber v'lo y'kime-nah)—lit; “and spoken, and does He not make it stand (or confirm it or fulfill it)?”

2) The Hebrew word for “promise” is by definition whatever it is that God says—**His spoken word is a “promise.”**

b. Acts 2:36-39

<sup>36</sup>Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Yeshua ... both Lord and Messiah."

<sup>37</sup>When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

<sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "Repent and be (immersed), every one of you ... And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>**The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off**—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

1) Ephesians 2:11-13

<sup>11</sup>Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... <sup>12</sup>were separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners **to the covenants of the promise**, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Messiah Yeshua **you who once were far away have been brought near** by the blood of Messiah.

3. *You can almost imagine Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all of their descendants sitting there in heaven with the Lord of Hosts, saying over the edges, 'well, when will it finally happen?' That promise that Abraham's progeny was going to get the land, was made so many centuries before it happened. It was a promise that would have frustrated Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of their descendants.*

a. Genesis 12:1-2

<sup>1</sup>The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household **to the land I will show you**. <sup>2</sup>**"I will make you into a great nation**, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing ... <sup>4</sup>Abram was **seventy-five years old** when he set out from Harran (c. 1943 BCE).

b. Genesis 21:5

<sup>5</sup>Abraham was **a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born** to him.

d. Joshua 23:1

<sup>1</sup>After a long time had passed and the LORD had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them ... (c. 1481 BCE)—**approximately 462 years after the promise was made to Abraham**.

1) Joshua 23:14

<sup>14</sup>"Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that **not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled**; not one has failed.

e. Hebrews 11:8-12

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place **he would later receive as his inheritance**, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup>By faith he made his home in the promised land **like a stranger in a foreign country**; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

<sup>10</sup>For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup>And so from this one

man, and he **as good as dead**, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

f. 2Peter 3:9

<sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

4. *The little farmer feels like nothing; Jewish history is about Abraham, it is about Isaac, about Jacob, about Jews and Egypt. It is not about me, I am just a little old farmer somewhere west of Nahariya; **but it is about you, you are the end and the end makes all the difference.***

a. Avot 2:20

Rabbi Tarfon<sup>2</sup> says: The day is short, the task is abundant, the laborers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house is insistent.

1) It has been suggested that R. Tarfon is offering, in an abbreviated form, **a parable the moral of which we may be expected either to grasp immediately or upon further reflection**. The parable is as follows: The owner of a house has contracted with a group of laborers to perform certain work within a specified period (of) time. But, although the amount of work to be done is great, the workers are slothful and are unlikely to complete the task on time, regardless of their obligation to do so. The owner must deal with three variables, time, the scope of work, and the quality of the work force. Presumably, if there were no rush, the work would eventually get done to his satisfaction. However, the "day is short." There is no additional time that can be allotted to the project, "and the work is great." The scope of what must be done cannot be diminished.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, **the only recourse is to find a way of stirring the slothful laborers to greater activity**. One such way is to increase the worker's compensation—to award a bonus if the job is completed in time—to assure them that "the reward is great." However, even so, it may be necessary to hover over them if the deadline is to be met. They must be kept constantly aware that the "master of the house is pressing" for completion of the job in time (*Hayyun, Millei de Avot*<sup>4</sup>).

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2 Rabbi Tarfon or Tarphon, a Kohen, was a member of the third generation of the Mishnah sages, who lived in the period between the destruction of the Second Temple and the fall of Betar.

3 Martin Sicker, *The Moral Maxims of the Sages of Israel: Pirkei Avot*, (iUniverse Inc.), p. 136.

4 Commentary on Pirkei Avot by R. Joseph ben Abraham Hayyun (d. 1497). Among his students were Don Isaac Abrabanel ...

2) Matthew 9:35-38

<sup>35</sup>Yeshua went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. <sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, "**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.**" <sup>38</sup>Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

b. Avot 2:21

21. (R' Tarfon) used to say: You are not required to complete the task, **yet you are not free to withdrawal from it.** If you have studied much Torah, they give you great reward; and your Employer can be relied upon to pay you the wage of your labor, but be aware that the reward of the righteous will be in the World to Come.

1) R' Tarfon comments on his own statement in the previous mishnah regarding man's overwhelming spiritual tasks in this world. One may feel, "Why should I begin when I will never be able to complete all my duties? **Since the day is short and the task abundant, it is useless to try.**" Therefore, R' Tarfon tells us that **we are not absolved of our tasks**, even though they seem too heavy for us (*Midrash Shmuel*).<sup>6</sup>

c. Acts 20:22-24

<sup>22</sup>"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup>I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup>However ... **my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task** the Lord Yeshua has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

d. 1Corinthians 3:5-9

<sup>5</sup>What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as **the Lord has assigned to each his task.** <sup>6</sup>I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow ... <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. <sup>9</sup>For **we are co-workers in God's service**; you are God's field, God's building.

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5 A collection of commentaries on Pirkei Avot by Rabbi Shmuel Di Uzeda, one of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria's senior disciples and author of the works *Iggeret Shmuel* (Epistle of Shmuel) and *Lechem Dimah* (Bread of Tears).

6 Rabbi Moshe Lieber, Ed., *The Pirkei Avos Treasury, Ethics of the Fathers*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), p. 125.