

On Shabbat, I often find myself reminiscing about Shabbats past. This weekly period of rest punctuated my childhood and our family celebrations were very special to me. As often as we were able, we sat down together every Friday night over everything from roasted chicken and kugel to takeout containers to celebrate Shabbat. After blessing the candles and making Kiddush and motzi, my mother would ask us all to share one good thing that happened in the week that just ended. Even among all the stress, tough moments, and chaos, I think each of us always managed to find a moment that brightened up our week. Whether they did it consciously or not, I believe my parents taught us a significant lesson: the constant importance of gratitude. Gratitude, the attitude or feeling of being thankful, plays a major role in the Torah portion we read this week, and I think that we all have the opportunity tonight to remember the importance of expressing gratitude in our own lives.

Moses tells the Israelites that when they inhabit the land of Israel, they must conduct a special ritual over the first fruits they gather, known as bikkurim. Let's break down the parts of this ritual so we can understand it a little better.

Number One: Bring the fruits to the priests

*<sup>2</sup> you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name.*

Number Two: The priests will accept your offering, then you recite the following-

*"I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign us."*

The basket of harvested fruits is placed before the altar.

Number Three: Recite a special speech, one that many of us know today from its appearance at the Passover Seder table.

*"My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. <sup>6</sup> The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. <sup>7</sup> We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. <sup>9</sup> He*

*brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.<sup>10</sup> Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me."*

After the offering is made and the fruits dedicated to God, you sit with the priests and the stranger and eat the fruits together.

This ritual may seem foreign to many of us. I am not a farmer, and I certainly have no idea where I would go today to try and offer some of my fruits or wheat before God. Nevertheless, the Torah does take the trouble to describe it, so I think it requires so reinterpretation. Saadya Gaon, a 9<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher and religious authority, who we will study in our first Adult Education class on Sunday, taught in his *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* that all of Jewish law, the halakha, can be broken down into four categories or purposes: showing gratitude to God as the source of all, demonstrating reverence for God and God's holiness, respecting the rights of others, and the reward for hard work.<sup>1</sup> The means for being more grateful, more aware of the gifts in our lives are already a part of Jewish tradition. I want to suggest that in this relatively short passage of the

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<sup>1</sup>Saadya Gaon, *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, trans. Alexander Altmann (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2002), 96-97.

Torah about bikkurim, we can glean a number of lessons in incorporating gratitude into our own lives. In fact, Judaism requires it of us.

Firstly, we need to change our perspective about what it means to have possessions and success. In a TED Talk by the monk and interfaith advocate Brother David Steindl-Rast, he reminds us that it is a universal goal of humankind to be happy. This is not always easy. We all may come across people who have all the means to be happy, but always desire more. On the other hand, we might know someone who can find happiness every single day in what little they actually possess. The Torah and Brother David agree—the key to gratitude is that we acknowledge every moment, every thing we have as a gift, freely given. This is what inspires within us the desire to be thankful. We thank the Divine for all that we have, from our land to our homes to the fruits of our labor. Each is a precious gift.

Furthermore, gratitude requires that one is grounded in a greater context, a sense of history. How can you be grateful for the present moment and its gifts if we have nothing to compare it to? In the ritual of bikkurim, the person offering his fruits does not just begin with a “Thank you God! God is good,” and sit down to take a big bite of his apricots and pomegranates. He begins by recalling the journey to arrive at this moment. His ancestors suffered persecution, slavery, and destruction. In

desperation, they cried out to God and God heard them, freeing them from their tormentors and leading them through the wilderness. Only then does he explain why he is offering his fruits—God brought the people to the Promised Land, and now it is beholden on them to give it back, dedicate some of the harvest to a higher purpose.

Finally gratitude can inspire us to share our thankfulness with others. The bikkurim portion is given to the disenfranchised, the Levite who has no land and the stranger who lives on the margins of society. The gifts are not taken home selfishly or left on the altar to naturally decompose. The people who need it and appreciate it the most enjoy the fruits immediately. This perhaps also inspired within the stranger and the priest a mutual sense of gratitude, for living in a society and a place where everyone takes care of one another with the gifts they can share.

Brother David helpfully boils down all of this for us into a simple method of living a life guided by gratitude: STOP....LOOK....GO. I suggest that we can translate this into our own lives guided by the values of Torah:

STOP and remember the past, remember all that our people have been through, all our families have done for us to bring us to this moment.

Remember where you are coming from before you look ahead.

LOOK at all that you have. Look at what's in front of you. Look at the life you have and the gifts you receive to enjoy life to its fullest.

And finally, GO, go forth and share that gratitude with others. Engage in acts that remind you to be mindful, to be just a little bit more grateful as you move forward.

STOP, LOOK, GO, seizing every moment as a gift and a moment to live with gratitude.