

Session 152

Ki Tavo – The Keys to Unlocking the Promises of the Land of Israel

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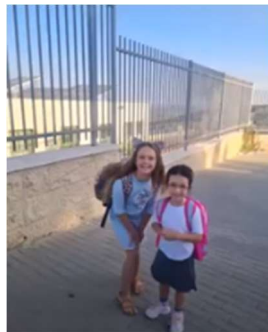
Jeremy

Shalom everybody! Welcome to the Land of Israel Fellowship, so good to see your beautiful faces. It's good to see the people that are outside, Nancy, Tar, and Brett, you guys are like doing like a picnic outside. That looks really amazing. Good to see everyone that's just gathered here today, preparing for this...it's like the best time of the year. It's given to us and we have the ability to just take it in and launch us into the new year. And I'm looking at the faces and I'm looking at the chats and it's like from Mexico to North Colorado, North Dakota, down to Louisiana, Africa, Holland, Germany, the UK, Israel, it's like wow! It's just incredible.

And the New Year has started in Israel. It's not Rosh Hashana yet, but the New Year cycle is on. It was the first day of school and you really feel it. Rosh Hashana is right around the corner and the academic year is perfectly aligned with the holidays. And we start the new school year right in line with the new biblical year. And I just want to share some of these pictures with you because our youngest is now in first grade.



Chen got on the bus by herself. That's Chen right there, and that's it. That was our last, first day of first grade. My kids are growing up and that was just unbelievably cute. But she has her older sister, Emunah with her. And of course, Emunah took incredible care of her.



Here is a picture of Emunah with the funny ears on her head. Emunah now went into the 5th grade and there they are together. And she like held her hand and walked her into 1st grade.

It was just...Tehila spent most of that morning crying, she was like in tears. "Our baby is in 1st grade, just acting like a mid-life crisis that morning. That just knocked her over. But baruch HaShem, we had Emunah that took control of things, got Chen to safety, even though Tehila was totally incapacitated with the emotional, overwhelming reality that our youngest is now in 1st grade, and on her way to a new existence for the next 12 years in school.

And so, friends, it's just important to remember, to enjoy the little things in life. Because one day, we're going to realize, the little things...they're really the big things. And so it's a big deal,

all of our family is getting ready to go back to school now. And so, with the New Year coming and all of us from around the world, I want to take this opportunity to lift up a prayer together, one people, one heart, one land from this place.

HaShem, thank You for today. Thank You for giving us this time to prepare for this coming year. Help us pull the arrow of life back and help us aim it toward You. Give us the vision, give us the dream, give us the desire to rise up this year and lift our loved ones up around us. Thank You for this Fellowship, thank You for choosing us to represent this vision in the world and live out the vision of the prophets as we prepare for these holy days together. Bless this Fellowship with health, with strength, with joy and prosperity this year. A sweet good year for all of us, a year filled with Torah and goodness, love and connection, courage, and truth. Shine Your light into our lives. Shine Your light into everyone that is live here today, bless everyone that will be tuning in later. Help us hear Your calling and walk through the valley of the shadow of death with no fear at all. Because You are our shepherd. Amen.

Jeremy

Alright, my friends. One of the members of the Fellowship asked me if I could do a quick review. They said it was very helpful last year. And last year, what I did was, I gave the Five F's for going into the New Year. And this year, I actually have 6 F's. And so, it's a great cheat sheet for life, we're going to kick it off a short introduction, just to sort of put that away, to know that I gave you that gift, and then we can really move on to really like the deep meat and potatoes of the Fellowship. So, if you do have your journals out, this is a great time to get these things written down. It's worth writing down, it's worth thinking about, and I actually have some friends that printed them out and stuck them on their refrigerator. Because it's something worthwhile reviewing all the time, but especially before the New Year where you're trying to craft a vision of how you want to ...like the dominos are stopping now. We have a chance to stop the domino effect and then start a new domino effect as we go into this New Year.

So what are the F's? The first F is faith. How's my faith? How's my Torah study? Am I growing as a person.

Second F. Family, how is my family doing? My marriage, my children, my parents, my siblings, what do I want that to look like in this upcoming year?

Fitness...how do I feel physically? How's my diet? Am I taking care of my body? You know, I heard one time someone said that people have many wishes in the world. Sick people have one wish, just to be healthy. So fitness is key, it's really the fundamentals. If you don't have your health, we don't have anything.

Finances – how are your finances? Are you giving enough charity? Am I spending enough time...is my life aligned? Am I spending more than I'm making? Am I living within my means?

Am I living like a righteous life? Am I just being wise with the finances that HaShem has blessed me with?

So, faith, family, fitness, finance.

Five, my friends, my Fellowship, my community. What am I doing around them? How are they doing? How are the people around me doing? Can I be doing more for my community? So those are the five F's. But...in truth, if you get those 5 F's down, you're already pretty much going to win the game of life.

But there is this 6th F that I want to add today. And that is the F of fun. F-U-N. Fun? That's not a word, that's not even a word in Hebrew. Did you know that? There's no word for fun in Hebrew because that's not a biblical idea, just to have fun. So I want to translate fun in a very specific way to make it holy. There are things in life that we do that bring us joy. And they are actually gifts that are given to us. These unique things that we, for some mysterious reason, really love to do. And we get enjoyment out of them. They are things that bring us joy. And I want you to think about those things. Because maybe it's one thing in particular. You know, for some maybe it's an early morning walk, a quiet cup of coffee, a good concert at night, a date night with your husband or wife, maybe it's painting, playing music, writing, creating, maybe it's animals – a dog, a horse, building something, gardening.

For Tehila, it's gardening. She loves gardening. She LOVES gardening. And if Tehila had a garden and a library, she pretty much has all the fun that she needs in the world. And when she's out in the garden, I just know that that's when she's doing good. But you know what happens? There are so many things to do in life. Six kids, and work, and a house, and responsibilities...that gardening...doesn't always make it onto to like the to-do list of that day. So when she carves out time in her life and she's able to transcend the tyranny of the urgent and the musts that we have to do, I know she's doing good.

And so what are the things that make your life enjoyable? Enjoyable, meaning they bring us joy. And if you think about them before this New Year, think about how you can get more of those enjoyable things into your life. It's a mitzvah to be joyful. And every mitzvah is an avodah, every mitzvah is a service, it's work. It's work to be joyful. Because otherwise the world would just sweep you away. It's a big mitzvah to be joyful. So what do you have to think of in your day. Don't just think about your fitness and your finances. Think about fun. Think about the things that actually just bring you joy for the sake of joy. There are just things that HaShem put in your heart that make you happy. So think about how we can get more of that joy in our year.

And here's the truth. Most people, they don't ever take time to reflect. Every day just goes into the next, they don't even have Shabbat. They're just living their life. And you know Abraham Lincoln famously said, "If I had six hours to cut down a tree, I would spend the first four

sharpening the ax.” And so, so many of us are just cutting away at life. Fighting through the brush, making a path through the jungle, but this time of year, it’s auspicious for sharpening the ax, for thinking about taking time out of our lives and thinking about how we want to live this year. Sharpening the ax before we start cutting into the next year.

And in some ways, one of the purposes of our Fellowship, this time and gathering is like, think about the higher things of life and then launch into our week, better prepared, better aligned, stronger in our faith, with more clear vision. And so...faith, family, fitness, finances, friends, fun. Six F’s. If you think about those six things going into your next year, you will have a better year, guaranteed, then if you just fumble into Sunday as you did into Monday, as you did into Tuesday and you just let the domino effects of life continue to fall. And so that is my first little tidbit gift to kick off the Fellowship.

And so now, what I want to do...first of all, thank you for that question, and of course all of you are always invited to shoot me WhatsApp’s and sometimes I’ll answer personally, but sometimes I feel like, you know that’s really valuable. I’m gonna share that with the whole Fellowship. And of course, you can reach me on WhatsApp, email, anyway you’d like. But with that, I would love to introduce my best friend, my learning partner, my chavruta, my brother-in-arms, partner on the Farm, Ari Abramowitz, he’s here with us today. Ari, the inspiration, here you are buddy, let’s go, I’d love to hear what you have to say. I haven’t seen you, we’ve been so busy. It’s like hard to...

Ari

I know, I know. It’s been so long. It’s good to see YOU. It’s funny we see each other this way. And it’s good to see everybody here. Now I didn’t realize that first day pictures were in bounds on this Fellowship. So as you’re talking, I’m frantically sending Tabitha pictures...can you include this, can you include this? Because while I don’t have any of Shiloh, I do have of Dvash. And I can’t believe I’m actually at that place in my life where I have that picture of my child going to the first day to her kindergarten. It’s just so overwhelming. And as you know, I don’t share anything on social media ever, but I do want to share with you guys the first day of Dvash’s gan. Tabitha, were you able to get it up?



Ahhh! Is that yummy? Their gan is called Gan Zohar. Gan is like kindergarten. And it was great. It was much more difficult for me than it was for her. The way her teacher explained it was, she got there, and we actually saw this part at the beginning, and all the kids are showing up and they’re shy and sort of meek and nervous on their first day. Some of them are crying, and she’s one by one going up to them and saying, “Here, it’s ok, come play with me, come play with me.” And bringing them all to make them feel comfortable and welcoming them. And then she went up to Shaena

and she said, “Mama, I think that it’s time for you to go. You know, all the kids are crying and holding onto their mother’s leg. And she’s greeting everybody and it was just ...it made me very proud. I wish I could have been as put together as her. But anyways, and then we took Shiloh for his first day. Anyways, I’m not going to take up Jeremy’s whole Fellowship talking about Dvash and Shiloh, but thank you for letting me share that with you.

And it’s really good to see all of you. Just like Jeremy said, as these times are approaching, on Rosh Hashanah and the High holidays, these are times that are really filled with hope and joy and optimism. And so I wanted to just share this short message with you about this because if there’s anyone that can connect with these emotions in the truest, realist way...it’s really all of you. I’ll tell you why I feel this way.

So this past Shabbat, I was at my sister, Miriam’s house, and as you know, you see here, I print up the prayer requests that Ardelle puts together. And I was reading through them like I always do. And while I was reading your requests and as you know, we pray for you regularly. But this Shabbat, I feel like I may have just have been in a more vulnerable place or a more emotional place, maybe a more open place than usual, but as I was immersing myself in the messages that so many of you share, really like you share them bravely and generously and as you know, for those of you that read these...these are filled with very real, very real challenges and pain. You’re sharing those places in your life that you really feel like you need the prayers the most.

As I was reading through it and praying through it, it was really entering my heart in a way that felt unique. And it was beautiful. But it was also quite painful. I feel like I was taking on your pain more than usual. And I don’t regret that, I’m grateful for that. I was sharing in your distress more than usual and it was difficult, but I was happy. Because I really believe that those prayers, the more they come from a place in which we truly share each other’s pain, we’re able to then share each other’s joy. And when we’re able to take on each other’s emotions in a real way, a healthy way, well I think those prayers are the most powerful.

And so in this week’s very beautiful and very intense Torah portion, we see that the stakes are high. When you decide to serve HaShem in truth. You know, when we do, the blessings are very great...beyond our wildest dreams. But the curses too are very real. When we know the right way and we don’t take it, the curses...we’ve seen them as we’re reading through it. It’s like just the highlights are the darkest points throughout Jewish history all were manifesting themselves, perfectly described in this week’s Torah portion as a part of the curses.

To get to the part of the blessings, let’s focus on that for a moment. Because Rabbi Shalom Rozner points out a beautiful point in the Torah’s language when discussing the blessings. And it made me think of all of you. So chapter 28, verse 2, it tells us:

And all these blessings
will come upon you
and reach you.

-Deuteronomy 28:2

So he points out that it would have made much more sense for the words to be arranged in a different order. It would have made more sense to say that the blessings will reach you and then when they reach you, they'll come upon you. They'll reach you and then come upon you. But he explains that often people reach out for blessings, things that are

outside of themselves that they don't have. Things that they feel like they really need that they don't have. And often, they see things that other people have and they pray for those things.

But the wording in that verse, he explains, is that first we should see the blessings that have already come upon us. Blessings that are often not clearly blessings at all, at least when you look at them from the naked eye. But when we're approaching life from the perspective of knowing that everything that happens to us is from God and everything is good, everything is a blessing, particularly those things that are the hardest and most painful, when we reach out, when we reach out and we prayerfully seek the eyes to see those hidden blessings in all of that pain, THEN they come upon us. When we reach out and trust and in faith to see those blessings. When we beseech HaShem for the eyes to see the blessings in the things that are the hardest for us to even imagine that there could be blessings within them, then they come upon us. Then we're able to see them, when we're able to experience them in the most beautiful way imaginable, even while it's playing out.

And so, when reading through this very powerful, holy, booklet of broken hearts and prayers, that's exactly what I saw. Everything, you know, so many of you would be justified in feeling like victims and complaining. I know that I've gone that route before. But that is not what I experienced in the prayers and in the blessings and the messages that you sent in those holy words. I saw faith and trust and hope and positivity. I saw the sweetest, holiest people in the world seeking and seeing the beauty and the spiritual opportunity in their pain. Without denying it, without putting on a show and acting like...NO! The pain is real, the tears are real, the grief is real, but the spiritual opportunity and the blessing is still there and I see all of you seeking that.

And so, I want to bless all of you, bless all of us, that as we approach Rosh Hashana, we will continue to be able to really coronate HaShem as the King in our lives. The kind King, the compassionate King, the loving King who runs the world better than we ever could. And better than we could ever understand. And whose orchestration of our lives we receive with love and trust and faith. May this coming year, my friends, be a year of sweetness and revealed good. Revealed good, because everything is good, but not everything is sweet and not everything is revealed. This should be a year of sweetness and revealed good. A year when all of our prayers should be answered in the best way possible, a year when our tears will be dried up and our tears will be transformed to laughter and joy. Amen.

Jeremy

Amen. Thank you so much, Ari. Yeah, thank you so much. Alright my friends, so here's what we're gonna do. Today we're really gonna go deep. I have...I'm trying to connect all of the dots because this Torah portion, Ki Tavo, is always read right before Rosh Hashana. It's always like leading up to that time. And what can you do? It says, when you come into the Land, you can't help but just feel that we're not just talking about the Torah portion of coming into the physical land of Israel, but it's when you come into the promise of your life.

And for some mysterious reason, the first mitzvah of this Torah portion is the mitzvah of bikkurim. The mitzvah of the first fruits offering. And just a little bit of background about what that is. The mitzvah of bikkurim starts when a farmer inside the Land of Israel, it's specifically inside the Land, would go out to his field and he would find the first budding fruits. You could have seen this awhile ago with our pomegranates, when they like just started to come out. And what you do, is you tie a reed around them and you verbally declare that these are my first fruits. I see them, they're now...these are the first fruits. And this mitzvah also only applies to the seven species in the Land of Israel. So, that's wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and grapes.

And the first fruits, when they actually come to ripe, they're brought to the Temple specifically on Shavuot. And you have really a window from Shavuot until Chanukah, but that's why Shavuot is called the Festival of...the Harvest Festival, the first fruits of your work. And so Chag Habikkurim, it's like the first fruits festival. And so, ok, that's the mitzvah and it's the first one – as you come into the Land, this is the one. But then, as you continue to like prepare for Rosh Hashana, the creation of the world, the let there be light moment, the creation of man. The midrash says something remarkable about the creation of the world. And it goes all the way back to the beginning of the Torah. And what is the beginning of the Torah? In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.



Bereishit, in Hebrew, is translated as "In the beginning." But the midrash says, no there's another way to read that word. Be reishit. Either with reishit or for reishit, God created heaven and earth. And it says, what does that mean? For reishit? Oh reishit, that means Israel, the whole world was created for Israel to be chosen, for a destiny to unfold, to illuminate all of humanity.

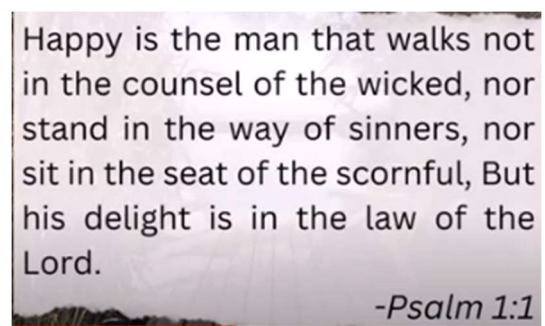
The second reishit is the Torah. All of the universe and all of the cosmos were created so God could communicate the holy way to live in the world. It was for reishit, for the Torah that all of creation was made. And then, the sages of Israel say, there's one more reishit. The first fruits. Reishit is the beginning. For the mitzvah of bikkurim. Somehow, the mitzvah of bikkurim, the mitzvah of the first fruits, this commandment is the expression of everything that God wanted

to do in this world for us when He created the world, itself. It's the key. And that's why the Torah portion says, "Ki Tavo, when you come into the Promised Land, this is what I want you to do." You want to unlock the promise of Israel? Here's the key. Bikkurim is so essential, it's apparently the guide to the ultimate good life, the purpose for which everything was created, the guide to living out the purpose of creation.

And so that's what I want to explore today because that's a pretty big topic. And if we are going in to the creation itself, this is the greatest way to prepare, to go really big. And so, the good life. And so let's talk about that. Philosophers throughout history have all talked about, what is the good life? And so, one of the most beautiful in my mind, when we talk about...there's like a Judeo tradition, there's Christian tradition, there's a Greek tradition, and then somehow it's like Western civilization is sort of a fusion of the biblical tradition and the Greek tradition and that's really what's created Western civilization. And Western civilization up until now is the greatest civilization we've come up with so far.

And so, let's go back to the basics. Aristotle remarkably aligned with the Bible on this issue, says that a good life can be summed up in one word. And he calls it, eudaemonia, that's the ultimate. And eudemonia is usually translated as happiness. If you type it into Google, if you read it, it's happiness. The ultimate good life, if a person a person is happy, great! That's the ultimate, just to be happy. But that's not what Aristotle said. Actually that's really far from what he was aiming at. Eudaimonia is Greek for daimon means soul, and eu means good. So eudaimonia is a state where you are being a good soul, to live according to virtue. The idea that a good, happy, healthy, happy life is inextricably connected to a moral life.

That's actually what the founding fathers of America meant in the United States Declaration of Independence when they said, "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." That's the happiness they were talking about. Happiness from living a good, worthy, happy, meaningful, noble life. And that is 100% in line with the Bible. Look at what the book of Psalms says, the very first verse. Verse 1, chapter 1:



It's like, who is the happy man? He is the one that stayed away from the wicked, he's the one that's living the good life, he's like following God's ways and just in case, chapter 106, verse 3 really says it beautifully:

Happy are those who
uphold justice, who
practice righteousness at
all times.

-Psalm 106:3

So, of course King David existed well before Aristotle, but he's giving us the keys here. It's like, you want actual happiness? Live, uphold justice, live with righteousness and you'll see that you'll be better, you'll be happier, you'll be stronger, your life will be blessed, it will just make you flourish. Excellent!

And then you look at the world today and you're like, "Hmmm. Well, 21st century, 2023, we're better off, better informed, healthier and freer than any previous generation. BUT...the life satisfaction of young men has absolutely plummeted. Richard Wilkinson wrote a book called *The Spirit Level*. And I'm only quoting this because Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quoted him. And so I learned this from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, but here's the quote.

"It is a remarkable paradox that at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume, and with little or no community life."

It's like depressing. It's like how did that happen? What's going on here? We're in the...we make the most money...I mean, you go to a hotel, a simple hotel in Israel, you eat like kings! Kings didn't eat the way hotels in Israel give you food. Two hundred years ago Kings did not eat the diversity, the amount, we are living in the most unbelievable time and why is everyone upset? What's going on? What's happening here? And I think what happened is that instead of living a little like the founding fathers of America, that defined that happiness that was connected to liberty and freedom and nobility and character, it became a life of the pursuit of life, liberty, and pleasure. And in philosophic terms, it went from eudemonic happiness to a hedonic happiness. To a happiness that is just based on physical pleasure. And in modern culture today, Western, secular civilization, hedonism prevails. It's like, why did that happen? Maybe it was better for the economy, maybe it's an easier path in the immediate. And people can't see far enough down the road. Maybe it's an easier sell. Tell people, the ultimate in life is to buy more stuff and die with more toys. And so now, in secular civilization, it's like the race is on. Who has the newest phone, who has the newest car, who has the newest stuff?

A former director of General Motors research lab said it like this, "Advertising is the organized creation of dissatisfaction." And I thought, that's just a great summary of advertisements in the advertisement industry. Let's make people feel unsatisfied and always wanting more and that way we'll make more sales. And that's really the heart of the advertising industry.

And so eudemonic happiness is achieved through kind of experiences of pleasure, comfort – maximize pleasure, minimize pain. That's where you're going to find happiness. And Rabbi Sacks says, it's like a new culture, a new religion has been built around this false idea. You get

retail therapy. You're not feeling good? Go out and buy stuff. You'll feel better. Salvation by shopping. That needs to be a bumper sticker. It's like that's where the world is at right now.

And so, you know, what that looks like? Someone sent me this meme and I can't help but share.



It's like a society that's built around that, this is what the health tzars around the world look like in the most secular countries in the world. You have the Democrats in America right now, Belgium, Britain, Canada, those are the people that are giving public, health advice to their countries. That's what that society is going to look like.

And so, what kind of leadership? You're going to end up spending money that you don't have on things that you don't need for a happiness that won't last. And you're going to end up unhealthy.

And so, what's going on here? If you want to try to fulfill that happiness, you're going to need constant stimulation. It's like, a momentary feeling of pleasurable sensation. It's like, getting what you want only temporarily satisfies that desire. Almost immediately, you're going to want to find a new thing to desire. But what we're talking about, what the ultimate goal is, is to live a joyful life. What does that look like? It's like, in order to live a joyful life, you have to view yourself over time. That's why all of the Torah is based around a calendar, based around a year, based around a week. It allows us to stop, see ourselves in time, look back in time. What was good? What was bad? Look forward in time. How do I want to be better? How do I want my life to look? That's how I'll build a joyful life.

This is a story, it's a true story. My son, Akiva came up to me. This is when he was 15 years old. And he was like, "Abba, do you know what I started doing? I started asking myself, what would my 25 year old self tell me to do now? I'm 15, what would make him happy with my decisions now? Would he tell me to go play video games? No! He would tell me to go work out, he would tell me to get good grades. So that when I'm 25, I'm gonna be in a much better position."

And I'm like, wow! Fifteen years old! How did you learn that? That's brilliant. That's exactly how to live a joyful life. It's to see ourselves over an expanse of time. And that's why Torah...prayer is not so much about trying to change God, but changing ourselves, to align ourselves with what God has in store for us in our life. And when you think about prayer and you think about the mitzvah of bikkurim, it's the first liturgy in the Torah. It's the first time

where God gives us a prayer book. It says, "When you bring the first offerings, I want you to offer up this prayer to me."

And He actually writes the first siddur, the first prayer book. You think about that, it's kind of amazing. I have a lot of Christian friends that say to me, "It just seems unbiblical to pray from a prayer book that use the words that other people wrote. It seems inauthentic, you're reading words that prophets wrote, that King David wrote, but what about prayer from your heart?"

But here, in the midst of bikkurim, it's really biblical. It is the way of giving the first fruit offering. And there are really two modes of prayer and that's really important. One is to reach out to God in order to change reality. And there's a time and a place for that. Maybe you just want to pour your heart out to God. But the second tefilla is a Hebrew word that's called la'hitpalel. And la'hitpalel is a reflexive verb. La'hitlabesh means to get myself dressed. La'hitpalel means I'm doing something to myself in order to channel something from God. I'm not trying to change God. God is good, God is wise, I'm the one that needs help here. I want to align myself with His will.

And so, Abraham Joshua Heschel has a beautiful quote. He says it like this, "Prayer may not save us, but prayer may make us worthy of being saved." And so the first prayer in the Hebrew Bible that we're commanded to say as our liturgy in the Temple also happened to become the most famous liturgy in all of Jewish history. It's literally the backbone of the Haggadah that we say in the Passover Seder. The same liturgy in the Temple for the First Fruits is the liturgy of the Exodus from Egypt that we celebrate every Passover. And so it's like, wow! It's the ultimate of creation, it's the first liturgy, it is the backbone of the Passover Seder, the first fruits offering on Shavuot. This first fruits offering is interconnected with so many things. It's stands like a hub that so many spokes come out of if we get to the heart of it, then we're really getting in some ways to the heart of the Torah, itself through the First Fruits offering, through the mitzvah of bikkurim.

So what I want to do now, is I actually want to go into the prayer, itself, into the mitzvah of bikkurim. We understood what it was, we take our first fruits, we bring it to the Temple, but now let's look at the prayer. Because through this prayer, it will give us a window into life. Into the way that God wants us to live. It's the first prayer He gave us, so let's see what it says. So you open up to Deuteronomy chapter 26, verse 5. And this is the beginning of the prayer. This is what you say when you offer your first fruits:

An Aramean (sought to) destroy my forefather, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a small number of people, and there, he became a great, mighty, and numerous nation.

-Deuteronomy 26:5

So look at what happens here. We start off the prayer with our history. It's like, the bikkurim offering is the ultimate in individual achievement. You worked, you planted, you watered, you tended, if it was a vineyard, you took every year, there's another act you have to do to finally get that vine ready. You cut off the aniyim, you set it up, you're getting it all prepared, you made it! You actually have the fruits of your labor. It is the ultimate in the individual success. You made it!

And then what do you do? You immediately go back to your forefathers, you immediately recall family. And after your family, you talk about your nation. And all of that is nestled within God. So imagine that. You have four – you have the individual, you have family, you have nation, and you have God. I want to juxtapose that to modern society, where how do they do it in modern society right now? You have race, gender, sexuality and climate. What's going to make a better society? It's obvious that someone that's rooted in family, rooted in their history, is going to be living a much more full life with roots that go down and branches that can go out.

Alright, let's look at the next verse, chapter 26, verses 6 and 7:

And the Egyptians treated us cruelly and afflicted us, and they imposed hard labor upon us.

-Deuteronomy 26:6

So we cried out to the Lord, God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

-Deuteronomy 26:7

So, someone is living in eretz Yisrael in 2023, and they're going out to the Land and they're planting a vineyard. By the way, Ari just planted a new vineyard before this new year. I'm not going to say, I'm going to keep it, it's a surprise, I'm not going to talk about. It's a cool surprise.

Ari

It's a surprise, I have the whole thing planned and prepared. You cannot say anything.

Jeremy

I got it, I was just saying, so imagine that, Ari...

Ari

But I do want to say one thing. Ok, it doesn't matter, go ahead, I'll wait, I'll wait. You go ahead, Jeremy, you're rocking, you're doing good.

Jeremy

I'm just saying, I try to imagine it, it's like you'd be taking your first fruits after you're waiting 3 years, after the 4th year. Your first fruits from that season, finally you get to take them. And

then what do you do? You say, "I want you to know, so many years ago, our fathers were slaves in Egypt." It's like so deep in history. The people of Israel are the keepers of time. Because we actually live with all of our history embedded within the moment that we live in now. We're all a part of that story. And our job is to invite the world to join that story. It's like...

Ari

Jeremy, wait. Can I ask you a question? I'm sorry if I'm going to derail you, but it's a real question I have. When the first fruits start to blossom, then you tie a little ribbon to them so you know that when they mature and they're ready to be eaten. You bring them to the Temple. But if we're really serious and honest and authentic and true about our anticipation that the Temple will be built in any moment, then shouldn't we be doing that now? Nowadays shouldn't we tie a ribbon to it so that when it matures by then if we really hope and pray and believe the Temple will be built, we can bring that? Because if we don't, it means that we don't really believe that the Temple's going to be built any moment in our day. Does that make sense?

Jeremy

Yeah, it's a good question. That's a great question. I think the answer is, that once you actually tie that ribbon around that fruit, that fruit must go to the Temple. But what are you going to do? What if the Temple isn't built? Then you have a holy fruit that has no home. So I think we wait for the Temple to be built and then we can dedicate the fruit to the Temple. It's not really a lack of faith, it's just an honor to not making something holy to God without the ability to actually fulfill on that commitment.

Ari

Thank you.

Jeremy

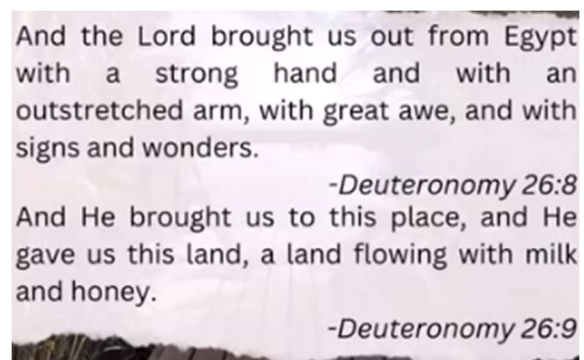
Alright, so now, back to the idea. Here we are, you know, someone told me over Shabbat, the mitzvah of bikkurim is actually the meeting point of the God of history and the God of nature. And they meet at the mitzvah of bikkurim. And so imagine the Jews that lived in Egypt, they saw God acting in history, changing the world, revelations at Sinai, changing consciousness, moving people toward their destiny. But once you're already in Israel, you're living now a very natural cycle. You're very connected to nature. Rains need to come. You pray for the rains, the crops are being raised. And now it's like, no, no, no. The mitzvah of bikkurim is never forgetting that the God of nature is the God of history. And we are His witness that we are living that out.

But what happens, is that when we bring that final fruits of our labor, we go all the way back and connect ourselves to the story of Israel, to the story of redemption. And we say, when we cried out to HaShem, HaShem heard us. And then what happens? A small chosen family has finally arrived in the Land of Israel. And so, that's talking about... so it's not enough to see yourself across time. Lik that's what my son, Akiva was saying. Who am I going to be at 25? I

want to see myself across time. No, no, no. It's not just enough when you're 15 to ask yourself what you're going to be like when you're 25. You can do that, it's amazing. But the Torah is saying, no, no, no. It's something much deeper. It's saying, "I want you to see yourself not only across your life, but I want you to see yourself across the entire life of all of the nation of Israel. That's who you actually are. And that's where real joy comes from. Knowing where we are, where we come from, where we're going.

Modern secular Israel is a great example of that. They know we came from slavery, but their memory blacks out at about Auschwitz. Like modern, secular Israel started at the Holocaust. And the Torah is saying, "No, that's not the right way to start. Not your own nation's history, not your country's history, go all the way back to your fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All the way to Egypt. See yourself as a part of that story. And the achievement of living in the Land and bringing fruits to the Temple will bring you the most joy. You don't need a new iPhone, you don't need a new car, you will experience simcha on the highest level."

And so now 26, verse 8 and 9. The next sentence in the first prayer of the Bible:



It's like, what are we saying here? Man, we had it hard. We were born into slavery. We don't take anything for granted. There's no entitlement. There's only gratitude. And this is really important because today's generation, I see it even with my own kids. And I try hard to push against it. It's like an entitled generation. It's like that meme that everyone talks about – Hard times create strong men, strong men make good times, good

times make weak men, entitled men. It's like we're living in a very blessed time, and it's created entitled young men.

But your capacity for gratitude is inversely proportional to your sense of entitlement. Meaning, the more entitled you feel, the less you can experience gratitude. And it's like satisfaction with what we have is what we're looking for. Not hunger for what we don't have. And the God of history meets the God of nature teaching us, "You could have been born in slavery. Your father was...remember where you are now and appreciate everything that you have."

And so, chapter 26, verse 10:

And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O Lord, have given to me.

-Deuteronomy 26:10

It's like after all the struggles, not only of my own toil and my own hands, the struggles of all of my ancestors that brought me to where I am now.

Sigmund Freud, a famous doctor of the spirit said, "One day in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful."

And so, what the Torah is teaching us here is remember those hard times. Because then when you get to the point that you're offering your first fruits, those first fruits are so delicious because of those hard times. And not just our hard times, but remember all of the hard times that it took to bring us to where we are today. Then you shall rejoice with all the good that the Lord your God has granted you and your household. That's when you're going to experience specific simcha. You see simcha, you can't really get confused in Hebrew. Simcha is the same letters as Mashiach. It's the same letters, meaning that happiness is clearly tied to virtue, tied to holiness, tied to goodness, tied to nobility, tied to good things. It's like, you want to experience simcha? This is the way.

And so, you know it says in the liturgy of Rosh Hashana, it says that God is the judger of hearts. Like no one really knows anyone. No one really knows what's in someone's heart. Someone can look very pious, and then all of sudden a scandal of some rabbi comes out and we're like, "What? That rabbi did that? But he looks so pious?" Sometimes, someone can just look like a really simple dude wearing sandals, walking around Israel. And I have found that those simple people just wearing sandals, walking around Israel? Happen to be some of the most righteous people that I have ever met. Just the simple shepherds of Israel, that are walking around in sandals out in the mountains are the most dedicated, the most committed, the most god-conscious.

So you don't ever know what's happening in someone's heart. But what does it really mean? It means more than that. It doesn't mean that God knows the hearts so don't worry about it. In some ways, there is a full-proof mechanism toward the service of God. To feel simcha, it's like a Divine instrument that you can't trick. Meaning most people that are believers are happier people. That's statistical, that's studies, that's undeniable. Secular people are less happy than religious people. But if you're religious in order to be happy, it doesn't work. If you go and you visit someone that's sick, you're going to walk away feeling better that you've helped your friend, you've taken a little bit of the pain that they were experiencing away from them, just by distracting them, by showing them some love. You're going to walk away and you're gonna feel better. BUT...if you go to your friend in order to make yourself feel better, it doesn't work! It's

like foolproof. It's like God judges the heart. It has to be authentic. There's like an authenticator here in the happiness. There's an authenticator there in the service of God.

And what does that look like? There is an ancient phrase from Ba'al Shem Tov. And it says, "Faith is the attachment to God, is the cleaving to God, is the oneness with God. Faith is the oneness, is the Shekinah." Like an equals sign. Faith = attachment to God. That equals the Shekinah. What does that actually mean? It's like a code. You have to like...it's like a puzzle, you have to figure it out, think about that for a long time. What is that mystic prophet teaching us? What is that? Faith is attachment, is the Shekinah.

What that means is, is that the Shekinah is the Spirit of God that we have to emulate to thrive. It's like when you cleave to God, when you start acting out His ways in the world, that is emunah. When you trust and walk in God's ways, that is the definition of what emunah is. To cleave to God, to be one with Him in the world. That is emunah. Faith in practice, in action. That's literally what the Hebrew word means. Is the Shekinah, is the Spirit of God. It means that if we emulate that Spirit, the Shekinah is the Spirit of God that we emulate when we want to thrive. You want to live flourishing, you want to live that real, long-lasting happiness, joyful happiness. Well, the Spirit of God that we must emulate to thrive is the Shekinah and it's fool-proof. You can't fake it because you're emulating it. You're one with Him, you are being good because it's good. You're doing what's right because it's right. You're being truthful because it's true. And when you live that out, the emunah in the world, you start to thrive, you start to literally feel the Spirit of HaShem in your life.

And you think about that, it's like, what? That's really brilliant! Because we're talking about going back to Egypt. Israel is the exact opposite of Egypt in the most fundamental way. Ancient Egyptians with their mummies and their pyramids worshipped death. Israel worshipped life. The pyramids, if you see a picture of them, it's like they represent something. Look at the picture of a pyramid really quickly right here.



You have a point at the top. Everything at the bottom is serving the one on the top, whether it be God or rather it be Pharaoh.



Look at the Jewish symbol of God, the ultimate symbol of the Jewish people and the Temple in Jerusalem is the menorah. Do you see the difference? It's inverted pyramid. The one on the bottom, the source of it all, we're not here to hold up God. God's purpose is to empower us, to nourish us, to grow us, to encourage us. Our soul, our flame, rises up from the source. His purpose is to reveal our soul in the world and bring out the person He created us to be. That's what that ancient phrase means. The Shekinah is the Spirit of God that we must emulate to thrive. So God's Spirit is to rise up through that menorah and then shine those lights. It's the exact opposite of Egypt.

And when we live with the Spirit of God in our lives, we light up. Period. We are that happiness, we are that joy, we thrive and we flourish. And all of it is encoded right there in the first prayer. That prayer that we give over in the first fruits offering is clearly not to change God. It's doing something to us. It's aligning us to be who we should be if we want to light up. So God's voice is calling us out of slavery. Even if it's calling us out of slavery into the desert. It's like calling us out of slavery while we're in the exile for a long time. That's really something to think about.

And that's why the ancient text speak about two levels. There's the physical slavery from Egypt and the spiritual slavery from ourselves, from our lusts, from our instincts, from our fears. And that's why the two holidays are so connected. We count 49 days from Passover to Shavuot. Our physical liberation, our spiritual revelation. There's no real freedom without mental freedom, without emotional freedom, without spiritual freedom. And that's not just a cliché. Think about it. When you are free, but you only do what you have to do because you're addicted to that thing. Let's take an extreme example. You're a drug addict. Eventually everything you do is in the service of getting that drug. You're a slave. You're not an individual. You're a tool to Pharaoh. Maybe it's not Pharaoh in Egypt, but it's a new Pharaoh. You're no less of a slave or tool. You're a tool in the service of that addiction, or of that lust. You're not really free. The first fruits offering is brought on Shavuot where we become spiritually free. The first fruits offering. It's like Israel, that's what we're called to be. To struggle with God. What does that mean? It means that the highest part in side of us, the flame, the soul that's inside of us is struggling and seeking and striving to get higher towards God.

And when you enslave yourself, you subordinate your soul to a lower force and it squandering your spirit. And the first fruits offering is teaching us how to liberate ourselves from that. And how do you know when your spirit is free? What is the essence of the first fruits offering? It's saying thank-you. It is the ultimate expression of gratitude. The ultimate expression of my work and my toil and how much I appreciate it. How much I have to give thanks for, how much satisfaction. I want to just drink it in. I'm not looking for the next pleasure in my life. I have

what I have, I want to really cherish it, I want to enjoy it, I want to say, "Thank-you." Because our most natural state is a state of gratitude. That's when we know we've removed all the shells, when we finally feel thanks, feel indebted, we want to give our first fruits. Because who is the One that blessed us with that harvest? That ultimately is the dynamic. That was the purpose of it all. That we would receive the gift of life. That we would live with the Shekinah in our lives. We would emulate the Spirit of God that would allow us to flourish. We're given the gift to choose. We can choose one pleasure, we can choose one happiness.

And the Torah is teaching us, this is the tree of life, this is the way to flourish. I'll support you from the bottom and I will light you up like the menorah. But you're going to have to choose the tree of life. Choose the path of hard work, of character building, of truth. Happy is the man who acts in righteousness always. And from that, gratitude will come.

And so with that, I want to enter into the New Year. A New Year of real, lasting joy. A year of gratitude, a year that should be good, a year that should be sweet, and may everyone in this Fellowship be blessed beyond measure.

Aaronic blessing (Hebrew)

Shalom my friends. See you again before Rosh Hashana!