When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the earth, 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. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him/her, "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to assign us." The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: "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. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. S/He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the earth which You, O Lord, have given me." You shall leave it before the Lord your God and bow low before the Lord your God. And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household.
eat their fill in your settlements, 13 you shall declare before the Lord your God: "I have cleared out the consecrated portion from the house; and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor neglected any of Your commandments: 14 I have not eaten of it while in mourning, I have not cleared out any of it while I was unclean, and I have not deposited any of it with the dead. I have obeyed the Lord my God; I have done just as You commanded me. 15 Look down from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our ancestors."

Context

Ki Tavo sets out commandments that pertain to entering and living in the promised land. Firstfruit and tithe offerings are listed along with gifts brought to sustain the priests and Levites, the stranger, widow, and orphan who have no land. The main bulk of the parasha is a ceremonial proclamation of curses and blessings on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. (The excruciatingly long list of horrifying consequences for not following divine instructions is customarily recited quickly and in an undertone during the public reading on Shabbat.) The parasha concludes that it is a good idea to reap the benefits of accepting divine gifts graciously and upholding the terms of the covenant faithfully.

Explorations

Upon entering Israel, the first obligation is the bikkurim, an offering of the firstfruits of the land. Our passage is one of few in the Torah that describes a ceremony in detail, including the specific text to be recited inside the Temple. The bikkurim represent the fulfillment of the divine promise to settle the Jewish People in the land.

"I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to assign us." Devarim 26.3

Though it would seem relevant particularly for the newcomer, the ritual is binding every year – an opportunity to refresh the connection among the land, the people, our narrative, and the sacred service. With a fine sample of the fruit of each harvest in hand, we remember our difficult beginning, how we progressed through slavery toward the blessing of the biblical promise for which we are to express our gratitude.

"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. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. 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. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. S/He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the earth which You, O Lord, have given me." Devarim 26.5-10
The recitation affirms a personal link between the firstfruit and the liberation from slavery in Egypt, the grand narrative of Jewish Peoplehood. Rather than serving a human oppressor in Egypt, the farmer willingly offers the produce of the earth to the divine liberator, participating in the national sacred practice of her/his People. In comparison to enslavement, bringing forth fruit from the earth symbolizes the freedom and autonomy of the Jewish People to labor freely and to harvest the bounty of the land for their sustenance—material and spiritual. The sages quote this passage at the core of the Passover haggadah as a succinct manifesto of Jewish history and destiny.

According to a mishna, the commandment of bikkurim is among the three special aspects of the Land that marks it as sacred,

There are ten [degrees of] holinesses: The land of Israel is holier than all lands. What constitutes her holiness? From her they bring the Omer [an offering of grain](VaYiqra 23:10f), the bikkurim-firstfruits (Devarim 26:2ff), and the two loaves [of bread offerings] (VaYiqra 23:17), which they do not bring from all lands.

Mishna Kelim 1:6

The verb “to bring” implies a Temple-centered ritual process—these items are to be brought from the orchard and field to the Temple. One aspect of the holiness of the land is that only fruit grown in Israel is suitable for the Temple service. One possible explanation for this exclusivity is that the earth of Israel is uniquely and inherently sacred— that the earth is holy independent of anything we do. Only produce grown in this specific earth is permitted into the sacred Temple ritual. The fruit somehow absorbs the sacredness.

Let us entertain another possible approach to the special worthiness of the fruit. The Mishna specifies which fruit are admissible for bikkurim and when they are to be brought.

One does not bring firstfruit offerings except from the seven species [of the Land of Israel] [A land of wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive oil and [date] honey. (Dev. 8:8)]; not from dates which grow on the hills, not from the fruit in the valleys, and not from olives for oil which are not the choicest. People from Mount Tzevuim brought firstfruits before Shavuot, and they [the priests] did not accept them since it says in the Torah, “the Feast of the Harvest, of the firstfruits of your work, of what you sow in the field” (Ex. 23:15). Mishna Bikkurim 1:3

Only the finest specimens from the seven species of the land of Israel, grown under optimal conditions are to be brought. The Mishna describes the process of selecting the firstfruit.

How does one choose firstfruit? A person goes down to her/his field and sees a fig that has sprouted forth [emerged from within the flower], a cluster of grapes that has sprouted forth or a pomegranate that has sprouted forth—s/he ties a reed around them and says, “Behold, these are firstfruits!” after s/he breaks them from the [connection to the] ground. (3:1)

This passage instructs the farmer to pay attention to the gradual process of growth in the orchard. In the spring, as the flower petals are finishing, one checks from behind which flower the earliest fruit has begun to appear. At the instant of recognizing the first
sign of fruit, the farmer marks it and declares it bikkurim—firstfruit. This declaration signifies the human intention to sanctify. Marking the fruit signifies the intention to take it to the sanctuary in order to fulfill a divine command.

In this description, the worthiness of the produce from the land of Israel to enter the sacred domain does not necessarily stem from the inherent sacredness of the land. The texts describe a subtle and intentional process: tending fruit trees, carefully observing their development, flowering and sprouting, designating and declaring firstfruit, nurturing the trees to fruition, picking the ripe fruit, taking the fruit in a basket to the sanctuary, reciting the special firstfruit declaration, and delivering the fruit into the hands of the priest who lays them at the altar. According to this example, the sacredness of the land might come from fulfilling a series of actions that cumulatively sanctify the harvest. These actions make the person and the fruit worthy for sacred service.

The Mishna in Kelim goes on to map nesting concentric circles of holiness. Motion inward toward smaller, more contained, and exclusive space culminates in the innermost enclosure, the Holy of Holies. The process emphasizes meticulous attention. People prepare to approach the sacred realm incrementally, and to participate at each stage in the healthy function of the sacred system. Entering implies an intention to contribute toward fulfilling divine service precisely and thoroughly. One enters with awe, to offer gifts, arouse divine attention, secure blessing, or attain atonement. The passage describes sacredness in terms of human relationships to the land and its produce. The Mishna refers to activities that relate to materials and space. Mindfulness, acts of purifying and sanctifying the work of the earth nurture holiness.

This interpretation of the passage in Kelim suggests an alternative to sacredness as transcendence, exclusion, or possession. Seeking the sacred is not a matter of going beyond this world, but of entering more deeply into this world. While penetrating into the enclosed sacred realm alludes to a symbolically male act, the texts reveal the complexity of sacred symbolism. There is no evidence of conquest, possession, or ownership—ba’alut. Interacting with sacred space entails a set of reciprocal actions. Offering implies receiving.

The physical place might accumulate sacredness from human intentions and activities—preparing, approaching, engaging, and receding from the space. Rather than a given quality that inheres in the land, this approach suggests that sacredness depends upon us, on our intentions and our actions.

Another passage from the Exodus story itself deals with most of the same concepts as the firstfruit,

When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as S/He swore to you and to your ancestors, and has given it to you, you shall set apart for the Lord every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the Lord's. But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among your children. And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to her/him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. When Pharaoh

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stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both human and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my children.’ Shmot 13.11-15

This text obligates offering the firstfruit of the womb, that is, the firstborn, to God. The Hebrew root of firstfruit and firstborn is identical – רַבִּים בֵּיתוֹ.ım #בֵּיתוֹ.ım. The Torah relates in a parallel manner to the fruit of the earth and the fruit of the womb. The human couple who conceive together, the pregnant and birthing woman who opens her womb, are implicit in the passage. Woman/womb is likened to earth; child to fruit. Human fertility is part of the structure of creation that memorializes and fulfills the Exodus. With our intentions and bodily actions, we are to sanctify the process of life-giving.

Questions for Discussion

• Discuss the connection between the firstfruit ceremony and the Exodus from Egypt. Why is the firstfruit an occasion for re-telling that narrative? How does the firstfruit context affect the way we understand the passage from this ceremony that the rabbis placed in the center of the text of the haggada on Pesach-Passover?

• To what extent do we take the harvest for granted, and how might we appropriately express appreciation for the bounty of the harvests brought from all corners of the earth to our table?

• Evaluate rituals that you observe in relation to food – your own and others. How do you relate to the idea of sanctifying the production and consumption of food in our time, without a temple, and often far from the land of Israel?

• Many Asian cultures continue to offer fruit as part of their sacred service. The beauty and sensuousness of this form of worship is preserved in daily practice.

The people in the upper left photo are carrying fruit offerings in baskets to their temple in Bali. On the right are fruit and flower offerings outside an Indian temple.
In Judaism, such temple service as the bikkurim has been suspended since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple nearly 2,000 years ago.

From the early days of the State of Israel, with the return to the labors of the field, the Zionists instituted celebrations of the bikkurim - parades with the firstfruit, dancing, and children laden with the harvest produce. The poster on the left is from the 1940's, on the right, from 2012. There are also home rituals involving food and drink. On the bottom right is a photo of my family’s Tu b’Shvat seder plate.
Discuss your views and feelings about the significance of fruit offerings, and material-spiritual service in general.

How do you understand sacredness in relation to land? - are some places more or less sacred than others? Explain.

Evaluate the comparison between woman/womb and earth – is it acceptable, inspiring, repulsive, objectifying, or what, in your opinion?

Study Links

These are two other rituals described in detail in the Torah:

- the Sotah (Bamidbar 5.11-31) – here is the link to our session on the topic, “Adulterous Suspicions”;
- the neck-breaking of a heifer (Devarim 21.1-9) – see this brief commentary on the passage by Rabbi Michal Shekel, “What do you do when the battle comes to you?”.

See this essay by Jeffrey Spitzer, “An Aramean destroyed my father” about the significance of the passage from our parasha in the Passover haggada.

Barbara Kingsolver's extraordinary book, Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life chronicles the experience of her family returning to their land to produce and consume local produce. The journey inspires a deep sense of the sacredness of the process of sustenance from our earth. This site makes some of the process accessible.

Summary of Issues

The firstfruit ceremony makes the explicit connection among the Exodus from slavery to freedom, the fulfillment of the promise of the land, and the sacred service. Compared with emphasizing the inherent sacredness of the land, mindful human intention during the cultivation, growth and harvesting of the fruit of the land sanctify it.

Methods & Observations

One of my reasons for emphasizing the degree to which people participate in creating sacredness is to increase our accountability for what we consider to be sacred. Rather than an immutable fact, the sacredness of our land and lives is our responsibility.

Contact

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