



## WEEKLY PARASHA

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**One Nation, under God, with Liberty and Justice For All**

The issue of who can be seen as a full member of the community arises at the beginning of this week's *parasha* and is revisited at the outset of the next. In the opening of Ki Tavo, we read of two *mitzvot* that apply when a person harvests the produce of the land: the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, or first fruits, and the mitzvah of *viduy ma'aser*, the declaration made when a person distributes what remains of his tithes at the end of three years. In both, the farmer gives thanks to God for the harvest and knows that he must share this divinely-granted bounty with those who are less fortunate: the Levite, the *ger* (the stranger), the orphan, and the widow (26:11–2).

As a landowner, the farmer's privileged position in society is implicit in these *mitzvot*. The Levite and the stranger do not own land, a serious economic disadvantage in an agricultural society, and the widow and orphan do not have an adult male to protect and provide for them. This privilege extends beyond wealth to status. In the society that the Torah imagines, one's land is primarily inherited, not purchased (see Vayikra 25). To own land, then, is to be a fully entitled citizen, a descendant of those who originally entered the land, exactly as the person bringing the first fruits narrates: "I declare today that I have come to the land that the Lord swore to our fathers *to give to us*" (26:3). He recites the story of the Exodus and declares that he is part of the sacred history, that his life as a part of the people is a culmination of God's promise to the forefathers. The stranger and the widow are unable to make such a declaration. As outsiders, minors, or women, they have not inherited land; they do not figure as primary actors in the nation's history; and they are not seen by society as having the same rights of belonging as others. It is the mandate of the landowner to protect and support them, but they remain at a distinctly lower social stratum.

The opening of next week's *parasha* presents a different picture: "You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God ... all the men of

Israel, your children, your wives, and the stranger within your camp ... to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God" (29:9–11). Here, the Torah implicitly recognizes that children, women, and strangers are not seen the same way as the men. It is for this reason that they must be identified explicitly, but it challenges such social stratification at the same time. The Torah is saying, while society may place you at different levels, today you all stand on equal footing to enter into the covenant with God. Although you have not inherited land and are not a recipient of *that* divine promise, you are part of the sacred history reaching back to the forefathers, "So that God may establish you this day as his people, and He shall be your God, as He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov" (29:12).

We are presented with two competing models: one of social stratification and one of religious and covenantal equality. How are these two models to co-exist? One answer is that each one inhabits its own distinct sphere. In the public and political spheres, the societal hierarchies remain, but in the private and religious spheres, all are equal members of the covenant. This solution will only go so far; in the end, the two spheres will necessarily intersect. To take one example, if a *ger* is unable to make the *bikkurim* declaration because he does not have a portion in the land, he is then placed in a lower position socially and religiously.

Another possibility exists: We can read the equality of the covenant as a critique of social hierarchies and a mandate to not only protect the *ger*, the widow, and the orphan, but ultimately, to remove the social inequities that place them at the margins. This point can particularly be seen in the case of the *ger*, for the Torah commands us multiple times, "one law you shall have for you, for the stranger, and for the citizen alike, for I am the Lord your God" (Vayirka 24:22). The ultimate goal is to achieve true equality of status.

This dynamic actually played out in *halakha*, in the case of whether and how a *ger*—understood by the Rabbis as “convert”—may bring the first fruits. The Mishna Bikkurim (1:3) declares that “A *ger* brings *bikkurim* but does not recite [the Biblical passage], because he cannot say, ‘that You, God, swore to our forefathers to give to us.’” While allowing the *ger* to participate in the ritual and give thanks to God, this ruling excludes him from connecting with the history of the people. The problem here is not limited to the issue of inheriting the land; it extends to one’s very relationship with God. The Mishna continues: “When he prays by himself he declares [in place of ‘our God and the God of our fathers’], [‘our God and] the God of the fathers of Israel,’ and when he prays in the synagogue he declares, ‘the God of your fathers.’” To recite his prayers in such a way must result in an acute degree of felt exclusion. Having joined the faith and identified with the people, the *ger* must now, on a daily basis, pray to a God with whom he has a personal relationship (“our God”), but a God who remains the God of another people. The *ger* remains forever an outsider. The move in this Mishna from recitation of *bikkurim* to prayer between the *ger* and God is the trumping of the social hierarchy over the covenantal equality, even in purely religious matters

The story, thankfully, does not end there. The Yerushalmi quotes an opposing position of Rabbi Yehudah, who states that a *ger* does recite the *bikkurim* declaration and also recites “God of our fathers” when he prays, just like everyone else. Rambam explains this movingly in a letter to a convert by the name of Obadiah (responsum 293, translation by Isadore Twersky):

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say in the blessings and prayers you offer alone or in the congregation: “Our God” and “God of our fathers”...In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike...The reason for this is that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God...Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him...

Therefore you shall pray, “Our God” and “God of our fathers,” because Abraham, peace be with him, is *your* father. And you shall pray, “The land that You have bequeathed to our fathers,” for the land has been given to Abraham...Since you have come under the wings of the Divine Presence and confessed the Lord, no difference

exists between you and us, and all miracles done to us have been done as it were to us and to you.

Here we have the reverse of what we saw in the Mishna. The *ger* refers to God as the God of his fathers in his prayers, and the miracles of Exodus were wrought to his fathers as well. He is now one of the people and their forbearers are his own. It goes further: The *ger* may even declare that the land has been bequeathed to his fathers, and—following the Yerushalmi—he may make the *bikkurim* declaration, proclaiming that God has taken him from Egypt and given him the land of Israel, although he in fact never truly owns the land as part of the original inheritance. Covenantal equality has trumped the societal hierarchies.

This is emphasized in other *mitzvot* as well. The Torah commands the *ger* to bring the Pesach sacrifice to share and affirm his participation in the foundational history of the people, and he has the *mitzvah* to recite the story of the Exodus on the Seder night—which takes the text of the *bikkurim* declaration as its point of departure—and to make himself part of that story. And when it comes to his ability to stake a claim to the land, the *ger* has the *mitzvah* of *birkat ha'mazon*, thanking God for the food after one eats and for the land—the land of Israel—that God has given us.

The Torah presents us with two competing models of belonging for the *ger*, the orphan, and the widow. One places them as a protected, disadvantaged class, and the other represents the rejection of class distinctions and the embracing of covenantal equality. Hazal have shown us that it is our responsibility to embrace the latter, to ensure that everyone is an equal member of the covenant and an equal member of society.

## Shabbat Shalom!

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