

## Talmud Passage of the Week

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### The Journey of Shavuot

Dear Friends,

This passage will come to you in time to prepare for Shavuot so I thought we would study something that's appropriate for the holiday. The Mishnah regarding Shavuot describes what an incredible festival this was. The farmers would bring their first fruits in baskets, often overlaid with silver or gold, and march as in a parade through Jerusalem to the Temple Mount with a flute playing before them. In the midst of this great communal festival, however, was a private moment of connecting with one's history.

### Mishnah Bikkurim 3:6-7:

While the basket was yet on his shoulder he would recite from: "I profess this day unto the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 26:3)" until the completion of the passage (Deuteronomy 26:10).

R. Judah said: Till [he had reached] "A wandering Aramean was my father." Having reached these words, he took the basket off his shoulder and held it by its edge and the priest placed his hand beneath it and waved it. He (the Israelite) then recited from "A wandering Aramean was my father" until he completed the entire passage. He would then deposit the basket by the side of the altar, prostrate himself and depart.

Originally all who knew how to recite would recite, while those unable to do so would repeat it; but when they refrained from bringing, it was decided that both those who could and those who could not [recite] should repeat the words.

### Background

As usual we need to unpack this passage a bit so that it'll make sense.

### Journeys

Shavuot is all about spiritual journeys. The journey that starts at Pesach at the Red Sea ends at Sinai. The counting of the omer ends in a joyous parade and pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The eternal journey of the Jewish people is recapitulated each time a Jew brings the first fruits offering to the Temple. This is one of the three times the Torah commands us to *say* something rather than *do* something (the others are the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:22-27) and the commandment fulfilled by saying the blessing after meals, *birkat hamazon* (Deuteronomy 8:10)). Here is how the Torah describes this moment:

And it shall be, when you have come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and possess it and dwell therein that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, which you shall bring of your and that the Lord your God gives you, and shall put it in a basket and shall go to the place which the Lord your God shall choose to place his name there. And you shall go to the priest that shall be in those days, and say to him, I profess this day to the Lord your God, that I am come to the country which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us. And the priest shall take the basket out of your hand, and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God. And you shall speak and say before the Lord your God,

A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a few and became there a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. And when we cried to the Lord God of our fathers, the Lord heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labor and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness and with signs, and with wonders. And he brought us to this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O Lord, have given me.

And you shall set it before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in every good thing which the Lord your God has given you, and your house; you and the Levite and the stranger that is among you. (Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

The place that God chooses to "place his name there" is, obviously, the Temple. The mishnah records a bit of unclarity about this ceremony. Does the priest take the basket before the person says, "A wandering Aramean..." or after the whole piece has been spoken? No clear decision is reached. Although R. Judah's view seems to be the one suggested by the Torah text, some commentaries state that his view is not accepted as is normal when one named source is cited opposing the anonymous majority. (Even Rambam fails to provide a clear answer to this question, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Agriculture, First Fruits, 3:10.)

This text from Deuteronomy should sound familiar to you, as it is the basis for a large part of the Passover seder. By linking this text with both holidays, the sages made the connection between the two. They also highlighted this short narrative's importance as the definitive capsule history of the Jewish people. This is our story: Avraham (the wandering Aramean) and his descendants started small, grew and were rescued from Egypt. That now great people came to Israel, settled, built a Temple and now support that Temple with the first fruits of their land.

### **Ancient Inexperience**

What is really amazing, from our perspective, is the issue of Jewish inexperience and the priests' and sages' adaptation to it. We tend to think that Jews in ancient days, and really, up to the last century, were faithfully observant and quite naturally knowledgeable about Judaism in a way that we are not.

We should take heart! It's always been tough to learn about Judaism. And this mishnah shows that the proper response when people are having a tough time is to make it easy for them and give them ways to participate that won't make them feel embarrassed to be part of Jewish life. Indeed, it is incumbent on those who know much to forgo displaying this in order to make it easier for those who know little. So, for example, even though a person may know the blessings over the Torah by heart, one is adjured always to recite them from a text. In this way, a person shows respect for others and for the importance of the blessing; being careful not to make a mistake even though it is obvious this person knows the blessings well.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Compare the Torah text from Deuteronomy and the mishnah Bikkurim 3:6. Which view expressed there comes closest to actualizing the ritual described in the Torah? Why do you think so?
2. Relate our previous discussions about "production values" in ancient Judaism and today, to the issue of Shavuot. How can we reclaim some of the excitement of this holiday? Should people perhaps recite and/or study the passage

from Deuteronomy? Could this be a time of bringing "first fruits" either agricultural or otherwise? Perhaps people could communally share the new gifts God has bestowed on them this year?

**3.** How can we do what the priests and sages did? How can we make it comfortable for those who know little to participate in Jewish life? Would this passage validate the use of transliterations? Is there a point beyond which we may not go in making Jewish practice unintimidating? Where are the "floor" and "ceiling" regarding this issue?

*I wish you a happy Shavuot filled with the joy of Torah!*

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