



No Final Chapter

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We've made it.

That seems to be the promise of *bikkurim*, the first fruits gift to God.

Introducing the commandment to offer the first fruits of the land to God, the Torah states:

דברים כו:א

וְהָיָה כִּי תָבֹוא אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וְיִרְשָׁתָהּ וְיָשַׁבְתָּ בָּהּ:

Devarim 26:1

When you enter the land that Hashem your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you inherit it and dwell in it.

“When you enter the land.” While the Torah does not say so explicitly, the implication behind the words is obvious: when you **finally** enter the land. When you arrive at the place our people have dreamed of for so long. When you are no longer wanderers. When the long,



winding story is finally over, and all that is left to do is offer thanks for having lived to see its happy ending.

Indeed, the farmers who bring their fruits to the temple are commanded to tell a story as they present the fruits to the *kohen* (priest)—one in which this moment in time is the story’s natural conclusion:

⁵וְעִנִּיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֲרָמִי אֲבִד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִםה וַיְגֵר שָׁם בְּמִתִּי מֵעֹט וַיְהִי שָׁם לִגְדוֹל עַצוֹם וְרַב: ⁶וַיַּרְעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה: ⁷וַיַּצְעֵק אֵל ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹלָנוּ וַיֵּרָא אֶת עַנְיָנוּ וְאֶת עֲמָלָנוּ וְאֶת לַחֲצֹנוּ: ⁸וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה וּבִמְרָא גָדֹל וּבְאֹתוֹת וּבְמִפְתִּים: ⁹וַיּוֹבִאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבֶת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ: ¹⁰וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לִּי ה' וְהִנֵּחְתוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ:

⁵You shall then recite as follows before Hashem 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. ⁶The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. ⁷We cried to Hashem, the God of our ancestors, and Hashem heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. ⁸Hashem freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents, ⁹bringing us to this place and giving us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, God, have given me.” You shall leave it before your God and bow low before your God.

The story which we also tell at Seder night seems clear: you once suffered, and then you were saved. In remembering our former suffering we are reminded of our current abundance and security, for which we offer our gratitude to God. In reading the Torah’s account of *bikkurim*, one might imagine that they are witnessing the final end point of Jewish history: secure, settled, and serene.

But we know that that is not how the story ends.

The *parashah* itself reminds us that that apparent promise of security is unsure. A few chapters later, we encounter the *tokhehah* (rebuke), some of the most painful verses in the Torah. We are told that there are curses, more terrible than anything we experienced before, that we will experience if we sin:

דברים כח:טו, סג

¹⁵וְהָיָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשַׁמֵּר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֵּיָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּךָ הַיּוֹם וּבָאוּ
עֲלֶיךָ כָּל הַקְּלָלוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשִּׁיגוּךְ...⁶³ וְהָיָה כְּאֲשֶׁר שָׁשׂ ה' עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַרְבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם כֵּן יִשְׁיֹשׁ
ה' עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם וְנִסְחָתְכֶם מֵעַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אֶתְּהָ בָּא שְׂמָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

Devarim 28:15, 63

¹⁵But if you do not obey your God to observe faithfully all the commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect...

⁶³And as God once delighted in making you prosperous and many, so will God now delight in causing you to perish and in wiping you out; you shall be torn from the land that you are about to enter and possess.

While the Torah itself seems to frame these curses as a warning, something that might happen if we disobey, the Ramban asserts that they are a prophecy. It is not only possible that we will face horrors in the future. It is a certainty:

רמב"ן ויקרא כו:טז

ודע והבן כי האלות האלה ירמזו לגלות ראשון, כי בבית הראשון היו כל דברי הברית הזאת... אבל הברית
שבמשנה תורה ירמז לגלותנו זה ולגאולה שנגאל ממנו.

Ramban to Vayikra 26:16

Know that these curses [in Parashat BeHukkotai] hint to the first exile, for in the period of the First Temple all the words of this covenant came to pass... but in the covenant of Sefer Devarim the Torah hints to our [current] exile and to the redemption through which we will be redeemed.

The curses are not only punishments: they are an unwinding of our story. Egypt, rather than being a place from which we were redeemed, a painful stop on our journey to our ultimate destination, becomes the place to which we are doomed to return. Israel, instead of Egypt, becomes the stopover:

דברים כח:סח

וְהִשִּׁיבְךָ ה' מִצִּירִים בְּאֲנִיּוֹת בְּדֶרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ לֹא תֵסִיף עוֹד לְרֹאשִׁיתָ וְהִתְמַכְרְתָם שָׁם לְאִיִּבִיךְ לְעִבְדִּים
וְלִשְׂפָחוֹת וְאֵין קֹנָה:

Devarim 28:68

Hashem will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

In only a few short chapters, the *bikkurim* transform into something darker: no longer a symbol of a story ended, they become, possibly, a momentary pause, a respite between periods of unrest. The land shifts under our feet.

What meaning can the *bikkurim* possibly have in a world so fraught with chaos? How do we thank God for where our story has brought us when we know that there is still so much of the story yet to be told? What does it mean to thank God for what we have when there is no guarantee that it will last?



While the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim* raises these questions, perhaps it also provides us with a framework with which to answer them.

In the face of a chaotic world in which security cannot be guaranteed, we bring *bikkurim*.

In the face of uncertainty, we watch our trees for first fruits and promises of new beginnings. We mark them, celebrate them, and remember that they come from God.

In the face of a story whose next chapter we cannot predict, we tell the story of what we have faced before; of who we have been; of where we are now, and thank God for every step of that journey. We celebrate what we have now in joy—not alone, but with those around us who are in need.

In the face of a world where abundance is never guaranteed, in which all our instincts might tell us to hunker down, to save every scrap we have, we open our hands and hearts in joy and gratitude.

Our story is long and winding. It is full of miracles and just as full of pain. Jews know that while salvation is miraculous, it does not guarantee safety in the future. Until the Messiah comes, no chapter is final.

But still, each spring, we tell the story of where we have come from, share what we have, and offer our thanks to God; knowing that in a world of chaos and uncertainty, it is those practices that will give us the strength we need to navigate through the darkness.

