Parshat Ki Tavo: First Fruits
By Leiba Chaya David

The Land of Israel has been conquered and divided, and Jewish farmers have settled into the yearly cycle of growth and harvest. Now they are given a special commandment, one applying only in the Land: they must take their first fruits to the Temple to express their gratitude to G-d. The first verses of this week’s Torah portion of Ki Tavo describe the ritual of bikurim (first fruits): “…you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your Land that HaShem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that HaShem, your G-d, will choose…” As we will explore below, the farmers were not only thanking G-d for an abundant harvest, but also affirming the link between G-d, themselves, the Land of Israel, and the collective history of the Jewish nation.

In the Land of Israel, the most basic sense of faith stems from an agricultural dependence on G-d. The Jewish farmer, whose livelihood is entirely dependent on G-d’s blessing, must live in a perpetual state of faith and appreciation. This faith is even indicated in the kind of fruit farmers brought as bikurim; they only offered the seven species for which the Land is praised—wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive, and dates. These species are native to Israel and are especially dependent on the blessing of rainwater for their growth.

The agricultural enterprise does more than just sharpen one’s awareness of G-d. According to Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, it also has the power to unify the Jewish nation. Rabbi Kook proposes that the ideal Jewish society is one based on an agricultural rather than a mercantile economy. Commenting on the bikurim ceremony described by the Mishnah, he writes that “the first fruits symbolize the special love the nation [of Israel] has for agriculture…As opposed to the nations of the world where cohesion is fostered by trade fairs, here [in an agricultural ritual] it is built through the common denominator of pure worship of G-d.”

On the following Mishnah, “All the professionals in Jerusalem would stand before them (the farmers) and inquire as to their welfare,” Rabbi Kook comments: “….When the nation is morally depraved, when individuals’ eyes and heart are only upon money, these two types, those who engage in nature and those who engage in artifice become alienated from one another. The farmers, who dwell in villages close to nature, will be the object of disrespect on the part of the professionals who have figured out how to live by civilization divorced from nature.”

In the colorful ceremony of bikurim, which involved Jews from all walks of life, Rabbi Kook saw an opportunity to rectify the disrespect and alienation between the farmers and the
townspeople. In a G-d-fearing society, each individual sector of society recognizes the relevance of the other sectors. Among the Jewish nation, farmers were given particular respect. This recognition is exemplified by the townspeople "standing up" before the farmers during the ceremony.

Note that Rabbi Kook is not saying that all Jews should become farmers! Rather, he is proposing that the integrity of the nation of Israel, and of humanity as a whole, is contingent upon the cosmopolitan city-dweller acknowledging his deep connection to the provincial farmer.

Today, most people live the state of alienation between nature and civilization described by Rabbi Kook. Most of us don't realize that many of the things we use in our "civilized" daily lives – including food, medicine, and even plastic – have their origins in the natural world. We are also unaware that our individual cultures were once inextricably linked to nature. The loss of local culture – that intricate web of language, food, religion, economy, and ecology – is disastrous for both people and the planet. Wendell Berry, an American farmer and writer, suggests that "lacking an authentic local culture, a place is open to exploitation, and ultimately destruction, from the center." He advocates strengthening local economies, fostering connections between generations, deepening religious convictions, and most importantly, building cohesive communities centered around specific places. The sound integration between place and culture, which implies an understanding of the interconnectedness of all of Creation, is critical for the development of positive environmental ethics.

Jewish life during Temple times, which wove together religion, economy, food, language, and local ecology, can be viewed as an integrated local culture. Today, the Jewish people are, on the whole, alienated not only from nature, but also from G-d, the Land of Israel and each other. We are not in a position to rectify the situation through the bringing of bikurim, since the Holy Temple, to our sorrow, is no longer standing. The Temple, as the bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, was the center of a proper Jewish culture rooted in the Land of Israel; without it, our ability to reconstruct such a culture is limited.

Yet there are many things that we can do even now to help recreate a local culture that acknowledges the links between G-d, the Land of Israel, and the Jewish people. We can grow and eat the seven species, taking the extra time to learn about their spiritual symbolism. We can be more conscious of how our moral and practical actions determine the abundance or lack of blessing in the form of rain. We can become acquainted with the traditional agricultural practices of the region and support farmers who implement them. And we can build stable, diverse, morally upright communities in the Land of Israel. All of these small tikkunim (repairs) serve to reinforce our dependence on G-d and maintain a balance between different sectors of Jewish society.

Even in the Diaspora, we can still experience a sense of partnership with G-d by growing our own food. We can help maintain an environmentally sensible food culture by purchasing
locally grown products in season. We can grow some of the seven species that might be compatible with our bioregions. And most importantly, we can dedicate time to learning *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, the Torah of the Land of Israel, including a trip to the Holy Land itself!

Every year upon bringing the *bikurim*, the farmer announces, "Today I am affirming that I have come to the Land that God swore to our fathers to give us."¹¹ Rashi (France, 1040-1105) comments that this is an expression of thanks to God for having given us the Land of Israel. It would make sense to give thanks upon initial entry into the Land, but why would a farmer need to repeat this every year? It must be that coming into the Land, and the expression of gratitude commensurate with such a gift, are part of an ongoing process. May we merit to continually "come into the Land," reinforcing our commitment to it, to God, and to all of the Jewish people, and may this strong bond serve as an example to all of humanity.

**Suggested Action Items:**

1. Get closer to the land! Grow your own food.
2. Support a Community Garden or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project.
3. Buy food and other products that are made or grown locally, in season.

For many more helpful hints and resources written by this author on this topic, visit: http://canfeinesharim.org/learning/make_difference.php?page=15627
Leiba Chaya David moved to Israel from the U.S. in 1996 and ever since has been exploring the Land of Israel and the Israeli environmental movement. She studied for a year at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, and is a certified field guide of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). She also holds an MA in Jewish Education from the Hebrew University. Currently, Leiba Chaya is director of Ru'ach HaSviva, The SPNI Center for Jewish Environmentalism. She lives with her husband and three small children on a moshav near Jerusalem.

1 Deut. 26:2 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)
2 Deut. 26:5 “An Armanean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation – great, strong and numerous…Then we cried out to HaShem, the G-d of our forefathers, and HaShem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our travail and our oppression. HaShem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and he gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O HaShem!” (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)
3 See Rashi on Deut. 26:2
4 Rabbi Kook (1865-1935) was the first chief rabbi of the State of Israel.
5 Based on an idea from Eyn Ayah, Rabbi Kook’s commentary to Eyn Yaakov, the 16th century collection of the aggadot (Legends of the Talmud by Rabbi Yaakov Ibn Habib). The ideas and translations used in this piece are from a book titled Of Societies Perfect and Imperfect – Selected Readings From Eyn Ayah, translated and annotated by Bezalel Naor, Sepher-Hermon Press, 1995.
6 Tractate Bikkurim Chapter 3, Mishna 2: “How do we bring up the first-fruits? All the people of the towns belonging to the maamad (convocation) gather to the city of the maamad and stay overnight in the city plaza. They do not enter the homes. The next morning the appointee would call: ‘Rise, let us go up to Zion, to the house of the Lord our God.’”
7 Tractate Bikkurim Chapter 3, Mishna 3
9 See, for example, Eitz Chaim Hee’s teaching on this theme by Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum on the Torah portion of Eikev.
10 On this theme, see Eitz Chaim Hee’s teaching by Jonathan Neril on the Torah portion of Bechukotai.
11 Deut. 26:3 (translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah)