

When Times are Tough and When Times are Good Shabbat Ki Tavo 5774

[Translations of Maor Vashemesh by Rabbi Jonathan Slater]

Reb Kalman Kalonymous Epstein [often referred to as “Reb Kalmish”], a Hassidic Master of the early 19th century from Krakow, Poland interpreted the passage with which the Torah portion of this Shabbat begins. The Torah describes a ritual of bringing the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem after the Promised Land will have been settled. Upon presenting a basket of fruits to the priest in the Temple, the Israelite is to retell a compact version of the sacred history of the people, beginning with: "*Arami Oved Avi* -- My father was a fugitive/wandering Aramean. [Or, differently translated: An Aramean (Laban) sought to destroy my father.] He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation" (Deuteronomy 26:5).

Reb Kalmish asks:

... what distinguishes the commandment of bringing the first fruits from the rest of those in the Torah, that we here must mention what Laban sought to do to Jacob? And, further, how does the fact that Jacob was saved from Laban explain why we bring first fruits? What is the connection of one to the other? Furthermore, the relationship of the story of the Exodus to bringing *bikkurim*/first fruits, more than any other mitzvah, needs clarification. Finally, we need to understand the reason for this mitzvah.

[His response:] The holy Torah here wishes to open our eyes to see that throughout the whole of our lives we are surrounded by difficulties, no one similar to the other. There is no person who has not experienced stressful periods, but also periods of expansiveness. So, a perceptive person who observes all events and accidents that come about over time with a discerning eye will see and understand that all is from God for their good, in the end. That being so, we should receive whatever happens with a welcoming countenance and not reject it.

Reb Kalmish goes on to observe that people under stress or in hard times tend to be blind to the blessings in their lives or the ways that the stresses themselves may become a source of goodness, as in a test. He also notes the human tendency in times relatively free of stress, times of “expansiveness,” when abundance is obvious, to ignore the ultimate source of that abundance or to take over much credit for it themselves. That is, when life is tough people may ask, “**For what reason** should I feel gratitude?” And when life is good, people may

ask, "To whom do I owe gratitude?" Or perhaps they may feel that expressing gratitude in one's abundance may appear to be self aggrandizing.

Reb Kalmish's responds to these possibilities by referring to the text he is explicating, as he says:

This is the meaning of "An Aramean sought to destroy my father": the Aramean Laban sought to distract Jacob so that he would reject the goodness of the blessed Creator, and so be punished. This then brought it about that he went down to Egypt, as Scripture says "He went down to Egypt". This is a warning to us not to reject the good that God sends us, and to recognize it as true goodness, and not to confuse us in our devotions. Rather we are to thank God and praise God for all the good.

In this regard, a Hassidic tale told by Martin Buber (in *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters*, p. 292) goes:

A rich man once came to the Maggid of Koznitz. "What are you in the habit of eating?" the Maggid asked. "I am modest in my demands," the rich man replied. "Bread and salt, and a drink of water are all I need." "What are you thinking of!" the rabbi reproved him. "You must eat roast meat and drink mead, like all rich people." And he did not let the man go until he had promised him to do as he said. Later the Hasidim asked him the reason for this odd request. "Not until he eats meat," said the Maggid, "will he realize that the poor man needs bread. As long as he himself eats bread, he will think the poor man can live on stones."

As we move closer the end of the month of Elul and nearer to the lift off of a New Year, we do well to take the words of Reb Kalmish as a personal challenge to self inquiry. The questions may arise variously. The ones I pose to myself include these:

What meanings do I attach to my experiences of difficulty, pain, or stress?

What meanings do I attach to my experiences of abundance, expansiveness, or joy?

What is the nature of my gratitude during periods of stress, pain, or difficulty?

What is the nature of my gratitude during periods of expansiveness, abundance, or joy?

The questions that you pose to yourself may differ. No matter. In the coming year, may they guide you to an ever greater capacity to feel gratitude and express it in periods experienced as stressful and in those experienced as expansive.