



A Life of Verticality

You can very well imagine the festive scene. By early spring, most of the crops and fruits had already ripened and many had already been harvested. Nature had fully awakened from her winter hibernation and the splendor of spring was in full bloom. Shavuot was approaching and the excitement was mounting.

Selected crops and grains of the seven minim were prepared as a donation to the mikdash and to the Kohanim. As the pilgrims transporting Bikkurim approached the suburbs of Yerushalayim, spontaneous parades erupted, escorting these processions to the mikdash. The joyous ceremonies which began on Shavuot, lasted throughout the entire summer, as a steady bounty of exquisite fruit streamed to Yerushalayim.

A Summary of Jewish History

The actual presentation of Bikkurim fruit in front of the *mizbeach* was prefaced by a ceremonious acknowledgment of Hashem's *hashgacha* in delivering these crops and fruit. Oddly, our thanksgiving was prefaced by a historical summary of Jewish history and of yetziat Mitzrayim. The opening four-pasuk section of Ki Tavo contains a succinct summary of our deliverance

from Mitzrayim: the first verse describes the descent to Egypt, the second portrays the slavery and bondage, the third details our prayers for divine rescue and the final verse articulates our miraculous departure and liberation.

This four-pasuk section is familiar to us as the “arami oved avi” portion recited as the heart of our Hagaddah conversation on Pesach night. It makes perfect sense to expound these verses on Pesach, but it is strange to recite them on Shavuot as the Bikkurim are delivered to the mikdash.

History redeems egotism

Rabbi Soloveitchik claimed that this recital converts the bikkurim experience into a noble rather than egotistic moment. Celebrating material success and productive harvests can become self-indulgent and self-congratulatory. Looking back at a year of work and toil and relishing the delicious products can induce haughtiness or self-centrism.

Framing this Bikkurim celebration with an account of Jewish history redeems this moment from selfishness and greediness. Our material success is cast in a narrative which is larger than ourselves. We are a small part of Jewish history, and our success advances our larger national arc, and not just our individual experiences or our personal convenience. Without a larger historical framework, material success can become egotistic. Embedded within the arc of Jewish

history, personal milestones and individual success become noble and altruistic.

Geulah, then tefilla

The same strategy is schemed every day before we daven shemoneh esrei. Petitioning for personal success and health can also mutate into a self-centric and selfish moment. Persistently praying for our individual needs can feel very narrow and very inward serving. To “redeem” prayer from the specter of selfishness, our nineteen requests are prefaced by a segment known as “geulah” which celebrates our first redemption and the launch of our common national history. Placed in the context of Jewish history, personal requests are no longer self-serving but serve a higher historical function. We ask for welfare and success so that we can advance the arc of Jewish history toward its terminus of final and complete redemption. Having aligned ourselves with Jewish redemption, our shemoneh esrei no longer solicits personal needs, but rather aspires to a higher national calling.

Israel and historical consciousness

A few weeks ago, I participated in a Rabbinic panel to which was posed the following question: which topic is most neglected in North American education? I responded that Jewish history isn’t being sufficiently educated. At best, recent Zionist and Holocaust history is being taught, but a broader survey of the genesis of our nation and how we arrived at our current state is rarely provided.

Historical consciousness frames religious experience. Our religious duties are part of a larger historical heritage of commitment and covenant with Hashem. Generations who preceded us wrestled with their



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historical predicament, displaying valiant heroism in bucking the historical odds and maintaining our Jewish mission and faith. Our generation is privileged to live in their wake, to reap the benefits of their perseverance and to author the final frames of history. Our unique historical moment can't be taken for granted and must motivate both national duty and deeper religious commitment.

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Historical Dislocation

Recently, I asked a Rabbinic acquaintance in Israel how he would have developed differently had he remained in the USA. He thoughtfully considered my question and replied that his life, and religious horizons would have been more “*narrow*”. I challenged his answer and cited the frustration of many olim who are disappointed that Israeli communities are *too narrowly* constructed. Unlike the heterogeneous communities abroad, Israeli communities rarely demonstrate cultural or ideological diversity. Sadly, some voices even discourage aliyah citing the lack of diversity in Israeli communities as a disincentive. After all, in the USA you can live in a broad-spectrum community, whereas in Israel you are often forced to choose one ideology at the expense of the other. Is Israel a narrowing experience or a broadening one?

The answer, of course, all depends upon perspective. Indeed, the lack of ideologically blended communities in Israel is disappointing. However, in the wide-view, living in Israel stretches our horizons of peoplehood and history. Living in Israel binds us to the larger historical process which worldwide Jewry is launching with. This awareness both augments and expands religious identity. If we have been selected to live at this dramatic stage of history, we must validate that divine choice with devout commitment and passionate dedication.

If life in Israel feels history “aware”, sometimes life outside of Israel can become historically disconnected. Two hundred years ago a person lived in the same house as his grandparents. One hundred and fifty years ago he probably lived on the same street as his grandparents. One hundred years ago he likely lived in the same city as his grandparents. Sadly, this is no longer true. We live hyper mobile lives, convincing ourselves that transportation and communication liberate us to live wherever we choose while still remaining “connected” to family. These technologies may “connect” us to our past, but they rarely provide historical continuity and cultural heritage. We are in danger of losing our sense of history and of building a very myopic and tapered religious identity. Narrow religious identity is never durable and can easily be toppled. We are losing sense of our place in history. We are becoming isolated points in space rather than parts of a historical “line”. We are becoming “flat” and losing our verticality.

Before we thank Hashem for our success we must align with our history. Else life will become egocentric. ■