

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



***“Celebrate the
Festival of
Harvest with
the firstfruits
of the crops
you sow in
your field.”***

— Exodus 23:16



Bikkurim: Giving God Our Best

Seven weeks after the first day of Passover, the Bible commands us to celebrate the holiday of *Shavuot*. Appropriately, *Shavuot* means “weeks,” marking seven weeks between the two holidays. In Greek and Latin, this festival was known as Pentecost, meaning “50 days,” again accounting for the passage of time between Passover and *Shavuot*.

However, these names tell us very little about the significance of this holy day – one of three “pilgrimage” holidays when the Israelites were required to travel to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. These names also tell us very little about what we are meant to do on this sacred day.

The Bible has another name for this holiday, which may be more helpful to us. It is also called the “Festival of Harvest,” and on it, we are required to offer God our firstfruits, in Hebrew, *bikkurim*.

Judaism’s Oral Tradition builds upon the details spelled out in the Bible and provides us with a beautiful description of bringing the *bikkurim*, the firstfruits. When an Israelite saw the first emergence of one of the seven species of the land – wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranate, olives, or dates – he was to tie a string around it, designating it as his firstfruits. At the appointed time during *Shavuot*, these firstfruits of the land would be presented to God at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (or before Temple times, at the Tabernacle).

With great pomp and ceremony, the

people would travel to Jerusalem with their firstfruits in a basket on their shoulders. An ox with gilded horns and a crown of olive tree branches would lead the way. The journey would be accompanied by music and song.

When the pilgrims arrived at the foothills of Jerusalem, they would adorn their fruit and baskets. As they entered the city, the craftsmen, officers, and governors would greet them saying, “Our people . . . enter in peace!” A musician playing the flute would lead the procession and accompany the pilgrims to the Temple.

Upon reaching the Temple, the firstfruits would be given to the priests. Prescribed scripture passages would be read, noting the difficulties the Israelites encountered before settling in the land of Israel. The ceremony would conclude with giving thanks for the land and the fruit of the land. After the fruit was offered, there was much rejoicing and feasting before returning home.

This elaborate and ancient ceremony has much to teach us today about gratitude and giving back to God from the gifts that He has blessed and bestowed upon us throughout each year. However, since the destruction of the Temple, we can no longer observe this ritual as it once was. Instead, we are to extrapolate lessons from this sacred act and integrate these teachings into our everyday lives.

Rabbi Eckstein



Giving Gratitude

You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.
— Deuteronomy 8:17–18

It's basic manners to say “thank you” when someone gives something to us. However, it's also our human nature to take things for granted. The more we are given things, the less we naturally appreciate them. The gratitude of a starving person for a simple meal is far more than that of a well-off person enjoying his or her daily feast. This is one reason why God instituted the practice of bringing the firstfruits.

Scripture repeatedly warns us that when blessed with abundance, we might be tempted to say, *“My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me,”* and cautions us, *“But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.”*

We can counteract the tendency to take our gifts for granted or to attribute our success to our own abilities by remembering that God is the source of all we have. When we bring our first and best and offer it to God, we acknowledge that it is all His to begin with and we thank Him for our many blessings.

However, a look at the text that is read upon bringing

the firstfruits reveals that our gratitude must be more than superficial. The text from Deuteronomy 26:5–10 begins: *“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt . . .”* The reading begins with the story of Jacob's struggles and his descent to Egypt. The narrative continues with the story of the Israelites, through their slavery in Egypt, to God bringing them out of Egypt to the land of milk and honey. The text concludes: *“. . . now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me.”* We revisit the entire history of the Israelites so that we can fully appreciate all of God's blessings.

The lesson for us is to not only express simple gratitude to God and the people in our lives for all that they have done for us, but also to do so in the greatest way possible. We need to remember not only the immediate gift that we might be experiencing at the moment, but also the context and history behind the kindnesses that we have received. The more we contemplate all that went into the gifts that we receive, the deeper and more complete our appreciation will be. That is true gratitude.

think about it...

1. What has God done for you in the past that has resulted in “fruit” you enjoy today?
2. It has been said that if everyone gave just 1 percent of their income to charity, we could end poverty and hunger. What one thing can you do to help raise awareness about giving and encourage others to give?
3. How do you feel when you receive a gift? How do you feel when you give a gift? Which feeling is more fulfilling in the long run?
4. What does it mean to you to give God your very best? How can you encourage others in your family, at work, or at your church to do the same?
5. What would you consider the “firstfruits” of your life? How can you serve God with the gifts that He has blessed you with?
6. Read Exodus 24:3, Israel's stirring commitment to obeying God's Word. In what ways does your faith community commit itself to obeying God's Word today? What about you personally?



Giving Back

Then celebrate the Festival of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.

— Deuteronomy 16:10

The overall idea behind the giving of firstfruits is expressing our gratitude to God. However, the means by which we fully achieve this goal is giving back to God from what He has given us. It's interesting to note that the law specified the only fruits that qualified as firstfruits were those from the seven species of the land of Israel.

While today, Israel may be known for its famous Jaffa oranges, Scripture specifies that there are only seven types of produce indigenous to the land of Israel. They are “wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and (date) honey” (Deuteronomy 8:8). It was from these seven species alone that the firstfruits were brought.

God wanted the experience of “giving back” to represent what the Israelites had received. These fruits emphasized the land of Israel and that God had given them the land. Similarly, when we give to God’s purposes, we are to give from what God has blessed us with. We all have been gifted with talents, treasures, and blessings. It is from what we have received from God that we are to give back to Him.

Another aspect of giving firstfruits is that the Israelites were required to bring the best of their harvest: “Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God” (Exodus 34:26). Maimonides, the renowned 12th century rabbi and scholar, explained that whenever we give to God’s purposes, it must always be the best that we have to offer.

He wrote, “Everything that is for the sake of God should be of the best and most beautiful. When one builds a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than his own dwelling. When one feeds the hungry, he should feed him of the best and sweetest of his table. Whenever one designates something for a holy purpose, he should sanctify the finest of his possessions.” When giving back to God, we must do so in the way that gives God the most glory. This represents our complete and boundless gratitude for what we have.

Bikkurim reminds us to establish priorities in our lives. We remember that for all we have received, it is our privilege and responsibility to give back to God’s purposes. As we bless others, may we be blessed in return.

apply it

- 1. Volunteer your time and talents for God’s purposes. Bake food for the hungry, keep the lonely company, offer a compassionate ear to the hurting, or engage in any activity that helps others through the talents God has given to you.**
- 2. Contribute to a charity of your choice. When we give back to God with the blessings He has given us, we not only facilitate good in the world, but express our gratitude in action, not just in words.**
- 3. Serve God with excellence. Whether you are providing hospitality for guests, using your talents for others, or giving a gift to an organization, do so with the highest standards possible — spare nothing and go all out.**
- 4. Recognize ALL that God has done for you by telling others about His work in your life — both in the past and in the present. Anticipate God’s goodness in the future.**
- 5. Set aside time for God. Designate a day or a weekend for studying the Word of God. Dedicate that time for learning, growing, and coming closer to God through His Word.**
- 6. Commit to spending the first 10 minutes of every day in God’s Word. Try it for a week and journal how the practice has impacted your day, your attitude, and your interactions with others.**



Giving Ourselves

*“Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,”
declares the LORD.*

— Jeremiah 2:3

If you ask any Jew who observes *Shavuot* what the holiday is about, they probably will tell you that it commemorates the giving of the *Torah* on Mt. Sinai. And that would be correct. According to Jewish tradition, the Hebrew date of *Shavuot* is the same day that God revealed Himself on Mt. Sinai and gave the world the Bible.

Even in our liturgy for the holiday, *Shavuot* is referred to as “the time of the giving of our *Torah*.” However, if you look in the Bible itself, *Shavuot* is never associated with the giving of the *Torah*. Rather, it is consistently associated with the giving of the firstfruits.

So what happened?

Very simply, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Gone were the priests, the grand ceremony, and eventually, the beautiful Jewish communities in the land of Israel. Without the possibility of bringing firstfruits, the Jews needed to find another way to mark this sacred, biblically prescribed holiday. While the receiving of the *Torah* had been a tangential theme of the holiday, over time it became the main focus. So instead of offering our firstfruits from

the harvest on *Shavuot*, we now offer our very selves to God by rededicating ourselves to obeying His Word.

This tradition has a deep connection to the original ritual. In Jeremiah 2:3, Israel is referred to as “*the firstfruits of his harvest* . . .” We are God’s firstfruits! Moreover, when we look at the broader context of this time period, the seven weeks from which *Shavuot* gets its name, we are reminded that the time leading up to the holiday holds an important purpose. Historically, this period marked a time of preparation between the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt until they received the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai.

Even today, this is a time of introspection and personal growth so that we might be worthy of receiving God’s Word. On *Shavuot*, all our hard work has “borne fruit.” In Proverbs 8:19 we read, “*My fruit is better than fine gold.*” This is the fruit that comes from studying God’s Word and growing from it. And it is these firstfruits that we offer to God on *Shavuot*.

Shavuot is now a time to offer ourselves to God — to offer the fruits of our personal growth and to offer our lives to fulfilling and obeying His Word.



Celebrating *Bikkurim* Today

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name.

— Deuteronomy 26:1-2



“**B**askets on our shoulders with crowns on our heads, from the edges of the land we come, we bring *bikkurim* . . . make way for us, because we have firstfruits with us, beat the drums and play the flute . . .”

These are the English words to a popular Hebrew song taught to Jewish children around the world. It recalls the beautiful and joyful pilgrimage to Jerusalem where firstfruits were once offered in the days when the Temple stood. Today, all we have is a memory of what once was.

In many Jewish communities throughout the world, there is a concerted effort to keep that memory alive and to keep the practice of bringing the firstfruits connected to the holiday of *Shavuot*. We achieve this mainly through our children who often decorate baskets in school and place real or pretend fruit inside. In some synagogues, the children are invited to bring their “firstfruits” on *Shavuot*, where they then parade around with flower crowns on their heads and baskets on their shoulders, singing songs of praise. If real fruit is involved, some synagogues donate the produce to local soup kitchens.

Overall, however, the practice of

bringing firstfruits on *Shavuot* has been lost to the Jewish people. Instead, the commemoration of receiving the *Torah* on Mt. Sinai has taken its place as the focus of the holiday – at least for now. On *Shavuot* today, it is common for people to stay up all night studying the *Torah* to demonstrate our joy at receiving God’s Word over 3,000 years ago. We also read from Scriptures that describe the revelation of God on Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Interestingly, the 1967 Six-Day War that brought about the reunification of Jerusalem was won just days before the holiday of *Shavuot*. On *Shavuot* of that year, over 200,000 Jews made their way by foot to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in fulfillment of the biblical directive to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the holiday. Since that time, walking to the Western Wall has become a tradition, and today, after a full night of studying God’s Word, the streets of Jerusalem are packed at early dawn with people making their way toward the Temple Mount, pilgrims once again.

All we are missing now is the Temple itself and the *bikkurim*.

