

PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI



הקודש ותמורתו Exchanging Holiness

It is commonly accepted in our economy that a customer who has purchased an item may return it or replace it, subject to certain conditions. The basis for this practice is that people might hesitate to buy because of the fear that they might later change their minds. But if they know that they will not be held to their original intention or “stuck” with the ramifications of a momentary mistake, they are encouraged to buy.

But there are other, higher planes, where decisions are irreversible. We can call them “one-way decisions.” In Parashat Bechukotai, we learn of sacred values, involving decisions that can be changed only in very limited cases, if at all. Let us begin our discussion with sacrificial offerings. The Torah declares:

וְאִם בְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִקְרִיבוּ מִמִּנְהָ קָרְבָן לַה', כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מִמֶּנּוּ לַה' יִהְיֶה קֹדֶשׁ. לֹא יִחְלִיפוּנּוּ וְלֹא יִמִּיר אֶתוֹ טוֹב בְּרָע אוֹ רָע בְּטוֹב...

*Regarding animals that can be offered as a sacrifice to G-d -
whatever is given from them to G-d will be holy;
he shall not replace it or exchange it,
neither for better nor worse... (Vayikra 27,9-10)*

Once a person sets aside a kosher animal for an offering to G-d, its very essence becomes holy. This quality can never be removed, exchanged or redeemed, for it is the very core and quintessence of the animal. Our Sages call it “sanctity of the body,” meaning the very “body” of the matter. What

happens if someone tries to exchange this animal for another one? The Torah gives the answer:

וְאִם הֵמָּר יִמִּיר בְּהֵמָה בְּבֵהֵמָה, וְהָיָה הוּא וְתַמּוּרְתוֹ יְהִי קֹדֶשׁ.

*And if he exchanges the animal for an animal,
both it and its replacement become holy.* (verse 10)

The holiness does not pass from one animal to another, but rather replicates itself – and both of them are now sacred and must be offered up as sacrifices to G-d. This spiritual reality is comparable to wave movement, as opposed to that of particles: The energy of a wave in the ocean moves from one place to another, but the particles of water remain where they were.

Another way in which we can understand this spiritual reality is by considering a coil through which an alternating current passes. If we place another coil adjacent to it, an electric current will be formed in it as well – but without the original current having left the first coil. This, too, is motion not of particles, but of electro-magnetic waves.

Or, if you will: one who tries to exchange sanctity seeks a “cut and paste” action, but in actuality, the result is “copy and paste” – that is, sanctity in both animals.

■ For Your Eating Pleasure

Similarly, fruits grown in Eretz Yisrael during the Shemittah year have, to a certain extent, sanctity that is non-transferable. The Torah commands us regarding Shemittah:

וְהָיְתָה שֵׁבֶת הָאָרֶץ לָכֶם לְאֹכְלָהּ לָהּ וּלְעֹבְדֶיהָ וּלְאֲמָתֶיהָ...
וּלְבֵהֵמֹתֶיהָ וּלְחִיָּה אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרְצָהּ תִּהְיֶה כָּל תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְאָכֹל.

*The Sabbath of the land will be for you to eat - to you, your
servant... and your animals – all the grain to eat.* (Vayikra 25,6-7)

The fruits that grow during Shemittah are meant to be “holy for eating.” The “body of the fruit” is to be eaten, and its holiness – known as *Kedushat Shvi'it*, or Shemittah sanctity – may therefore not be transferred to other fruits via exchange, redemption, or any other method. And if someone tries to transfer the sanctity, he will find that both the original fruits and their exchange are sacred. Practically, this means that the special laws of Shemittah, such as not destroying or doing business with the fruit, apply to both the original holy produce and the new fruit. (If the person continues

the chain and tries to transfer the “new” sanctity to additional fruits, only the first and last fruits in the series retain it.)

In this light, let us consider: Given that G-d has chosen Jerusalem as the holiest place in the world, can its sanctity be transferred to a different location? The answer, of course, is no. The sanctity of a place is in its essence, which can, by definition, never be transferred elsewhere. The holiness of Jerusalem is eternal and not transferable. (It is true, though, that in future times, the holiness of Jerusalem will spread out to other places, even as far as Damascus in Syria, as the Medrash teaches (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 7): “Jerusalem is destined in the future to reach the gates of Damascus.”)

■ The Sanctity of Monetary Value

What happens when we consecrate to G-d something that cannot be offered as a sacrifice? For instance, if one consecrates a utensil, or a blemished or unkosher animal, it may not be offered up on the altar – but can the sanctity it received by virtue of the consecration be transferred to another item? The Torah answers:

...כֹּל בְּהֵמָה טְמֵאָה... וְהֵעִרֶיךָ הִכְהֵנוּ אֹתָהּ...
וְאִם גָּאֵל יִגְאָלֶנָּה וְיִסַּף חֲמִישִׁתּוֹ עַל עֶרְכָּהּ.

Any unclean animal that shall not be brought as an offering to G-d... the Priest shall appraise it... if the man redeems it, he shall add its fifth to its value. (Vayikra 27,11-13)

Since the animal cannot be offered on the altar, its sanctity applies not to its essence, but only to its monetary worth. This, of course, is not an integral part of the animal, and it can therefore be transferred from item to item. This is done by “redeeming” its sanctity onto another item, or even onto coins. This procedure is called *hamarah*, from the same root meaning “exchange,” and it causes the sanctity to be absolutely transferred to money or other articles; the original animal becomes totally profane and not holy. This is akin to a “cut and paste” operation, or one in which the holiness is carried atop a particle moving from place to place.

Some sacred fruits can also be included in this process. Fruits from a tree in its fourth year, and those of *Maaser Sheni* (which must be eaten in Jerusalem), may have their sanctity “traded” onto coins. To understand this better, let us study *Orlah* and the *Maaser Sheni* tithe.

■ Holy Praise

The Torah teaches us the laws of *Orlah* in Parashat Kedoshim:

וְכִי תֵבְאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ וּנְטַעְתֶּם כָּל עֵץ מֵאֲכָל...
שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים יִהְיֶה לָכֶם עֲרֵלִים לֹא יֵאָכֵל.

*When you come to the Land and plant fruit trees...
for three years it shall be orlah, and shall not be eaten.* (19,23)

The first three years' worth of a tree's fruits are forbidden to be eaten. The fruits of the following year must be eaten only in Jerusalem, and only under specific circumstances corresponding to their "holy" nature. The eating of these fruits is accompanied by joyful singing and praise to G-d:

וּבִשְׁנָה הָרְבִיעִית יִהְיֶה כָּל פְּרִיו קֹדֶשׁ הַלְלוּלִים לָהּ.

*And in the fourth year,
all its fruits will be "holy praise" to G-d.* (verse 24)

There are times, of course, when it is quite difficult to bring the fruits to Jerusalem and eat them there. One who has hundreds of trees, for instance, will have a hard time overcoming all the logistical problems involved in bringing the entire fourth-year crop to Yerushalayim. Jewish Law stipulates that another way of "bringing" the fruits to the Holy City is by redeeming them for coins, and then bringing the coins to Jerusalem for the purchase of meat, wine and other food. This is precisely the same law as the Torah details for *Maaser Sheni*, one of the tithes taken from produce grown in the Land of Israel.

Let us analyze the interesting phrase *kodesh hilulim*, "holy praise" or "praise of holiness," that the Torah uses to describe the fourth-year fruits. Rabbi Akiva explains it in the Gemara (B'rachot 35a) as the source for reciting a blessing both before and after eating. R. Akiva feels that a blessing on food is essentially a song of praise to G-d for having created the fruit; when we say, "*Barukh atah... You, the source of blessing... Who created the fruit of the tree,*" we are praising and thanking G-d, and thus fulfilling the verse that says the fruit is to be "*holy praise to Hashem.*"

The Gemara also provides another, more complex, explanation of the phrase. The Hebrew word *hilulim*, meaning praise, is understood as referring to *chilulim* (with the letter *heh* replaced by the similar-looking letter *chet*), meaning "making profane and not holy." This, of course, refers to the transfer of the fruit's sanctity onto the coins – and is the source for

the law that if bringing the actual fruits to Jerusalem is difficult, we may transfer their sanctity to silver coins; the coins will become holy and usable only in Jerusalem, while the fruits lose their sanctity and may be eaten outside Jerusalem.

Let us now take stock. The Gemara has derived two seemingly different things from the words *holy praise*: the concept of reciting a blessing before food, and the concept of exchange of sanctity. Do they have anything in common? Does the word *hilulim* become *chilulim* simply by virtue of similar-looking letters? What is the nature of the link between the praise of a blessing on fruit, and the process by which holy fruits become totally profane?

■ A Song of Praise

Every Sunday, in the Song of the Day, we recite a verse whose depths are not easily plumbed:

לְהָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָהּ תִּבְּלַ וְיֹשְׁבֵי בָּהּ.

*The earth and all that fills it is G-d's,
as well as the world and those who dwell upon it.* (Psalms 24,1)

The Gemara elaborates on its profundity:

Shmuel said: Whoever derives benefit from the world without reciting a blessing, is as if he derived benefit from items consecrated to Hashem... and as if he has embezzled from the Holy Temple.
(B'rachot 35a)

That is, since the whole world belongs to G-d, everything in it is sacred, and one may not partake of it. But it is a special type of holiness, in that the recital of a blessing over it renders it profane and we may then eat of it. But – how does this work? How does the recitation of a blessing allow us to eat the fruit? To where does its sanctity disappear?

The answer is found in the opening Psalm of the special Shabbat and holiday morning prayers:

הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד אֱלֹהִים וּמַעֲשֵׂיהָ יָדָיו מִגִּיד הַרְקִיעַ.
... אֵין אִמְרָ וְאֵין דְּבָרִים בְּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם.

*The Heavens recount the glory of G-d, and the firmament tells
His handiwork. ... There is no speech nor words;
their voice is not heard.* (Psalms 19,2-4)

The entire Creation is one big song of praise to G-d, without words. The very wonder of everything in the world is a song of awe and veneration for Hashem. Consider, for example, a simple apple. The deep wisdom buried inside it – its color, taste, energy, beauty, all the millions of cells inside – they are all a song of praise to the One Who created it. The apple is thus entirely an entity of holiness.

But when we eat the apple, what happens? It disappears, and with it seemingly goes its song of praise to Hashem. Perhaps we are not allowed to do this? By what right are we permitted to silence this song of praise simply because we are hungry?

The answer is that we are not silencing the apple's praise, but rather replacing it with something even better: our own recitation of praise to G-d. And how do we do this? By reciting the blessing over it! We pick up the apple and say: "*Barukh atah*: You, G-d, are the source of blessing, our G-d, the King of the Universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree." And so, instead of the apple expressing a silent song of praise to Hashem, we say out loud our own blessing of tribute - a higher level of praise to G-d.

When the apple "sings" its song, it does so automatically, without any choice in the matter. But when we, who have the ability to decide whether we want to say the blessing or not, actually choose to praise Hashem, this is so much greater.

■ The Missing Link

Let us return to the first verse, *The earth and all that fills it is G-d's*. The entire world belongs to G-d, and is under His authority; eating an apple without a blessing is like embezzling from that which has been consecrated to G-d. Our blessing replaces the apple's song of praise, and permits us to eat it. This, then, is the intrinsic link we sought between *hilul*, praise, and *chilul*, exchange of sanctity: Our **praise** is the **exchange** and redemption of the apple's praise.

It is fascinating to note that at the end of the above-quoted chapter of Psalms, which begins with the Heavens' *silent* praise to Hashem – "*their voice is not heard*" - we find a verse referring to our own *non-silent* praise of Hashem:

... יהיו לְרָצוֹן אִמְרֵי פִי ...

May the words of my mouth... find favor before You. (19,15)

This tells us that even with the amazing greatness of the praise sung to G-d by all of Creation, our own blessings of praise and prayers of thanksgiving are of even greater value to Hashem, because of where they come from: the Free Will of human beings.

■ A Gift with Honor

The above-quoted Gemara also speaks of one who picks a fruit off a tree, or takes one from the refrigerator, and takes a bite without reciting a blessing:

Whoever derives enjoyment from This World without first reciting a blessing is as if stealing from Hashem and Israel, as is written (Proverbs 28,24): *“One who steals from his father and mother and says there is no crime, is companion to a destructive person.”* (B’rachot 35b)

The verse is referring to a child who sees nothing wrong with taking something from his parents without asking permission. The child justifies his actions by thinking, “Whatever my parents acquire for themselves is meant for their children anyway. So why should I have to ask permission before taking it?” The answer, of course, is that though the parents’ property is meant for their children, they want to give it to them in an orderly, dignified manner. By simply snatching it up, the children destroy the relationship of respect that they must have for their parents.

The same is true between friends. Consider a man who prepares a gift for his friend as a sign of their friendship. He wraps it nicely and puts it aside to present it to him the next day. During the night, the impatient recipient sneaks into the house and takes the gift. Asked why he did it, he explains, “In any event it was for me.” This answer clearly does not justify what he did; the friend has violated and destroyed the relationship of respect and honor between them.

The same is true between Hashem and us. Hashem certainly created the world for man, and we might think, “I need not recite a blessing, for I’m just taking what He wants to give me in any event!” But in truth, G-d wants to give it to us with “honor,” and by reciting a blessing first, we strengthen our relationship of mutual respect – and then Hashem gives to us happily!

This provides a beautiful explanation for the rest of the *Orlah* passage. After telling us that the fruits of the first three years are forbidden, and that we must eat the fourth-year produce in Jerusalem or redeem their sanctity, the Torah proceeds to tell us the law of the fifth-year fruits:

וּבִשְׁנָה הַחֲמִישִׁית תֹּאכְלוּ אֶת פְּרִי לְהוֹסִיף לָכֶם תְּבוּאָתוֹ אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם.

And in the fifth year, eat the fruit, to add its grain for you;

I am the Lord your G-d. (Vayikra 19,25)

What is meant by “*to add its grain for you*”? The customary meaning is that Hashem will bless all those who fulfill these laws of *Orlah* by increasing and blessing their crops. But this does not fully explain the closing phrase, “*I am the Lord your G-d.*” Based on what we have said, we can give the following explanation for the entire passage:

Instead of understanding תְּבוּאָתוֹ as meaning “*its grain,*” we will understand it as coming from the *bet-aleph* root meaning “*come,*” and the verse will mean, “*to add to [the blessing] that comes to you.*” That is to say, in the fourth year, we praised G-d for the fruits via blessing and redemption – while in the fifth year, we may eat the fruits simply by reciting a blessing, with no redemption needed. However, the fifth-year blessing that we say and with which we praise Hashem gains us the “added value” of a special relationship with G-d, wherein He gives us His gifts with honor, respect and joy - as is emphasized at the end of the verse, “*I am the Lord your G-d.*”

Can there be a more wonderful gift?!

