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This week's Torah portion, Tavo, opens with the mitzva of bikurim – first fruits. "You shall put it in a basket...and the priest will take the basket out of your hand." Closer study of the Torah's laws of bikurim reveals that the presentation of the basket (usually made out of wicker) to the kohen was an integral part of the mitzva itself.

Interestingly, while the fruits that were brought were only the choicest (and only selected from the seven varieties with which the land of Israel is praised), the basket that was used for them was made of a common material. This seeming contradiction in the mitzva of bikurim contains an allusion to the descent of the soul from the higher spheres and its incarnation in a physical body down below.

The fruits of the bikurim are symbolic of the soul; the basket is the corporeal body. Handing the basket to the priest represents the purpose for which the soul made this drastic descent.

In general, the first fruits are symbolic of the Jewish people; more specifically, of the G-dly soul as it exists Above, completely transcendent of the physical world. G-d's plan, however, is for this rarefied soul to become en clothed in a body, a coarse and lowly "vessel" which contains it, as it were.

This vessel makes it difficult for the soul to express its connection with G-d, even to the point of obscuring its true mission in the world. Again, just as in the mitzva of bikurim, the holy and superior "fruit" is contained and even constrained within the confines of a simple and unpretentious "basket."

Chasidut provides the reason for this, explaining that the descent of the soul into a physical body is a "descent for the purpose of ascent": It is precisely through its sojourn on the physical plane, having to confront the difficulties of this world and overcome them, that the essence of the soul is revealed and a higher level of spirituality attained – much higher than could ever be reached without experiencing this descent in the first place.

In principle, "fruits" alone are not enough; the objective of the soul's descent is "fruits within a basket." The soul's ascent is accomplished through the performance of practical mitzvot, which can only be done with the help of the "vessel" – the physical body. For in truth, the soul was already filled with love and awe of G-d before it came down into the material world; the only change it experiences upon finding itself in a body is that it can now do physical mitzvot, something that was previously impossible. Thus the soul is rendered capable of elevating the physical world and turning it into holiness – the very intent of all of creation. From L'Chaim 5755, #385, Adapted from Likutei Sichot of the Rebbe, Volume 29]

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"It will be when you come into the land that the Eternal your G-d gives you for an inheritance, and you will inherit it and settle in it." [26:1] The midrash notes that eretz (land) is a cognate of merutza (running) and of ratzon (will, desire). "When you come into the Land..." - when you attain the level of ratzon, desire for the G-dly, that is a gift from Above and an inheritance for every one of Israel, then your required service is "...you will settle in it" - to internalize all you have attained, "bringing it down" in a settled manner.

"You shall take...and place it in a basket," - draw down the (spiritual) lights into (appropriate) vessels. "You shall go to the place the Eternal your G-d will choose" - a Jew must know that when he goes from one place to another, he is not going on his own, but is being directed from Above. And the intention and purpose in this is... "...to cause His Name to dwell there" - that is, to make G-d known in that Jew's locale. (Baal Shem Tov, from HaYom Yom, www.ascent.org.il)

"Because you would not serve the L-rd your G-d with joy and with gladness of heart... therefore, you will serve your enemies (Deut. 29:47) We see from this that joy is such an important part of the Jew's service of G-d that the harshest punishment of "you will serve your enemies" is not meted out for a deficiency in the service itself, but for worshipping G-d without joy and vitality.

When the Jew is happy, G-d is happy, as it were, and even the harshest decrees are annulled -- analogous to an earthly king granting amnesty to his prisoners when he is in a cheerful mood. (The Rebbe, Lchaim 5755, #385)

The Baal Shem Tov teaches:

1. Everything is by Divine Providence. If a leaf is turned over by a breeze, it is only because this has been specifically ordained by G-d to serve a particular function within the purpose of creation.
2. Every single thing that a person sees or hears, is an instruction to him in his conduct in the service of G-d.
3. The love G-d for every Jew extends not only to the Jew's soul but also to his body. G-d loves all Jews without distinction; the greatest Torah genius and scholar and the most simple Jew are loved equally by G-d.
4. "G-d is your shadow" (Psalms 121:5) - Just as a person's shadow entirely mimics his actions, so does G-d, as it were, entirely reciprocate our deeds.

The Alter Rebbe teaches:

1. This is what man is all about; this is the purpose of his creation and of the creation of all the worlds, sublime and lowly -- to make for G-d a dwelling in the physical world.
2. A little bit of light dispels a lot of darkness.
3. "One who is satisfied with his lot" (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1) describes a tremendous virtue in material matters, and a tremendous failing in all that pertains to one's spiritual attainments.
4. The Jewish heart is a smoldering coal. The words of prayer are the bellows that fan it to a roaring flame.
5. Rabbi Schneur Zalman's disciples would say: Our Rebbe revives the dead. What is a corpse? Something cold and unfeeling. Life is movement, warmth, excitement. Is there anything as frozen in self-absorption, as cold and unfeeling as the mind? And when the cold-blooded mind understands, comprehends, and is excited by a G-dly idea - is this not a revival of the dead? (see chabadonline.com for a complete list)

ONE WHO IS LOWLY AND CRASS DOES NOT SENSE HIS OWN CRASSNESS AND LOWLINESS. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM, ELUL 20)

It is an empty excuse for anyone to say that the everyday life and conduct in keeping with the Torah and Mitzvos is difficult, and sometimes too difficult, to carry out. For, since a word, and certainly a deed, impacts the very heavens and earth, of what significance can a personal difficulty, however great, be by comparison!

-The Rebbe