

The Case of the Basket

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

"Poverty follows the poor," observed a Talmudic sage more than 1,500 years ago. What prompted his remark was one of the laws of *bikkurim*--the "first fruit" brought by the Israelite farmer to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. More specifically, a law regarding the baskets in which the *bikkurim* were brought.

If you tilled the earth in the biblical Land of Israel, and your orchard grew any of the special fruits with which the Land is blessed--grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives or dates--you were commanded by the Torah¹ to select some of the choice first-ripened fruits, put them in a basket, bring them to the Holy Temple, and present them to the *kohen* (priest). The annual gift of the first fruits to the *kohen* expressed the idea that our material pursuits (whether as a farmer, accountant or graffiti artist) are not an end unto themselves, but exist to serve a higher, spiritual purpose.

Since the Torah makes it a point to emphasize the fact that the *bikkurim* are to be brought in a basket,² the Talmud wants to know where that basket ended up. Did it go to the *kohen* together with the fruit, or did the farmer take it back home with him? Well, it depends. "The rich would bring their First Fruits in baskets of silver and gold, while the poor would bring them in baskets woven of stripped palm leaves or straw." So the rich kept their baskets, while the poor were told to leave theirs with the *kohen*. So what else is new?, the Talmud opines, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer...³

Chassidic teaching, however, turns this adage on its head, showing how a closer examination of this law and its deeper significance actually reveals the limitations of wealth and the advantages of poverty.

The legal principle behind the law of the *bikkurim* basket is the concept of *bittul*, "nullification." If object B exists solely to serve object A and has no role or identity aside from that service, then object B is regarded as an extension of object A. The straw baskets of the poor are thus "nullified" to the fruit that they hold and become an inseparable part of the gift. Not so the gold and silver vessels of the rich man's *bikkurim*. The materials and the workmanship invested in them impart to these baskets significance and identity all their own, apart from their role to hold and transport the *bikkurim*. Thus, when the first fruits of the farmer's land are elevated to the domain of the *kohen*, they do not draw their container along with them.

In our own lives, the "choice first fruits" represents our soul, and the "basket" in which they are placed represents the soul's receptacle--our body and physical life. The goal of our lives--the purpose to which the

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choice fruit is placed in the basket--is that the soul be transported and elevated to become a "gift to the kohen" in the Holy Temple, representing the lofty heights a soul attains through a life of service to G-d.

What about our physical self? Does it, too, come along for the ride? Obviously, the soul's elevation also elevates the vessel and vehicle that served it in its journey. But the degree to which this occurs depends on the relationship between the body and soul--on the degree of *bittul* with which the physical self served the soul's purpose.

Some people lead "rich" lives, embellishing their existence with intellectual depth and emotional intensity. Then there are life's "paupers"--those who simply and unpretentiously endeavor to do what is right, with no thought to the glint and glory of creativity and experience. The ornate gold vessel *versus* the functional straw basket.

Practically speaking, a life is usually not exclusively one or the other. We all have our gold-and-silver moments, as well as our straw-basket times. Certain areas of our lives are richly lived, while others never rise above the purely functional level of carrying out our duties towards our fellows and our G-d.

The rich man's basket and the poor man's basket both serve the *bikkurim* of the soul. But with a difference: the rich man's basket boasts a value and identity of its own, while the poor man's basket achieves ultimate *bittul*. All I am, it proclaims, is a means to transport the choice fruit which I hold to its destination.

Of course, it's better to be rich than to be poor. And ultimately, it can be argued, more profound understanding and deeper feeling motivate us to more positive action. But sometimes we must choose: should I use an available hour to attend a Torah class, or to do a favor for a neighbor?

Therein lies the lesson of the *bikkurim* basket. Opulent baskets are nice. They make the journey more pleasurable and meaningful. But at the end of the day, they do not bond with the fruit to the extent that the straw basket does. A simple, unpretentious deed becomes a vehicle for the soul's fulfillment of its destiny in a way that even the most inspired learning or the most moving experience never can.

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