

Torah Talk - מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Ki Tavo
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פרשת כי תבוא
י"ח באלול תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 26:1-29:8

In this *parasha*, Moshe instructs *Bnei Yisrael* (the Israelites) about the first fruit offering and elaborates on the terms of the covenant by listing the blessings for keeping the commandments and the punishments for disobeying them.

One misconception that many people hold is that prayer did not begin as a ritual practice until after the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash* (the Temple). This *parasha* is one of the places in the Torah that puts this idea to rest. When the people bring their first fruits, they accompany the offering with a prayer. In addition, when they complete their tithes, they also offer a prayer, not only of הודאה – *hoda'ah* (thanksgiving), but also of בקשה – *bakashah* (request) (26:15):

הִשְׁקִיפָה מִמַּעוֹן קִדְשֶׁךָ מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבֵרַךְ אֶת-עַמֶּךָ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֵת
הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה לָנוּ--כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתֵּינֹנוּ, אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ.

Look forth from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Yisrael, and the land which You have given us, as You swore to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The above translation does not begin to capture the full meaning of this verse in the original Hebrew. To begin with, the word הִשְׁקִיפָה – *hashkifa* – which is translated here as “look forth,” means more than just looking. The root שקף – *sh/k/f* – connotes bringing something into focus, as in the word משקפים – *mishkafayim* (glasses), and further implies an understanding of what one sees.

In addition, the word מַעוֹן – *ma'on* – translated here as “holy habitation,” is far more than that. *Ma'on* is thought of as where the שכינה – *shechinah* (the aspect of Hashem that hovers over us, watching us with Divine providence) resides. According

to the Talmud, Tractate *Chagigah* 12b, the *ma'on* is the fifth out of seven levels of heaven, indicating a closeness of Hashem to the people, even more than if God were sitting on the Divine throne, which is located in the seventh level of heaven.

In addition, the clause, “the land which You have given us,” uses the word אֲדָמָה – *adamah* for “land” rather than the usual אֶרֶץ – *eretz*. *Eretz* means “nation” or “country” as well as “land” and contains political overtones. This use of the word “land” means the earth, the literal dirt or soil in which the farmers plant and from which they harvest their produce.

Finally, דְּבַשׁ – *dvash* (honey), does not mean in this verse that substance which is produced by bees. Whenever the Torah speaks of the “land flowing with milk and honey,” it is referring to date honey, implying abundance of both animal and vegetative crops.

So if we are to better translate the verse above, it would read something like this:

Focus [on us] and understand [our needs] from Your nearby habitation of Divine providence, from heaven, and bless Your people Yisrael, and the soil which You have given us, as You swore to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk [from cows] and honey [from dates], [signifying abundance in all of our produce].

Understanding this one verse is an example of why, at MILTON, we make sure that the students can access the text independently in Hebrew and do not simply translate the verse. Were they unable to access the text in all of its richness, they would miss many of the nuances in the original Hebrew which give so much more meaning to our most holy text.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why might the Torah have mandated that a person had to say a prayer out loud when bringing an offering?
- If you were a farmer, what might you pray to Hashem for? Why?
- It is said that any translation is an interpretation. What does this mean? What argument can be derived from this for reading any text in its original language?

