



Thanking G-d as a Group

An Israeli couple who didn't want a Chuppah.

A Twelve Hour Plane Ride

Good Shabbos!

Several years ago, I found myself sitting next to an Israeli couple in their 30s on a flight to America. In conversation, I discovered that they were flying from Israel to undergo a civil marriage. In Israel, you see, a Jewish couple wishing to marry must go through the official state rabbinate—the only way Jewish couples can legally get married in Israel. But since this couple did not wish to undergo a Jewish wedding ceremony, they chose to travel to the U.S. to get married by a justice and then go back to Israel as a legal duly-wedded husband and wife.

That was because the State of Israel recognizes the legal validity of any couple's marriage outside of Israel, regardless of who conducted the marriage. As long as they show up with an official marriage license or certificate from any country, Israel's Interior Ministry will recognize it.

So, when I expressed interest in why they didn't want a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, complete with chuppah and kiddushin "by the law of Moses and Israel," to the extent that they bothered to travel to the United States for it, the young lady explained that since it was not an "egalitarian chuppah," they were therefore not interested in getting married by some rabbi.

A whole conversation ensued (plenty of time to talk on the 12 hour flight), and among other things, the bride complained about the kesubah, the traditional marriage contract.

The kesubah is a Jewish legal document in which the husband binds himself to support and protect his wife, and that if, G-d forbid, there is a divorce, he commits himself to pay her a specific sum of money; if the husband dies, G-d forbid, the kesubah also stipulates that his widow be the first to collect from his estate the sum, or the equivalent of the sum, of the money to which he obligated himself in the event of a divorce—and all before the children inherit anything.

And so, our rankled bride-to-be complained that the kesubah only serves to perpetuate inequality—after all, it only requires the husband to support the wife; the wife, however, is not obligated under a kesubah to give her husband anything!

She thought it was really strange that the Jewish Sages, over 2,000 years ago, established the kesubah so as to protect and defend women. By making it really expensive to divorce your wife, the thinking was that men would then not treat divorce lightly. But she objected to the very notion of a rule created to protect her and women in general.

But as it turns out, the Sages were ahead of progressive society by a good 2,000 years.

It was only in the 1970s that the modern State of Israel enacted a law that said that both halves of a couple had the right to half of the estate created by their legal union. And in the United States, the concept of “food security” for wives came to be only in the 19th Century—and even then, only in cases where the husband was the guilty party in a divorce. But for thousands of years before that, a woman divorcing her husband would leave the house with the shirt on her back—she’d get nothing. And in cases where her husband died,

the children would be the ones inheriting everything—especially if it were a second marriage, where the children from the first marriage would feel no emotional obligation to support the wife of their late father.

So the Sages came along to protect and defend women in such eventualities... and here, this young Israeli couple was attacking this time-honored institution!

I suggested to the future bride that if the issue was so important to her, then on the contrary—besides the Jewish *kesubah* that she'd get, she could sign a document of her own in which she would obligate herself to support her future husband!

But still, she persisted: Why is it that, once under the *chuppah* canopy, the bride must be the one who circles the groom seven times — “it's not equality!” I responded that it's actually only an Ashkenazic Jewish custom, not an ironclad law directly from the Torah. As such, since her fiancée was actually Sephardic, she didn't even need to do it anyway—and besides, as mentioned, it's only a *minhag* (custom), not *halachah* (Jewish law). And in the *minhagim*, there are many differences, minor and major, between Sephardim and Ashkenazim.

So finally, after that whole conversation, she finally said: “Well, now it's starting to sound different!”

Then I asked them: “What do your parents say about your plans?”

Well, the bride's mother was willing to support anything her daughter decided to do. As for the groom's mother, she actually felt it very important for her son to get married under full traditional law.

“Doesn't your mother who raised you, deserve to see you under the *chuppah*? Do it for her!”

The young couple looked uncomfortably at each other and said, “Now

you're making us feel guilty."

And that brings us right to this week's Torah portion.

A Person and a Community

In the Parshah of Ki Tavo, the Torah opens with the words, "And it will be, when you come into the Land... that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground... And you shall put [them] into a basket and go to the place which the L-rd, your G-d, will choose..." And that's the mitzvah of Bikurim. As Rashi comments: "A man goes down into his field and sees a fig that has ripened; he winds a reed around it for a sign and declares, 'This is the first fruit.'" To do the mitzvah of Bikurim, a person needs to bring to the Beis Hamikdash the first fruits that ripened in his crops of any of the "Seven Species," and once there, to thank G-d for all the good that G-d has given him.

Now here, the Sages of the Talmud had a debate: At which point did the Jewish Nation become obligated to start bringing Bikurim? According to Rashi (Talmud, Tractate Kidushin 37b), since the verse itself states that "And it will be, when you come into the Land.... and you possess it and settle in it," it teaches us that "they were not obligated [to bring] 'first fruits' until they conquered the Land and divided it." And when Yehoshua brought the Jewish Nation into the Land of Israel, he took seven years to conquer it and another seven years to divide it (Talmud, Tractate Zevachim 118b). So, until that point, the Jewish Nation was not obligated to keep any of the mitzvos that depend upon full settlement of the Land—like *Shmitah*, *Leket*, *Shikchah*, *Peah*, *Hafrashas Challah* and so on. And Rashi says that even with the mitzvah of Bikurim, the Jewish Nation was obligated only after those first 14 years during which they "conquered and divided."

But, commenting on our Parshah, the Sifri comments on its first word, "*V'haya*" ("and it shall be"), and says that "*V'haya*' means nothing but 'immediately'" — meaning that the very moment the Jewish Nation

enters the Land, it becomes obligated in Bikurim. That means that a farmer who acquires a tract of land, works the soil and grows dates on it, must bring Bikurim from the very first date that ripens on his land—even if the majority of the Nation has not even yet settled the rest of the Land.

The Rebbe explains that both these views have a place in the service of G-d—meaning, they each symbolize a different spiritual concept.

“The essence of the mitzvah of Bikurim is the praise and acknowledgement of the Bikurim-bringer towards G-d for the good things He did for him,” the Rebbe says — and in this there are two categories. The first is when a person personally thanks G-d as an individual. The second, however, is when a person thanks G-d communally, as part of the entire community. There is place for both views.

We see this in daily life. When a Jewish person gets up in the morning, the first words said are, *“Modeh ani l’fanechah”* (“I acknowledge before You”)—a Jew thanks G-d for returning the soul and supplying a new day. Then, during the morning Amidah prayer, we say, *“Modim anachnu Lach”* (“We acknowledge You”)—the same words with a small change that’s really a big change. In the morning, we thank G-d in the singular—but in the morning prayers, we thank G-d in the plural.

In other words, every Jew has the personal obligation “immediately upon awakening from sleep” to thank the Creator for returning the soul—but in doing so, one has not yet discharged the full obligation. It’s only when one prays together with other Jews that one understands that it’s not enough to merely thank G-d for what one has as an individual—rather, “We acknowledge You” (Likutei Sichos Vol. 34, pg. 151 et al).

Make it Your Own

What is the lesson in all this, my friends?

The lesson is that a person cannot live for himself, all alone and isolated, saying, “I saved myself” or “I took care of myself”—meaning, I made sure my kids grew up Jewish and I thank G-d for all the good He gave me. Rather, we must remember that after we get out of our beds in the morning, we go to shul to connect with the community—where we all thank G-d together as one for all the good that G-d does for the entire Nation of Israel. That means that we are taking responsibility not just for the future of our children and grandchildren, but for the entire Jewish community as a whole.

If and when we ever come across a young Jewish couple that does not want to get married by Jewish law, it's not just the groom's mother's problem—it's our collective problem. Likewise, when the Jewish holidays come, it is incumbent on each and every one of us to see to it that at least one more fellow Jew joins us at our holiday table on Rosh Hashanah or on the eve of Yom Kippur—or to invite someone who does not have a Sukkah to have lunch with us at our Sukkah.

For at the end of the day, we are all responsible for one another—after all, while we start with “*Modeh ani,*” we conclude with “*Modim anachnu Lach.*”

Good Shabbos!