

# LOUD AND QUIET VOICES

Category: Devarim, Ki Savo

*The customs of this week's Torah portion seem to reflect the reality of Israel today.*

## The Lebanon Operation

This past week was something really special for Israel and Jews around the world. There was this deep sigh of relief, this feeling that perhaps things had taken a major turn. The operation managed to rebuild Israel's deterrence in a very tangible way.

Everyone in the Middle East once knew that messing with Israel was dangerous business, but after October 7th, that fear had faded. It wasn't like it used to be—suddenly, even a small terror group could bring Israel to its knees.

But this week's events in Lebanon seemed to set things right again. Israel showed, once more, that it has capabilities that no one even dreams of. And with that, people could breathe easier again. Power earns respect, and that is especially the case in a neighborhood like the Middle East. People don't pick fights with the strong.

So, the stronger Israel becomes, the more others will think twice before attacking. And that, ultimately, can prevent bloodshed—on both sides. As the Rambam writes — every single person is an entire world.

## The Lowered Voice

In this week's Torah portion, we come across something pretty unique.

Usually, when the Torah is read, the reader uses a normal, steady voice—not too soft, not shouting—just loud enough for everyone to hear clearly. But like any rule, there are exceptions. Twice a year, the reader is asked to lower their voice. One of those times is in our portion, Ki Tavo, where we find the *Tochacha*—the warnings and curses that Moses conveyed about what might happen if the Jewish people, heaven forbid, stray from the path of Torah and mitzvot.

When it's time for the *Tochacha*, no one is specifically honored with that aliyah. The reader himself says the blessings, and then he lowers his voice when he begins the *Tochacha*. Why? Because bad news isn't something you announce loudly. If, heaven forbid, someone has to share tragic news, they don't yell it in the streets—they speak softly, with care. And so, the *Tochacha* is also read softly. (We do the same when reading about the sin of the golden calf and the complaints in the wilderness.)

However, right at the beginning of the parsha, there's one verse where the opposite is true. The Chumash has an instruction beside one single verse that "it is the custom for Torah readers to raise their voice during this verse."

What's special about this verse?

## The Two Special Mitzvahs

There are two special mitzvahs in this week's parshah that are associated with agriculture.

The parshah starts with the mitzvah of Bikkurim—bringing the first fruits. This was something Jewish farmers in Israel did when the Temple was around, and back then, most people were farmers. As soon as a farmer saw his first ripe fig, he'd set it aside for Bikkurim (Rashi on Devarim 26:2). Once he had enough figs or other fruits from the seven species Israel is famous for, he'd put them in a basket and head to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Usually, the farmer wouldn't make this journey alone. The whole village would join in, and they would march together in a grand procession to Jerusalem. When they arrived, the people of Jerusalem would come out to greet them, and then, together, they would ascend to the Temple. There, the kohen would take the basket from the farmer's hands, and the farmer would recite several verses aloud, offering thanks and praise to G-d for bringing us out of Egypt and giving us a land flowing with milk and honey.

This mitzvah was able to be fulfilled any time from Shavuot to Chanukah—whenever the farmer had time to leave his fields and make the journey to Jerusalem.

Then there is a second mitzvah, the mitzvah of *Ma'aser - tithing*. *Ma'aser* is a commandment to set aside portions of the produce grown in the Land of Israel to support the Kohanim, Levites, and the poor.

The Kohanim and Levites didn't get their own piece of land in Israel, because G-d had other plans for them. They were chosen to be the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people. Their job wasn't just about Temple service—though that was a big part of it—they were also the rabbis and teachers, helping spread Torah throughout the land.

It's tough to be both a spiritual leader and run a farm or business at the same time, so the Torah commands that every landowner support the Kohanim and Levites. Here's how it worked: Two percent of a farmer's produce was given to the Kohen, called Terumah, and after that, ten percent of what remained was given to the Levite, known as Ma'aser Rishon. (The Levite got more tithes than the Kohen, but the Kohen also received other gifts). After giving two percent to the Kohen and ten percent to the Levite, another ten percent of what was left, called Ma'aser Sheni, had to be set aside and taken to Jerusalem.

In the first and second years after Shemittah, this was the setup: two percent to the Kohen, ten percent to the Levite, and another ten percent for the journey to Jerusalem. All in all, around twenty-one percent of your crops went to tithes, which honestly doesn't sound too bad compared to modern taxes!

In the third and sixth years, there was a change in the rules. Instead of hauling that ten percent up to Jerusalem, the Torah says you should give it to the poor—this is called Ma'aser Ani. So, you're still giving the same amount, but instead of a road trip to Jerusalem, you're helping those in need closer to home.

Then, during Pesach following those third and sixth years, a Jew would make a trip to Jerusalem. He would go to the Temple and make a special declaration before G-d. It was like a public announcement that he had done everything he was supposed to with Ma'aser. He'd state that he gave to the Kohen, supported the Levite, brought Ma'aser Sheni to Jerusalem, and, most importantly, gave Ma'aser Ani to the convert, orphan, and widow. He would end with the powerful words, "I have followed everything You commanded me, Hashem" (Devarim 26:14).

Then, he'd switch from talking about what he did to asking G-d for something in return. He'd pray, "Look down from Your holy abode in heaven and bless Your

people, Israel.” The Jew is basically saying, “I’ve done my part, Hashem; now it’s time for You to do Yours, just like You promised in the Torah — ‘If you follow My statutes, I will send the rain at its proper time.’”

And this is where we start hearing about voice-levels.

The Talmud (Sotah 32b) notes that the part where the Jew says, “I’ve fulfilled the mitzvah of Ma’aser” is done in a low voice, almost like he’s keeping it between himself and G-d. But when he gets to the part where he asks G-d to “Look down and bless Your people,” that’s said out loud for everyone to hear!

Why is the declaration of Ma’aser said quietly? After all, the person has fulfilled the mitzvah completely, so why whisper it? There’s no reason to feel embarrassed about doing a mitzvah!

There are two answers, one from the Babylonian Talmud and one from the Jerusalem Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud says that “a person should speak their own praise quietly.” When it comes to the earlier mitzvah, Bikkurim, the focus is on praising Hashem for the miracles of the Exodus and the gift of the Promised Land, which is why it’s proclaimed out loud. But in Ma’aser, when you’re talking about your own actions, a little modesty wouldn’t hurt.

The Jerusalem Talmud gives a different reason. It says the declaration is whispered to avoid embarrassing others nearby who might not have been able to fulfill the mitzvah of Ma’aser completely and therefore cannot say that piece. It’s done quietly out of consideration for others. But when the person gets to the prayer, “Look down from Your holy abode in heaven and bless Your people, Israel,” that part is said aloud—and not just by the individual! According to the Jerusalem Talmud, everyone in the Temple would join in, because asking Hashem for a blessing is something everyone can do together.

## **Our Reality**

As a remembrance of that custom in the Temple, today, when we read from the Torah, the reader raises their voice at this particular verse, “Look down and bless Your people.”

The result is a unique way of reading, which almost never happens in the Torah—we go back and forth between raising and lowering our voice, all within the span of the same Parsha.

I feel like that reflects our reality today. Since October 7th, we've all been speaking in "a quiet voice." The news from Israel has been incredibly difficult to hear, and talking about it has often felt like recounting one overwhelming tragedy after another. But this week, for the first time, we spoke with a loud voice, with strength.

The Rebbe once said that Jews have the power to turn the request of "Look down from Your holy dwelling and bless Your people Israel" into a reality. All the difficult and painful things can be transformed into clear, open blessings (Toras Menachem 32:140). Let's try to make it a reality.