

We are Caretakers, not Owners: Thoughts on Parashat Re'eh, August 27, 2011

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The Sages of Talmudic times often expressed profound ideas in terse, enigmatic statements. An example of this is found in the Midrashic comment: “The world was created in the merit of three things: in the merit of [the mitzvot of] Hallah, tithes, and first fruits” (Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishith 1:2). If we were to speculate as to which mitzvot were absolutely vital to the creation, we might have chosen other—seemingly more important—commandments: e.g. the Sabbath, the laws of holiness, the sanctification of One God etc.

What did the author of this Midrash have in mind? Why did he think that the laws of Hallah, tithes and first fruits were so vital to the creation of the world? To answer these questions, we need to ponder the significance of these three mitzvot.

All three of these commandments are reminders that we ultimately own nothing, that the universe belongs to God. God allows us to be guardians and caretakers of property, and we are expected to uphold our responsibilities faithfully. When we make a batch of dough, we take off a piece. In Temple days, this was given as a gift to the Cohanim, the priests in the Temple. Today, with the absence of the Temple in Jerusalem, we burn a bit of dough as a reminder that it is not ours. We may not use the rest of the dough, until we’ve first taken out the Hallah.

A farmer works hard to bring in a crop. He might think: this all belongs to me; I’ve done the labor; I’ve invested time and money: the produce is all mine. The Torah reminds us: No, it is not yours, it is God’s. One tenth must be given to the Levites, a tenth of the remainder must be given to the poor, or must be brought to Jerusalem to be eaten there.

A farmer sees the first fruits budding on his trees; he has worked long and hard to earn the harvest. Yet, he must designate the very first fruits to be brought to the Temple as an offering to the Almighty.

These three mitzvot underscore a vital fact of creation: the world was created by and belongs to God. We are transient guests here. The Almighty blesses us with property to sustain ourselves and our families—but we must always realize that what we have is not fully ours: it is ours only insofar as God enjoins us to be worthy caretakers.

These three mitzvot point to the ultimate truth—well beyond the realm of agriculture—that all our property and assets are on temporary loan to us from the Almighty. This is not merely an abstract idea, but is a foundation for a wise philosophy of life. It keeps things in perspective. If we think that what we earn is all ours and only ours, we are sadly mistaken; it is ours only by virtue of the fact that God has allowed us to have it on loan. We literally cannot take it with us.

These three mitzvot epitomize our sense of gratitude to the Almighty for what He gives us. They teach us humility and charity. They put life into a spiritual perspective.

In this week's Parasha, we read about the mitzvah of tithing. In commanding the bringing of tithes to the Temple, the Torah states that we are to bring the tithes of our grain, wine, oil, the firstlings of our herd and flock "that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always" (Devarim 14:23). It is precisely through bringing these offerings that we learn to fear the Lord, to recognize God's role as Creator and Master of the universe.

We all work hard to earn income, to invest wisely, to enjoy our worldly assets. When we understand on the profoundest level that all our material assets are simply temporary loans from God, we can live more responsibly and more wisely. By setting aside part of our material wealth to help the needy and to support charitable institutions, we thereby demonstrate our recognition of God as Master of the universe. Tithing and giving charity are not merely acts of kindness; they are fulfillments of practical obligations which God has placed on us.

This theme is highlighted by our making blessings before we eat or drink. Yes, we are allowed to enjoy our food and drink—but only after first giving recognition and gratitude that these are gifts from the Almighty. One who eats or drinks without first offering a blessing is considered by the Talmud to be a thief of sorts. He/she has "robbed" God of recognition as Creator. More importantly, he/she has robbed him/herself of an opportunity for putting material life into a spiritual context.

The Midrashic sage taught that the world was created in the merit of the mitzvot of Hallel, tithes and first fruits. He was pointing to a deep truth that none of us should ever forget.

Angel for Shabbat