



LIMITATIONS AND FREEDOM

WE ALL HAVE THE SAME PROBLEM. IT JUST SHOWS ITSELF IN DIFFERENT FORMS. On the one hand we want freedom: healthy, pure, wholesome joys, the just rewards and fruits of our efforts. On the other hand this quest is beset by problems, which we can group under the heading 'limitations'.

One kind of limitation is the fact that the joyous moment cannot go on for ever, and eventually we have to return to humdrum daily life. Another is that it may seem to take quite a bit of coaxing and prodding of that daily life in order to squeeze out a little bit of joy. Another kind of limitation is that in our looking for human joy and comfort there are also some unhealthy and destructive appetites which have to be controlled. So there are many kinds of limitation, as indeed there are many kinds of goodness, liberation and happiness. So the simple dualism is there, seemingly ever present: limitations and freedom.

There it is, the paradox of life: a combination of wholesome, succulent fruit and - well, let's say, a simple wicker basket in which the fruit is kept. The fruit and the vessel which confines it. Our freedom, and the limitations of different kinds, which give a border to our freedom, enclosing it.

Now, this perspective relates to the opening passage of the Sedra¹.

The Sedra describes an activity which takes place in the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, in which each farmer expresses gratitude to G-d for the blessings he and his family have been granted. The instruction in the Sedra is to take the First Fruits which grow among one's produce, the dates and figs and grapes, to put them in a basket and bring them to the Temple. There the fruit is given to the Priest.

It is a way of thanking G-d, and there are beautiful descriptions by our Sages about the way the farmers would make their way together to Jerusalem, led by flute players². However, every passage in the Torah has eternal significance and, further, a tiny detail can be a clue to an entirely new perspective.

In this case the tiny detail is the fact that, particularly as explained by the Rambam, the basket too is part of the sacred offering³. This is seen most clearly when the person brings the First Fruit offering in a simple wicker basket, which is kept by the Priests⁴.

Why the basket? The succulent fruit is obviously the offering to the Priest in the Temple. Why should the wicker basket be anything more than a casual throw-away item?

Because, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the whole procedure is telling us something about life, about the interaction between delicious fruit and the simple wicker basket which holds the fruit. The Torah image of the farmer and the Temple in ancient Jerusalem is also a teaching about our own lives. It is telling us that the limitation is also part of the offering. The limiting factor is also potentially sacred.

We might read the fruit as the soul and the basket as the body; or the fruit as the joyous "religious" activity, and the basket as the ordinary daily world. The point is that the power of the Torah is to make *everything* holy, through the practical Mitzvot. The simple practicalities, and even the struggles of life, are holy. They too, together with the radiant joys, are part of our on-going connection with G-d⁵.

1. Deuteronomy 26.1-29:8. 2. See Mishnah Bikkurim ('First Fruits') chapter 3. 3. See Rambam 'Laws of First Fruits', 3:7. 4. As explained in the Mishnah and the Rambam, if the First Fruits are brought in a metal (eg silver or gold) basket, this is returned to the owner. 5. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.29 p.145-152.

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SEDRA KI TAVO

THE APPLE TREE

Debbie was in the middle of reading her new book on the couch, a mug of cocoa in her hand, when her brother Jake suddenly ran in, an excited gleam in his eye.

“Debbie, you have to see this,” he said.

“Oh, Jake! What’s happened? What do you want me to see?” “There is the first fruit this year on the apple tree!” Jake said triumphantly. That got Debbie outside fast.

They had been waiting for their apple tree to produce that year’s crop of fruit for a while already, ever since summer had started. They had nearly given up hope. But at last, it had finally borne its first fruit of the year!

“Wow, the apple looks really nice,” Debbie said, reaching up, and touching it with her finger tips.

“Let’s go tell Daddy and Mommy,” Jake said, eager to share their good news. “Yeah,” Debbie agreed. They raced inside and found their parents drinking tea together in the kitchen.

“Mom, Dad!” Debbie said excitedly. “The apple tree outside had its first fruit this year! Come check it out!”

Mr. and Mrs. Rosen exchanged amused glances and followed their children outside.

“Wow, it really did,” Mrs. Rosen said softly. “It looks great. So small and perfect. When it has more fruits we can make apple cake for Shabbat.”

Mr. Rosen looked thoughtful. “You know kids, this week in the Sedra, Ki Tavo, it talks about first fruits.”

“Really?” Jake asked, wrinkling his nose in confusion. “The Torah talks about apple trees?”

His father nodded. “Nearly. It says in the Torah that each year, when the first fruit on a tree appears, you tie a red string around it to remember which fruit it is. Then you bring the first fruit to the Temple as a gift to G-d.”

“So you’re saying that if Moshiach came now, so that the Temple was rebuilt, we would tie a string around this apple and then we would bring it to the Temple?” Debbie asked.

“Well, not quite,” said her father. “First fruits are actually brought only from fruit growing in Israel. And then only from the seven kinds of produce for which the Land of Israel is praised in the Torah: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates... and.. and..”

“I know,” said Debbie, “olives and dates!”

“Well done!” said Jake. “That’s seven. But what about our apple?”

“I know, we’ll eat it with honey on Rosh Hashana,” said Mrs Rosen. “For a really sweet year!”

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