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I Am For My Beloved

We are in the month of Elul, which is an acronym for *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* – I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me.

But would it not have been more appropriate to call the month *Dalul*, for *Dodi li v'ani lo* – my Beloved is for me and I am for my Beloved? This would seem to be a more accurate description, since Hashem, our Beloved, is the One who initiated the relationship with us, the Jewish people.

The reason why it is named Elul – *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* – is because the way we relate to God defines how we perceive the way He is relating to us. Relationships are reciprocal, as King Solomon teaches, "*Kamayim hapanim lapanim ken lev ha'adam la'adam* – As water reflects a face back to a face, so one's heart is reflected back to him by another" (Proverbs 27:19). When we love someone, we feel that they love us back, and likewise, when we resent someone, we feel that they resent us.

This principle applies to our relationship with

Hashem as well. *Ani l'dodi*, if you love the Almighty, *v'dodi li*, then you'll see that the Almighty loves you. But if you have resentment – Hashem, You didn't treat me right, You don't appreciate what I've done for You, You are making my life so difficult – then you will think Hashem does not love you.

The spies are an example of this dynamic. After the spies returned from scouting the land of Israel and gave their evil report, they complained bitterly, as the verse says, "You slandered in your tents and said, 'Because of Hashem's hatred for us did He take us out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorite to destroy us' (Devarim 1:27). On the words, "*Besinas Hashem osanu* – Because of God's hatred for us," Rashi comments: "In reality He loves you, but *you* hate Him. As is commonly said, 'What is in your own heart about your friend, you project is in his heart about you.'"

What you feel about your friend is what you imagine he feels toward you. The same principle applies to God. If you hate Hashem, then you think He hates you. And likewise, if you love Hashem, you will feel that He loves you. That is the meaning of *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*. Therefore, one of the main areas to work on during the month of Elul is loving Hashem, and in turn feeling His love for you. And this week's parashah gives us a powerful tool to accomplish that: gratitude.

Bikkurim – The First Fruits

The beginning of the parashah introduces the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, bringing the first fruits of the seven species for which the Land of Israel is praised to the *Beis Hamikdash*. "You shall come to whoever will be the kohen in those days, and you shall say to him, 'I declare today to Hashem, your God, that I have come to the Land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us'" (ibid 26:3). "Hashem," you proclaim, "I came to recognize that You gave me this Land and the gift of all these abundant fruits."

But that's not all you say. On the words, "ve'amarta eilav – and you shall say to him," Rashi explains that when you bring *bikkurim*, you should actually inform the kohen that you are not a *kafuy tov*, an ingrate.

Why do you have to tell that to the kohen? Isn't it enough not to be a *kafuy tov*? No, you must articulate it and say it out loud. Speech is a bridge from the internal to the external. Speaking something out concretizes your thoughts and makes them real. Therefore, you have to say in the *Beis HaMikdash* – in the presence of the Almighty, to a kohen who lives with the reality of Hashem – that the Almighty has given you gifts with no strings attached. You have to look the kohen in the eye and convince him that you have genuine gratitude. He can tell if you mean it or not, if you are full of joy and think life is gorgeous – or not. And saying it out loud enables *you* to see where you are really holding, as well. There are no more pretenses.

After you state that you are not an ingrate, and you thank Hashem for bringing you to the Land of Israel, the kohen takes your basket of fruit and puts it on the altar. Then, you say out loud for everybody to hear, "*Arami oved avi*, an Aramean tried to destroy my forefather..." (v. 5) – the famous section that forms the backbone of the Pesach Haggadah, and describes how Hashem took the Jewish people out of Egypt and brought them to Israel. An essential part of a Jew's *hakaras hatov*, appreciation, is giving thanks to Hashem for being part of the Jewish people, the one nation that is charged with the mission of bringing morality and wisdom to the world. "You shall rejoice with all the goodness that Hashem, your God, has given you" (v. 11) – including the privilege of being part of this great nation.

Gratitude is the foundation for every loving relationship, including our relationship with Hashem, and it is the first step to tapping into Elul's power of *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*.

Why Curses

The parashah also contains the list of blessings that the Jewish people will receive if they fulfill the mitzvot, as well as the *Tochachah*, the litany of curses that describe the horrific consequences that will befall the Jewish people if they reject God and His Torah. The custom is for the *baal korei* in shul to read the *Tochachah* quietly. That forces us to wake up, pay attention, and really listen. If we listen to the Almighty, we will merit all the *berachos*.

In the midst of threatening the Jewish people with terrifying misfortunes, the Almighty says, "They will be a sign and a wonder, in you and in your offspring, forever, because you did not serve Hashem, your God, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant" (ibid 28:46-47). The Torah is stating the reason for all these terrible tribulations: because you did not serve the Almighty with joy.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Succah* 8:15) explains that even if you fulfilled all the mitzvot, learned Torah day and night, and worked hard on your service of God, if you did not do it with joy, you are worthy of retribution and deserve all these curses. To some people, this may seem like a shocking statement. Hashem, what do you want? I did all Your mitzvot; I worked diligently for you. Where is the justice? All this work, and this is what I get, just because I did not do it with joy?

It is critical to remember: God does not need our mitzvot. He is infinite, perfect, and there is nothing we can do for Him. He created us to give us the greatest pleasure and meaning possible. He gave us His Torah and mitzvot for our enjoyment and benefit. We mistakenly think that we are somehow helping God, doing Him a favor, by keeping kosher and observing Shabbos. And we wonder, "Where is God's gratitude?" We are like the ungrateful child who complains that he has to hold the ice cream.

Life, Torah, mitzvot – it's all for our benefit. Gratitude and joy are the name of the game. If we complain and kvetch, if we think we are doing God a favor, we are missing the entire point of existence. *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*. We have a Creator who loves us, who made us and sustains us every instant. It is essential to remember that the Almighty loves us.

You wake up in the morning and the first thing you say is, "*Modeh Ani* – Thank God I am alive." Do you mean it? Tell it to the kohen. Speak to the Almighty, not to the wall. Don't just recite it as a formula. Recognize that life is gorgeous – and then thank the Almighty! Don't be a *kafuy tova*. Look what He gave you: He gave you life, He gave you a Torah to teach you how to maximize life, and He charged you with a unique mission in the world. And He made you part of the Jewish people, who bring meaning, wisdom, and values to the world

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li. Appreciate how wonderful it is to be alive, how wonderful it is to have a relationship with God, and how wonderful it is to have a Torah. That is real *teshuvah*. Live with gratitude and joy, and you will receive all the *berachos*.

The *shofar* is blowing. It says: Wake up and be real; don't do things as a robot sleepwalking through mitzvot. Feel how gorgeous life is. For the remainder of Elul, when you wake up in the morning, say *Modeh Ani* with real intent. Convince the kohen that you mean it. Thank the Almighty for giving you the opportunity to serve Him. Connect to His love and be grateful for all the good He has given you. Say it, mean it, and it will change your life. *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*.



Gratitude and the Positivity Bias

Psychology has helped us become more aware that how we think influences our feelings and behavior. Imagine a day in which five good things happen to you, but then you step in a puddle and get your shoes muddy. If you were to consider your day ruined, this would be an example of negativity bias. We have a tendency to focus and dwell on negative experiences, even if they're relatively trivial. In contrast, when you think back on your day and your mind focuses on the good things that happened—a kind text from a friend, a compliment from your boss, a relaxing walk in the park—that's your positivity bias in action.

The positivity bias encourages a person to pay attention to the positives in life. Both the positivity and negativity biases influence many aspects of one's life. Focusing on the positive will enhance one's overall quality of life and can improve a person's emotional and mental health.

At the root of a positive attitude is gratitude, the fuel that helps power positive thoughts and actions. The attribute of gratitude is exemplified in the mitzvah of *bikkurim*, the offering of the first fruits of the Land of Israel. This mitzvah is described in this week's Torah portion.

When you enter the land which God, your God, is giving you as an inheritance, you shall take possession of it and settle it. Then you shall take

the first from every fruit of the ground which you gather in from your land that God, your God, is giving you. You should put it in a basket and go to the place where God, your God, will choose to make His name dwell there.

Notice that the words “God, your God” are stated three times. Perhaps this is to emphasize that everything comes from God: the land, the harvest, and the specific place in which God makes His name dwell. This repetition connects all the good to the same, unified source: “your God.” It fortifies our God-consciousness as a crescendo of recognition that culminates in appreciation.

Rambam proposes an enlightening idea regarding the verbal declaration recited by every farmer when offering his first fruits: “And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land which You, God, have given me.”

Sometimes, when living in material comfort, a person may be more prone to haughtiness and lack gratitude. Acknowledging that God is the primary source of one’s success and blessings is paramount to not becoming arrogant. Entitlement and insolence are the outcomes of not practicing gratitude. The bringing of one’s first fruits serves as a reminder to be grateful.

But what if one’s harvest wasn’t bountiful? What if the farmer sees others who clearly have much more? The Torah states that “you shall rejoice with all the goodness that God, your God, has given you and your household.” A person must focus on the good that he or she has.

Lasting happiness is not determined by the amount of money or possessions we have. Many people with large bank accounts are still unhappy. With all of their wealth, they are disappointed, depressed, and feel that they have nothing. People can squander their lives, convinced that they don’t have enough. Isn’t

that a self-imposed curse?

Appreciating the good in one’s life begins with gratitude for life itself. Waking up in the morning means that God has a reason for you to be alive. What is that reason, and how can you best actualize it today?

The unhappiest people are oftentimes self-absorbed. They’ve become constricted by the negative way they perceive their own circumstances. Feeling and expressing gratitude expands us to include and interact positively with others. A positive perspective helps generate gratitude and produces happiness.

Feeling grateful may not come naturally to a person. However, it can be developed, cultivated, and maintained, just like a garden. By emphasizing the good, we’ll come to feel gratitude. A Jew has numerous opportunities each day to practice gratitude and to cultivate his or her awareness of the good. From reciting *Modeh Ani*, “I am thankful before God,” upon awakening, to mindfully reciting blessings before and after eating—and even after going to the bathroom—we’re taught to express our gratitude to God. The thrice daily prayer services—morning, afternoon, and evening—all focus on being grateful. Why such emphasis on gratitude? Because naturally, most of us can forget to be grateful, and then we fall victim to our negativity bias.

The Torah was given thousands of years before the field of positive psychology emerged at the end of the twentieth century, yet it’s replete with daily rituals and practices that epitomize the benefits of positive psychology. Positive thinking and gratitude are hallmarks of Judaism.

The mitzvah of the first fruits contains life-enriching lessons. Here are two to consider:

1. Making a verbal declaration of gratitude enhances the experience,

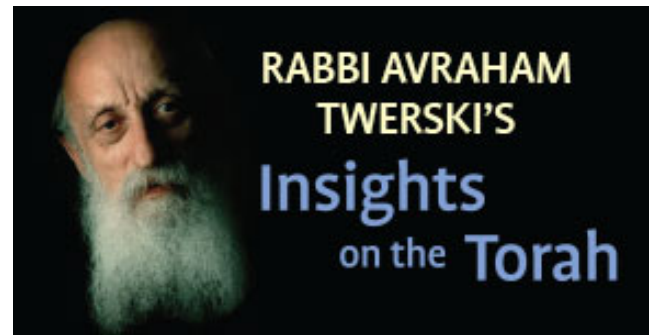
making it more tangible.

2. The Torah encourages one to beautify a mitzvah. The *bikkurim* were a beautiful sight, accompanied by music and song to engage our senses.

The positivity bias generally is stronger in older adults. As people age, they tend to remember more positive than negative information. Perhaps this is due to the wisdom that only age can bring. But why wait until you are older, if you can benefit from increased positivity now? Studying the Torah can help activate and enhance your positivity bias at any age. As stated several times in this book, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was known to say, "Think good and it will be good." Positive thinking is the Jewish way. Choose to strengthen your positivity bias today.

Making It Relevant

1. What are you grateful for today? State it aloud and write it down.
2. When you get together with friends, initiate the practice of having each person share something positive that happened that day or something for which they are grateful.
3. Sanctify your first waking moment each day by expressing your gratitude to God for your life. Then visualize your goals for the day and strive to actualize them.
4. Before relating any negative experience or anything that you feel that you lack, start by stating two things for which you are grateful.



Blessing in Disguise

All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you, if you hearken to the voice of God (Deut. 28:2).

The term "overtake" connotes that someone is fleeing. But why would anyone flee from blessings?

In *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* the Baal Shem Tov's grandson says that God's blessings sometimes come in a form that we see as distressful, and inasmuch as we do not know their true character, we may flee from them. The Torah assures us that the good that God intends for us will come upon us even if we try to avoid it.

This is also the meaning of the verse: "May goodness and loving-kindness pursue me all the days of my life" (Psalms 23:6). We pray that if, in our limited understanding, we try to avoid a concealed kindness, that it pursue and overtake us.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev saw a person running in the marketplace. "Where are you running to?" he asked.

The man answered, "I'm running for my *parnassah* (livelihood)."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok said, "How do you know your livelihood is in front of you? Perhaps it is behind you and you are running away from it."

Infants cry frantically when the pediatrician administers a painful injection to immunize them against dreaded disease, and they cannot possibly understand why the mother who loves and cares for them collaborates with the doctor to hurt them. The gap between our wisdom and the infinite wisdom of God is much greater than even that between an infant and its mother. Whereas the infant cannot be expected to accept its mother's actions as being for its welfare, we should be wise enough to know that everything that God does for us has an ultimate good, even if we see it as bad.



Engraving Eternity in Stone

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it?" (Devarim 30:12)

What mitzvah would you give the Jewish nation as their inaugural task upon entering the Land of Israel?

In this week's Torah portion, we discover that mitzvah. But rather than conquering Jerusalem or building a grand altar, God instructs the Jewish people to erect massive stones and engrave them with the entire Torah in all 70 of the world's major languages (Devarim 27:1-8). The verses repeat this commandment three times, which the Talmud ¹ interprets as an instruction to erect and inscribe three sets of

stones.

To grasp the magnitude of this mitzvah, let's do a little math:

- 600,000 characters in the Torah
- 70 languages
- 3 sets of stones
- **600,000 X 70 X 3 = 126,000,000 characters** (equivalent to 252,000 single-spaced pages in Microsoft Word)

And remember: Every letter must be carved into stone without modern tools or technology. Among all the Torah's commandments, this mitzvah ranks as perhaps the most labor intensive. That leaves us to wonder, why does God choose such a "monumental" task as top priority upon entering the Land of Israel?

The Land of Torah

The Ramban, the renowned 13th century leader of Spanish Jewry, offers two beautiful interpretations:

1. *"It was for the sake of the Torah that you have come [to Israel]."* - The whole purpose of the Land is to carry out the Torah
2. *"As a remembrance so that you may come into the Land and conquer it and drive out all these peoples, [a conquest that will be yours only] when you will remember the Torah and keep all its commandments."* - You will only be able to conquer the Land and its inhabitants when you keep the Torah.

While these teachings illuminate our fundamental mission in Israel, they don't fully explain the specific characteristics that make this mitzvah so extraordinary. We're still left wondering:

1. Why such a Herculean task?
2. Why must we carve the entire Torah into stone?

3. Why three times?
4. Why translate it into 70 languages?

Transcending Transcendence

To answer these questions, we need context from an earlier story of the Torah. Before entering the Land, the Israelites sent 12 leaders to scout ahead and bring back a report. The mission bore disastrous consequences; the spies returned with devastating slander about God's Land. Upon hearing the report, the Jews despaired, cursing God for taking them out of Egypt. God responded in kind, condemning the generation to wander the desert for 40 years.

But why did these distinguished leaders give such a negative report? According to the revolutionary interpretation of the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, the spies wanted to maintain their elevated spiritual state without engaging in earthly pursuits. Desert life offered pure transcendence:

- Manna descended from heaven (no agriculture needed)
- Divine protection clouds shielded them (no military concerns)
- Constant miracles sustained them (no ordinary worries)

Israel meant messy reality:

- Land to cultivate
- Wars to fight
- Commerce to conduct

When the spies describe Israel as "a land that consumes its inhabitants," the Alter Rebbe interprets their words to mean that the Land consumes one's time and energy with worldly demands, stifling one's capacity to study Torah and meditate upon its truths.

In essence, the spies refused to renounce the spiritual utopia of the desert for the entanglements of an earthbound life in the

Land of Israel.

But were the spies so wrong for wanting to devote their time and energy to achieving lofty spiritual heights? If anything, that seems like a holy and noble goal! Maybe we should celebrate these spiritual purists rather than condemn them.

Elevating the Physical

This view represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Jewish spirituality. Think about it: if God wanted pure spirituality, why did He put us in physical bodies in a physical universe? Clearly, He wants us to engage with the world around us! This paradigm appears throughout Torah—almost every commandment demands interaction with the physical world: Tefillin requires actual leather boxes on human arms. Challah needs genuine dough and real ovens. Succah calls for dwelling within a tangible hut in physical space. The Jewish approach doesn't transcend physicality—it transforms it. We use material elements to serve spiritual goals, elevating the physical world through our divine service.

So what does this have to do with the Land of Israel?

The Land of Israel represents where our mission of sanctifying physicality reaches maximum potential. Many essential mitzvot depend entirely on being in the Land: pilgrimage festivals, leaving crops for the poor, building the Temple, and much more. Furthermore, as the spies feared, the Land would force us to engage with the physical world—earning a living, protecting borders, managing earthly concerns. But contrary to the spies' assumption, these tasks represent the highest form of spirituality: bringing heaven down to earth. To embed this essential truth in the people's hearts, God gave them the mitzvah of carving the entire Torah into stone as their inaugural act upon arrival.

A stone represents the coarsest expression of physicality—heavy, dense, lifeless. God's Word—the Torah—is the opposite—sublime, transcendent, divine. Carving the Torah into stone manifests the Divine within the mundane, encapsulating the very purpose of Jewish people in the Land of Israel.²

Universal Elevation

As we mentioned earlier, God commands the Nation to repeat this carving process three times. Looking closely at the verses, the location of the command changes in each repetition: once on the riverbed of the Jordan, the next on the plains of Gilgal, and finally on Mount Eival. Notice a trend?

- Riverbed - Low
- Plains - Middle
- Mountain - High

What's the message? Each place has its own particular and unique potential, but the mission never changes. We must elevate all aspects of the physical world to serve the Divine.

One last detail that we need to illuminate: Why 70 languages? Because to truly bring the Torah out into the world and Godliness down to earth, the Jewish people must become a light unto the nations. The Talmud teaches that humanity divides into 70 distinct nations speaking 70 languages.³ The 70 languages on the stones enabled every visitor, regardless of origin, to access God's wisdom in their native tongue. The message is clear: if the Nation carries out its mission properly, anyone who comes to the Land should sense the tangible connection between heaven and earth and feel inspired to follow God's way.⁴

The stone-carving project served as more than a public declaration—it functioned like a corporate retreat before launching a major initiative. As the nation carved each character

in each language, they internalized every aspect of their calling:

- The act of carving itself embedded the truth that physical action transforms spiritual potential into reality.
- The three locations taught them that no place was too high or too low for divine service.
- The 70 languages reminded them daily that their responsibility extended beyond their own borders.

This internalized mission would guide the Jewish people for generations, both in the Land and throughout their exile.

Staying Grounded

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the Mussar movement's founder, embodied this heaven-to-earth principle magnificently. Before one Yom Kippur, word spread that this legendary figure would lead prayers. Crowds flocked from everywhere to hear him on Judaism's holiest day.

The synagogue packed. The moment arrived. Everyone waited... and waited. But he never came.

They'd later discover that, on his way to shul, R. Yisrael heard a child crying incessantly. He waited for a family member to assist the baby, but no one arrived. Realizing the parents had left their child to hear him pray, he entered their home and cared for the baby until they returned.

The parents had mistakenly assumed they needed to travel to the synagogue to connect with spirituality. Rabbi Salanter understood that true spirituality begins with attending to urgent earthly responsibilities.⁵

Dwelling in the Desert or Working the Land

The colossal mitzvah of the engraved stones reminds us that no spiritual act surpasses one with tangible impact on the world around us. Of course, we must also carve out time to develop an inner spiritual world.⁶ We can only enter the Land after we've dwelt in the desert. But ultimately, our mission requires us to infuse the physical world with spirituality—bringing the heavens down to earth.

As you approach the High Holidays, examine your life circumstances: "Am I in a season of dwelling in the desert or is my mission to work the Land? Where do I need to rebalance these two aspects of divine service?"

If you're heavily invested in spiritual growth—yeshiva, rabbinics, contemplative practices—ask yourself: "Have I focused so intensely on inner development that I've neglected earthly responsibilities? Where do my insights need to become actions?"

If you're heavily invested in the physical world, ask yourself: "Am I bringing Torah's higher ideals into my work, finances, and home life? How can I elevate my daily activities into spiritual service?"

May we find strength to manifest Godliness in life's most mundane moments!

Shabbat Shalom,
Avraham

perfection into the physical world as a gift for humanity. Then, He gave us the mitzvah of, upon entering Israel, inscribing the entire Torah on stone. With this mitzvah, God metaphorically passes us His baton as we accept our divine mission of manifesting His word in the physical realm.

5. His actions reflected the principle in Jewish law that the obligation to care for a child in need eclipses the Rabbinic enactment to pray in a congregation on Yom Kippur.
6. Significantly, before the sin of the spies, the Jewish people spent many months in the desert amidst God's many miracles before entering Israel. Every spiritual journey must end with expression in the physical world, but it's equally important to start by cultivating an inner depth and connection to God.

1. Sotah 35B
2. Rabbi Akiva Tatz points out the contrast between writing and carving. With writing, you take an external medium and put it on top of a surface. With carving, the medium is the message - the very stone in which you carve contains the wisdom of the words carved upon it.
3. See *Bereishit* 10 (the "Table of Nations"), which Chazal interpret as referring to 70 foundational nations (cf. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:12). The Talmud references 70 languages in *Megillah* 17a and *Sanhedrin* 17a. See also *Sukkah* 55b, where the 70 offerings brought on Sukkot are said to correspond to the 70 nations of the world.
4. One last idea: Where else do we see God's word carved into stone in the Torah? The 10 commandments, inscribed by God Himself. With the 10 commandments, God engraved His infinite wisdom and spiritual