



Celebrating our Connection to Israel with Pride and Gratitude

Yom HaAtzmaut happens in the weeks leading up to Shavuot – the time of the harvest during which we celebrate the great bounty of the Land of Israel. This includes the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim* – the Torah requirement for farmers to bring their first fruits to the *Beit HaMikdash*.

Interestingly, the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim* can teach us how to approach Yom HaAtzmaut.

What is most unusual about this *mitzvah* is that when the farmers brought their baskets to the *Beit HaMikdash*, they would make a short declaration, summarizing Jewish history: how the Jewish people came to live in Egypt; how we were afflicted by the Egyptians and called out to G-d; how He answered our cries and redeemed us with signs and wonders, and eventually brought us to the Land of Israel – to the sacred ground from which these first fruits were harvested (Devarim 26:3–10).

Furthermore, the Mishnah paints a colorful picture of the farmers' procession: they did not arrive one by one in Yerushalayim; rather, they would go up in a group, accompanied by music and a whole entourage to

mark the occasion. At the head of the procession, there was a bull decorated in gold. And all the residents of Yerushalayim – the shopkeepers and all the workers, sometimes even the king – would come out to greet the farmers' arrival. Upon arriving at the *Beit HaMikdash*, the *Levi'im* would sing a song from the book of Tehillim (Mishna, Bikkurim 3:3–4).

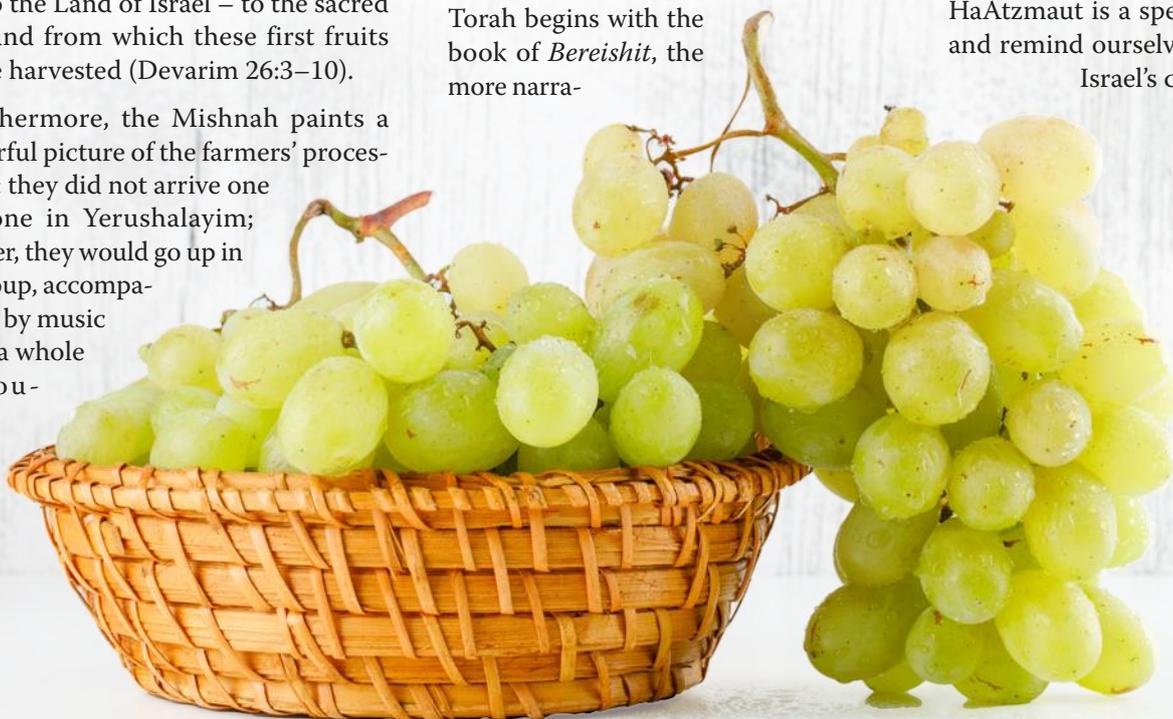
Why all the fanfare? What is so special about the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim* that it warranted such a declaration and such a grand, beautiful ceremony?

The Malbim (Devarim 26:5) explains that the declaration regarding the *bikkurim* was stated as a response to those who would challenge our right to the Land of Israel. He cites Rashi's very first comment on the *Chumash* – the question of why the Torah begins with the book of *Bereishit*, the more narra-

tive-driven portions of the Torah, when really the Torah is a book of commandments (Rashi, Bereishit 1:1).

Quoting from a remarkably prescient Midrash (Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 187), Rashi explains that the reason the Torah begins with the story of Creation is because one day “the nations of the world” will accuse the Jewish people of unjustly appropriating the Land of Israel, to which we can respond – G-d, the Creator of the world, gave it to us. That is our title deed. And we underline this claim by publicly declaring and celebrating our connection to the Land of Israel in the *bikkurim* ceremony.

There's certainly a lesson we can draw here in our own age about proudly and unapologetically celebrating our connection to the Land of Israel. Yom HaAtzmaut is a special time to do so, and remind ourselves of the justice of Israel's cause.



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