

Learning Reverence

Our focus for reflection today is a tithing law in Deuteronomy 14:22-26. Taking a tenth of the year's agricultural produce plus the firstlings of his herds, the Israelite is to present an offering to the Lord in Jerusalem. Read this passage for yourself, then let's join the Jewish sages in their Torah conversation.

"Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always." (Deut. 14:22-23)

Two things caught the attention of Jewish sages over centuries of Torah reflection. First, the tithe, while presented to God, is used for the tither's benefit; i.e., he feasts on his own produce in Jerusalem ("the place"). Secondly, the whole point of the tithe is "so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always" (14:23). Which raises the question: how does this act of feasting instil awe and reverence for God? How do you respond?

The sages approach this issue in a variety of ways, but they all agree that the location—Jerusalem—is significant. Note that the tithing rules allow for the produce to be exchanged for money so as to make the pilgrimage easier for farmers living far from the holy city. Upon arrival in Jerusalem they can then buy the items required for the offering and the feasting.

The sages also focus on the reference to "learn". Were these details part of your own reflections above? What questions do they invite?

Perhaps you are asking, 'Precisely how does the act of offering/eating in Jerusalem teach the Israelite to revere the Lord?'

With imaginative agility, several commentators focus on the intellectual environment of Jerusalem. Says the Sefer HaHinukh:¹ "When each person would offer up the tithe of his cattle, year by year, in the place devoted to Torah

observance and study—Jerusalem, the seat of the Sanhedrin and the religious and intellectual authorities—then the owner of that wealth will go there to study Torah or send one of his sons to study there..."

Says the Ha'amek Davar,² since it is impossible to consume his tithe all at once, pilgrims delay their stay in Jerusalem and "there is nothing else to do there but study Torah...or leave one's surplus money to the upkeep of Torah students."

Rashi and Rambam,³ on the other hand, take the view that it is the Temple of Jerusalem that inspires and has an ennobling influence.

One may object that our text says nothing of Torah study or Temple services; if anything its emphasis is on eating! Which leads Alshikh⁴ to prefer the explanation that the tithing practice calls attention to the true source of one's bounty. By going to the holy city to consume it, it is as if they are feasting "from the table of the Most High." This is what teaches reverence for the Lord.

Then again, Abravanel⁵ offers the most straightforward of explanations of what the Israelite "learns" from this particular offering in Jerusalem. Just the act of being faithful to the precept is what instils reverence. Says Abravanel, it's good practice for a lifetime of fidelity! "Habituation will implant in the soul humble acknowledgment of the overlordship of God."

Continue to ponder this text and converse with the interpretations of the sages. •

1. 13th c education work.
2. 19th c Torah commentary,
3. Rashi: 11th c. Rambam: 12th c.
4. Alshikh: 16th c commentator.
5. Abravanel: 15th c commentator.

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim* (New York, 1995). Scripture: NRSV.

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