

Parshat Ki Tavo
Sharing What's In Your Basket
Alana Suskin - Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track

ב וְלָקַחְתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית כָּל-פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר תִּבְיֵא מֵאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הָאֱלֹקִים נָתַן לְךָ--וְשָׂמְתָּ בַטֵּנָא; וְהִלַּכְתָּ, אֶל-
הַמָּקוֹם, אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר הָאֱלֹקִים, לְשֹׁכֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם.

that thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which thou shalt bring in from thy land that the LORD thy God giveth thee; and thou shalt put it in a basket and shalt go unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there.

This week's Torah portion begins with a reminder of the bounty that God gives to humanity out of graciousness, and simultaneously combines this with an obligation for us to remember that this goodness is in our keeping, but not for us alone. We are commanded to take the first fruits, place them in a basket (*batene*) and bring them to the place where God causes God's name to dwell. When we place the basket before the altar we make a declaration memorializing our history as a member of an oppressed and fugitive people – of a time before we had land and bounty, but instead were afflicted by the people in whose land we dwelt.

Maimonides explains the purpose for this recitation, “the first of everything is to be devoted to the Lord; and by doing so man accustoms himself to being generous and to limit his ...desire for property...Those who amass wealth and live in comfort are more prone to fall victim to the vices of insolence and haughtiness...”¹

It is not rare to see just the sort of behavior described by Rambam, in all times and among all peoples. [Study](#) after [study](#), [year](#) after [year](#), the evidence that wealth turns our hearts in the way that is described in Devarim 8:12-18; that we begin to believe that it is “...my power and the might of my hand that has gotten me this wealth,” and so deserve what we have, and are under no obligation to share it with others who we consider less deserving.

This feeling of wealth as just deserts isn't usually openly expressed, though. It is common to see individuals who defend their hoarding of resources as moral. They may claim that it is to protect their family, or that it's barely enough, and they can't afford to share what they have. Perhaps this is hinted at in the comment of the Mei Hashiloach on the second verse of the Torah portion (Devarim 26:2) “that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you shall bring in from your land that the LORD your God has given you; and you shall put it in a basket – *batene* - and go to the place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there.” He explains that this basket should be perforated so that people can see that its inside is like its outside (*tocho k'varo*). This phrase “*tocho k'varo*” appears twice in the gemara, both times to emphasize the importance of a Torah scholar or communal leader acting in a way that is consonant with the values taught in the Torah, values that the scholar outwardly professes.

It is also could be induced to be a pun of sorts: in Aramaic, one could decide to read *batene* not as “in a basket” but rather “the belly.” The belly can be a source of both fecundity and plenty (when it means “womb,”) or humility and humiliation (when it refers to crawling on one's belly or the ritual of the sotah).

¹ Translation via Aryeh Newman in Nehama Liebowitz's *Studies in Devarim*, p. 258

When our inside is like our outside, when we are willing to act in a way that is consonant with the memory of our own oppression and want, then the belly is fecundity and plenty, a blessing for ourselves and others. But when we overfill our bellies and fail to share with others, then the belly swells not in healthy fertility, but as it does in Numbers 5:22 in the ordeal of the Sotah and is a source of shame and humiliation.



Alana Suskin is an *educator, activist, and widely published writer*. Ordained by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in California, she also holds BAs in Philosophy and Russian Linguistics, an MA in Philosophy and a graduate certificate in Women's Studies and is a popular speaker and teacher around the country. She is a senior managing editor of the progressive blog Jewschool.com, called "The most important thing happening online in the Jewish community today," by noted Jewish sociologists Ari Kelman & Steven M. Cohen. Rabbi Suskin served as Assistant Rabbi at Adas Israel in Washington DC, the first synagogue in the USA to be addressed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Director of Lifelong Learning at Shaare Torah in Gaithersburg, MD. Out of a passionate love for Israel and Zionism, she turned her rabbinate toward Israel advocacy and education with the Zionist, two-state policy organization, Americans for

Peace Now. She has served on the boards of T'ruah, Jews United for Justice, and Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. As an outgrowth of her long-time peace-building and interfaith efforts, she has recently co-founded the Pomegranate Foundation, which sends a pair of Muslim and Jewish religious leaders to churches in areas with small numbers of Jews and/or Muslims, to be in dialogue with and to build relationships across faith traditions in order to reduce anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and increase understanding and friendship in the USA.