

# Parsha Ponders

Vayikra | March 18, 2021 | 6 Nissan 5781

## *A desire to give*<sup>1</sup>

ואם-תקריב מנחת בכורים ליקוק וגו'

If you bring your first fruit offering to Hashem...<sup>2</sup>

There are three *mitzvos* in the Torah that start with the word אם, usually translated as “if”. ואם-מזבח לי, the *mitzvah* to build an altar<sup>3</sup>. אם כסף תלוה, the *mitzvah* to lend money, and more generally the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*<sup>4</sup>. Finally, a verse in this week’s *parsha*, אם תקריב מנחת בכורים, the *mitzvah* to bring *bikkurim*, one’s first fruits as an offering in the Temple<sup>5</sup>. If אם is translated as “if”, these verses are saying: “if you build an altar”, “if you give *tzedakah*”, “if you bring the offering”. Rashi assures us<sup>6</sup> that these are not voluntary *mitzvos*, but rather bona fide commands. Why then are they expressed in an optional way?

One explanation is that these *mitzvos* need to be performed not because we were commanded, but because we want to fulfill them. It’s similar to prayer, where we are adjured to not make it into lip service. It’s supposed to be genuine words from the heart; a sincere desire to come close to our Creator through beseeching for our needs<sup>7</sup>. We can readily see how this applies to the *mitzvah* of lending money. If someone gives a loan to someone in need because they have to, but make it obvious they don’t want to, the person on the receiving end feels terrible. The lender missed the Torah’s message, and doesn’t get much credit for their rote action<sup>8</sup>. Hashem’s desire is that we bestow kindness upon others out of a sincere desire to help people with love.

What’s the significance of first fruits? They bring the owner tremendous joy. After tons of backbreaking work, they can finally enjoy the “fruits of the labors”. A person might think, “Why should I give my first fruits to the Kohanim? They won’t enjoy it as much as me. They didn’t work hard for them.” Someone might end up giving their *bikkurim* solely to fulfill Hashem’s will. But that’s not what He wants. He wants us to want to give them. We can understand this better from Kayin, the son of Adam.

Kayin, for whatever reason, had the idea to give Hashem an offering<sup>9</sup>. Even though he wasn’t commanded to do so, he voluntarily gave from his produce. Our Sages understood<sup>10</sup> that he actually gave from the worst of his produce. Why did he do this? He felt that everything is the same to Hashem. There is no “better” or “worse”. Only Man has such concepts. Why then should he give something better? He was punished for this, because he made a fundamental mistake. Offerings aren’t something

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Darash Moshe to Leviticus 2:14. For a writeup with similar ideas, see <https://parshaponders.com/vayakhel-pekudei-5780/>

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 20:22

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 22:24

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 2:14. Rashi *ad. loc.* brings from Chazal in Toras Kohanim *ad. loc.* that this verse is referring to the *mitzvah* to bring the *Omer* offering. If so, it is surprising that the Darash Moshe explains the verse according to its literal meaning. We decided to go with his reading, as his insights relate specifically to *bikkurim*. Although, at the end he does seem to tie it back in to the *Omer* offering, although seemingly almost like an afterthought

<sup>6</sup> Rashi to Exodus 20:22, quoting Mechilta *ad. loc.*, brought in Yalkut Shimoni *Yisro* § 306

<sup>7</sup> Avos 2:13. See also Berachos 4:4

<sup>8</sup> See Bartenura to Avos 1:15

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 4:3

<sup>10</sup> Rashi *ad. loc.*, quoting Bereishis Rabbah 22:5

that Hashem *needs*. He doesn't need *anything*. It therefore doesn't matter that Hashem doesn't have "preferences". The whole point of offerings are opportunities to come close. The way to do this is to show Hashem what He means to you. This is done by giving of our best, not by giving of our worst.

The same is true with *bikkurim*. The first fruits are so dear to their owner, because they are the culmination of all their hard work. That means they are the best candidates for something to give to the Kohanim, the agents of Hashem in the Temple. Even though the Kohanim don't rejoice as much as the owners with these fruits, that's not the point. The point is to genuinely want to give of one's best. These *mitzvos* best demonstrate Hashem's desire for us to *want* to perform them.

Good Shabbos