

the Torah is challenging us to seek meaning in our Jewish lives

by rabbi judah dardik

Deuteronomy/Devarim 11:26-16:17

Haftorah: Isaiah 49:14-51:3

The classical Jewish tax code is fairly simple - it is a flat tax. Two percent of the crops grown are offered to the Kohanim to support them in their Temple and educational duties as priests. A tithe of the remainder goes to the Levites for the same, and then a final ten percent is given according to a calendrical cycle. In some years it goes to the poor, and in others it is called "maaser sheni" and is eaten by its owners under specific circumstances described in this week's Torah portion.

The rules for dealing with maaser sheni are rather particular. Once harvested and designated, it was set aside and taken to Jerusalem. There it was eaten by its owner, alongside family and friends. The commitment of so sizable a portion of personal income to consumption in the national spiritual center served to ensure that people would take time and enjoy regular spiritual refreshment. Time eating the fruits of one's labors together with family and friends, away from work and soaking up an atmosphere influenced by the Temple and its priests and teachers, virtually guaranteed a boost in the sense of personal spiritual connection.

Although ideally one went to Jerusalem with their maaser sheni soon after that fresh produce was harvested, possibilities for delay did exist. The Torah states, "If the road will be too long for you so that you cannot bear it, because the [Temple] is far from you... you may exchange it for money. Wrap up the money in your hand and take it to that place... and spend it on whatever you wish [to eat]" (14:24-26). One who lived far away could delay their trek to Jerusalem by designating a sack of coins as sanctified in place of the fruits themselves, thus redeeming the produce and taking the money with them later to buy food in the Holy City at that time.

However, redemption did carry a cost; there was a 1/5 penalty applied to the transaction. Clearly the Torah considered this less than ideal, but necessary considering how far away people might live from Jerusalem.

This makes the Talmudic passage in Makkot 19B all the more surprising. There, the Talmud explains the phrase "too long for you so that you cannot bear it" as allowing a person to trade in their produce and redeem it with money so long as they are even **one step** outside the walls of Jerusalem. Wait a second! Why is this less than ideal approach allowed if you are but a single step out? How does that qualify as being too "far from you"?

The Alshich explains that if a person feels that the burden of a mitzvah is so much for them that they had to redeem and delay it, it is a sign that they feel disconnected from Hashem. The concept of distance in these verses is not only geographic, but personal as well. If a person standing one step outside Jerusalem feels that their trip to bask in the glow of a spiritual learning environment is a burden, that they "cannot bear it", then something is dreadfully wrong. At that point the Torah offers "redemption" of the maaser sheni and time to try and work through this slump.

And how does one work through it? While much of the work is defined by the individual factors in one's life, there are a few salient points that emerge from this section of the Torah. First, one must recognize the issue and not fall prey to glorifying it – there is in fact a penalty imposed on the redemption of maaser sheni. Second, to recognize that the Torah guidelines only allow a person to eat maaser sheni when 100% of their person is in Jerusalem (no straddling the wall). When giving another try to a spiritual experience, it deserves our full attention and selves for those moments.

Finally, the Torah is challenging us to seek meaning in our Jewish lives. We are being told that we do not have to do this "just because", but rather that there is in fact a meaningful experience to be had. But know as well that it doesn't come cheap nor does it come easy. No one else can make this magically happen for a person without his or her own effort. We are being taught to till the ground, to sow, to reap and to carry and only then to enter Jerusalem in spiritual celebration.

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