

Parashat Ki Tavo 5776, 2016:

Vidui Ma'aser and the Power of Speech

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Vidui ma'aser (the Declaration Concerning Tithes) is a *mitzvah* that appears in our *parasha*:

When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give [them] to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, so that they can eat to satiety in your cities. Then you shall say before the L-rd, your G-d, "I have removed the holy [portion] from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, according to all Your commandment that You commanded me; I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten [them]." (*Sefer Devarim* 26:12-13, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) formulates our *mitzvah* in the following fashion:

The 131st mitzvah that we are commanded is to make a proclamation of the kindness G-d has bestowed upon us; and that we have separated the obligatory *ma'asrot* and *terumot* (types of tithes). We must verbally affirm our separation from them just as we have physically removed them from our premises. This [declaration] is called *vidui ma'aser*. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "And you must declare before G-d your L-rd: 'I have removed all the sacred portions from my house; I have given the appropriate ones to the Levite and to the orphan and widow....'" (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, 131, translation, Rabbi Reuven Bell, with my emendations and brackets)

In sum, according to the Rambam, *vidui ma'aser* is simultaneously an act of *hakaret hatov* (recognition of the good) that the Almighty has done for us, and a verbal review of the separation and distribution of the various tithes that we have performed.

The anonymous author of the 13th century work, *Sefer HaChinuch*, explains the underlying rationale of, "Then you shall say before the L-rd, your G-d," in a novel manner:

At the root of the precept lies the point that the unique characteristic of man and the great element of his glory is the power of speech; in this he is superior to all [other] species of creatures. For as regards the other functions, other animals also behave as he does. For this reason, there are a great many people who are more fearful of desecrating their speech, which is the great element of distinction in them, than of sinning in action. (*Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 607*, translation, Charles Wengrov, with my emendations)

While we are surely intrigued by this author's analysis of the singular import of human speech, it is unclear as to how this contributes to an explication of the precept of *vidui ma'aser*. Fortunately, the *Sefer HaChinuch* builds upon this notion, and elucidates why the spoken act of "Then you shall say before the L-rd, your G-d" must take place:

Now, inasmuch as the manner of tithes and *t'rumah* is a great [important] thing... it was out of His kindness toward us, in order that we should not sin about them, to adjure us about them to separate them, and then not to have benefit from them through any action; and that we should attest about ourselves, with our mouth, at the Sanctuary that we were not deceitful about them and did not detain anything of them – all this in order that we should be most careful in the matter. (Ibid. underlining my own)

Fascinatingly, the explanations of both the Rambam and the *Sefer HaChinuch* focus upon Hashem's kindness in conjunction with the obligation of verbal attestation of tithes. Maimonides interprets "the kindness G-d has bestowed upon us" in reference to the bounty of the fields. In contrast, the *Sefer HaChinuch* stresses Hashem's kindness toward us, "in order that we should not sin about them, [the tithes]." Therefore, he initially underscores the uniqueness of human speech so that we may understand the crucial role of oral testimony in guarding the integrity of the tithes, which is the very purpose and fulfillment of this *mitzvah*.

The *Sefer HaChinuch*'s discussion of the extraordinary significance of human speech is reminiscent of Onkelos' translation/explication of, "He [G-d] breathed into his [Adams's] nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul," (*Sefer Bereishit 2:7*) wherein he renders the expression, "and man became a living soul," as "and man became a speaking being" (*v'havat b'adam l'ruach m'mal'lah*). In other words, for Onkelos, the distinctive marker that separates

mankind from the rest of Creation is our ability to communicate through intelligently conceived speech.

I believe that the emphasis placed upon the significance and power of human speech by both Onkelos and the Sefer HaChinuch is particularly apropos for the month of Elul and the period of the *Yamim Noraim*. My suggestion is strongly supported by the “*Al Chet*” of Yom Kippur, wherein nine of the 44 statements are explicitly concerned with abusing the power of speech:

For the sin that we have sinned before You with the utterance of the lips.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through speech.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through insincere confession.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through foolish speech.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through impure lips.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through evil talk.

For the sin that we have sinned before You with the idle chatter of our lips.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by gossip mongering.

For the sin that we have sinned before You through vain oath-taking.

(Translation, the *Artscroll Machzor*)

In my estimation, the *Al Chet* is incontrovertibly teaching us that with the great power of speech comes the equally great responsibility to control it, and use it wisely. We can either use speech for *mitzvot* such as *vidui ma'aser*, and as a vehicle of authentic communication with others, or for the panoply of sins that are listed in the *Al Chet*. Elul is a time when we make choices. With the Almighty's help, and through our continuous efforts, may we choose to use the power of speech to serve Him, and to build a better world. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *kativah v'chatimah tovah*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.