



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**KI TAVO / כי תבא**

**SERMON TITLE:**

**HOW TO NOT EMBARRASS ANOTHER JEW**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה זייל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

## **KI TAVO**

### **HOW TO NOT EMBARRASS ANOTHER JEW**

Good Shabbos. Last week we talked about kosher. This week, I'd like to discuss something that sometimes isn't so kosher: Wall Street.

You'll forgive me if any of you ever lost money in one of Wall Street's infamous crashes, but the cold hard fact is, such crashes do occur from time to time. And when they do, everyone looks for scapegoats, for culprits, for someone to blame. We try to find out who's responsible for the financial destruction. Who caused it? And of course, we hear Democrats blaming Republicans, and vice versa. Everyone labels the other as guilty.

In this week's parshah, we read about the mitzvah of Bikkurim, or first fruits. In Biblical times, when the Jewish Nation lived on its own land, every property owner had an obligation to bring the first fruits of his orchards to the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple.

Now, when the landowner arrived at the Temple, he would recite a special prayer, in which he would praise G-d's kindness for taking us out of Egypt and bringing us to "a land flowing with milk and honey" and "building the Temple for us," and he would thank G-d for meriting to bring the Bikkurim.

This prayer had to be recited in Hebrew. It was not a long prayer. But for someone not familiar with Hebrew, it could have been burdensome.

In Tractate Bikkurim (3:7), the Mishnah first informs us that "everyone who knew how to recite [the prayer] in Hebrew would recite, and anyone who did not know how to recite, the prayer would be recited with him." In simpler terms, someone familiar with Hebrew would recite the prayer himself, and someone who didn't would have someone say it with him—the other would utter it and he would repeat it after the reader.

But this led to a problematic situation—people "refrained from bringing" the Bikkurim to the Temple because they were embarrassed that everyone would see that they didn't know how to recite the Hebrew prayer. So the Sages instituted that the prayer

would be recited both with those who knew it and those who didn't—they decided that anyone who entered the Temple, even if he was the most prominent rabbi, would have the prayer recited with him. Why? "So as to not embarrass" those who didn't know how to recite and thus cause them to cease bringing the Bikkurim.

In Judaism, there are many things done so as to not embarrass another Jew.

Until the Talmudic Era, the Jewish custom for funerals was to dress the deceased in fine clothing—but people would be embarrassed to arrange funerals for poor people who didn't leave behind money for fine clothing when they died, as they were too poor to afford them. So their survivors would have to struggle to put together a decent funeral for their dear departed loved ones—but it got so bad that people were literally dumping bodies in the street and running away.

So Rabban Gamliel, the Jewish leader at the time and a very wealthy man, "acted lightly with himself" by ordering that he be buried in garments made of flax, which in those times were the cheapest and simplest clothes. And ever since then, the entire Jewish community has followed Rabban Gamliel's custom of using flaxen shrouds, and every Jew is buried in these clothes.

We thus see that in order to not embarrass a fellow Jew, we compromise on extras such as fine clothes for burials.

Now, every time I meet with a couple before their wedding, I always notice that the future groom is overwhelmed and always asks the same question about the Jewish wedding ceremony: "Will I need to read something in Hebrew?" I always immediately reassure him and tell him that it's not a Bar Mitzvah—he won't need to read from the Torah scroll or recite his Haftarah. Nothing. He'll only have to recite one short sentence, "harei at..." As soon as I tell him this, I immediately notice that the color returns to his face.

The truth is that having a wedding ceremony is a mitzvah in the Torah. And just as there is a blessing we recite before other mitzvos, such as before lighting Shabbos candles or washing our hands before eating bread, there is also a blessing we recite on the act of getting married. This blessing is called "Birkas Eirusin," or the "Betrothal Blessing."

Birkas Eirusin is quite long, and most people are not familiar with it since it is only recited once in one's lifetime. Now, in a perfect world, the groom would be the one reciting Birkas Eirusin, the Betrothal Blessing, because he is the one actually performing the mitzvah. But since most grooms don't know this blessing, it was established that the rabbi would recite the blessing at every wedding—even when the

groom is proficient in reciting the blessing. In this manner, the poor grooms are relieved of the looming burden of having to learn how to recite the blessing.

In this case, we take it one step further—not only do we dress the deceased in simple clothing so as to not embarrass anyone who doesn't have fancy clothing, but here, we even compromise on the reciting of a blessing and the ideal performance of a mitzvah just so we don't embarrass those who don't know how to do it (just like we did with the mitzvah of Bikkurim).

But there's yet a further step.

We're now standing just a few days before the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and we're all familiar with one of the longer Yom Kippur prayers, the "Al Cheit" confessional prayer.

This is a group prayer, which lists all the sins a person might do. For each one, the congregation recites, "For the sin which we sinned before You...", with each individual ruling himself guilty of the most serious sins.

Now, people have commented to me many times, "I didn't do these sins! I feel like I'm lying when I say this!" To resolve this problem, commentators explain that there are indeed Jews who unfortunately have done these sins—and so, if we would only confess our individual, personal and private sins, we'd feel humiliated before G-d and completely ashamed of ourselves. So that's why the Sages established group confession, in which everyone confesses to every sin so as to not embarrass the actual sinners. In other words, the Jew goes to shul on Yom Kippur and rules himself or herself guilty before G-d of things he never did just so another Jew is not embarrassed.

To briefly digress, the Jewish calendar uses a leap year system. Roughly every three years, a full month is added to the year, making that year a leap year. Nowadays, the Jewish calendar is set and we know exactly which years will be leap years. However, in the Talmudic Era, the president of the Sanhedrin, the "Jewish Supreme Court," would convene a special meeting every few years at which they would decide whether to add the extra month or not.

This special meeting would only have seven invited participants, and they were the only ones allowed at this meeting—no uninvited allowed.

Now, the Talmud tells us that Rabban Gamliel, the Sanhedrin president immediately after the Destruction of the Temple, convened such a meeting to add a "leap month" to the year. He instructed his assistants to invite seven scholars.

The next morning he arrived early at the meeting, and was surprised to find eight scholars present.

He immediately declared, "Whoever came here without permission, leave!" So one of the invited participants, a scholar known as Shmuel HaKatan, Shmuel the Small, got up and said, "I'm the one here without permission"—only to not embarrass the one who actually was there without permission. Shmuel HaKatan took the blame upon himself—and Rabban Gamliel said, "Sit, my son, sit—all the years are fit to be made leap years thru you." (In other words, you have proven your worthiness as a true scholar.)

That's why he was called Shmuel the Small—because he humbled himself to prevent humiliation to another. And that's what true love of fellow Jew is—when someone comes in and asks, "Who did it?" and you know that the guilty party is about to get in a lot of trouble and you get up and say, "I did it." This is the essence of love of fellow Jew—preventing embarrassment and pain to another even at your own expense.

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