



The *Bikkurim* Season
By Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Ki-Tavo begins with the *mitzva* of *bikkurim*, or “first fruits.” The Torah requires farmers to bring the first fruits that ripen to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* in Jerusalem, where they give the fruits to a *kohen* and recite a special declaration briefly reviewing the story of the Exodus and the nation’s entry into *Eretz Yisrael*.

The Mishnayot in the first chapter of Masekhet Bikkurim establish that one may bring his first fruits to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* anytime from Shavuot until Chanukah. The sages debate the question of whether the accompanying declaration is made if one brings his *bikkurim* after Sukkot, but according to all opinions, the fruits may be brought until Chanukah. The Mishna does not specify, however, what a farmer must do with fruits that ripen only after Chanukah. It states that first fruits may not be brought after Chanukah, but does not instruct what should be done with fruits that do not ripen before that point. Must they be brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and some later point, or do they not have the status of *bikkurim* at all?

Maimonides addresses this question in the second chapter of the Hilkhot Bikkurim section of *Mishneh Torah* (*halakha* 6). He writes, “One does not bring *bikkurim* after Chanukah, because first fruits that ripen after Chanukah are considered from the following year, and [therefore] one leaves them until after Shavuot.” Maimonides understood the Mishna to mean that Chanukah marks the end of the year with respect to *bikkurim*. Fruits that ripen after Chanukah belong to the new year, and should therefore be brought to the *Mikdash* when the new *bikkurim* season begins, five months later, on Shavuot.

The Ra’avad, in his critique of *Mishneh Torah*, disagrees. In his view, fruits that do not ripen until after Chanukah are not subject to the *bikkurim* obligation at all. The Ra’avad claims that fruits that ripen during the winter months (after Chanukah) are considered *pesolet ha-peiros* – the “refuse” of the fruits, rather than actual fruits. *Halakha*, according to the Ra’avad, does not regard this produce as “fruit” in the formal sense, and these fruits are therefore excluded altogether from the obligation of *bikkurim*.

A number of later writers noted that Maimonides appears to contradict his own ruling in the very next passage (*halakha* 7), where he rules that a separate *bikkurim* offering must be brought from each season’s crop. For example, if a farmer did not bring his new fruits from one season’s crops, he may not use them as the first fruits for the subsequent season’s crops. In discussing this *halakha*, Maimonides writes explicitly that the new year with regard to *bikkurim* begins on Tu B’Shvat, the day which marks the new year with respect to virtually all halakhic aspects of fruit-trees. He rules, “One shall not bring from fruits that formed before the fifteenth of Shevat for fruits that formed after the fifteenth.” The question immediately arises, why does Maimonides here view Tu

B'Shvat as the cutoff point for *bikkurim*, whereas just one *halakha* earlier he established that the *bikkurim* season ends at Chanukah?

The likely answer, as developed by Rav Aryeh Pomarnchik in his work *Torat Zera'im*, lies in a distinction between determining the status of the fruits, and defining the season of the *bikkurim* ritual. As mentioned, Tu B'Shvat begins the new year for nearly all *halakhot* involving fruits. Thus, in determining which fruits belong to the previous year's crop and which should be viewed as part of the new season's yield, we naturally point to Tu B'Shvat as the cutoff point. That is the day that signifies the new agricultural year and thus determines that a new year of produce has begun. But when Maimonides speaks of Chanukah as the onset of the new year for *bikkurim*, he refers not to the status of the fruits, but rather to the season for the *bikkurim* ritual. *Halakha* establishes that the ritual of bringing *bikkurim* does not apply past Chanukah, because, generally speaking, no fruits remain in the fields at that point. The farmer can come to the Temple and give praise to the Almighty only while his orchards are still laden with fruits. Once Chanukah passes, the fruits have, by and large, fallen from the trees, and so even if a particular species happens to ripen at that time, the season for performing the *mitzva* has already passed. The farmer must therefore store the fruits until the new *bikkurim* season begins the following spring.

Thus, in these two passages Maimonides addresses two entirely different issues. The first is the time-frame of the *bikkurim* ritual, which extends throughout the time when the fields are generally laden with produce – from Shavuot until Chanukah. The second issue relates to the status of a given fruit, determining if it belongs to the previous season or to the new season's crops. In this respect the new year begins on Tu B'Shvat, the new year for fruits with regard to all halakhic matters involving fruits.