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KISOVO 1981
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion Kisovo we learn how we are to appreciate the newness and freshness of the world, how there are always new things in the world. In fact, there are still Kedushim new things being written about our tradition all the time. How, though, can we open ourselves up to the world? What is required? The Torah teaches us that when the person brought his first fruits to the Temple he made a declaration and three words of this declaration were Vatoch Hinay Haivaisee which means literally, how behold I have brought. The Rabbis explain that there are three characteristics which are needed in order to see the wonders of the world. The first one signified by "and now" means that you have to have feelings of self-worth, that you are important, that your contributions are needed. In Judaism everyone is important. We cannot sacrifice any individual for a cause. If we could then Stalin would be right. Let a million Russians die to build a canal which will benefit 50 million. In Judaism everybody is important. Jewish law recognizes no distinction. In American law many times it is not who is more right that counts but who is more important. Unless you have a case of over \$10,000 many times you cannot sue in a federal court. In Jewish law the amount of money is irrelevant. What is important is that there is a dispute between two people and it must be settled. It does not make any difference who the people are. Each of us can do things. The second requirement is signified by the word Hinay which stands for joy. We must have a positive attitude toward the world, an optimistic attitude. Life is not a burden. The curses recounted in this Torah portion are stated explicitly to come upon the Jewish people if they do not serve G-d with joy. Joy is the whole keynote of our religion. Every important event in Jewish religion is known as a simcha. The third characteristic needed is that you have to give from your own. There are so many people who want others to give not themselves. I sit on many committees and many times people want to spend a lot of money and I am all in favor of it because if you collect charity you should spend it for charity. However, these people want everybody else to give. They feel that just because they serve on the committee they do not have to give. So many people have wrong ideas about what is necessary to open up the world to oneself. I am reminded of how once I taught school and was explaining sunsets and sunrises and why Shabbos is sometimes early and late. I asked the class why are the days longer in the summer. One of the little boys raised his hand and said, "I know, I know", and I said, "O.K., tell me". He said "The heat makes them expand". In order to open up the world we must have a feeling of self-worth, we must have joy, and we must be willing to give of our means.

To many people religion is a terribly confining thing. To these people to be religious is to be put in a strait jacket. They just cannot stand it. It chokes them. When they conceive of religion they conceive of people who have lost their vitality and sense of adventure, people who are willing to settle for a very safe and dull routine. They look at these people and say, "They might as well be in jail". In fact, I once had a mother tell me, after her son had become religious, that she would have preferred that her son had become a drug addict rather than have become religious. To her mind her son had cut himself off from life by becoming religious and she even cursed me for it.

To these people it is hard to explain that the Jewish religion is not a strait jacket, that by becoming religious you do not close but you open all sorts of worlds of intellect and feeling which you did not even know existed before. Perhaps one of the reasons for this constricted view of the Jewish religion today is because many Jews only know Judaism through translation. They take terms and concepts from other religions and cultures and apply them to Judaism. For example, they conceive of Judaism as a form of Puritanism. In Puritanism if you enjoy something you are being irreligious while if you suffer you are being religious. According to Puritanism it is impossible to enjoy anything and be religious. To Judaism's eyes this concept is ridiculous. Whether something is enjoyable or not is totally irrelevant. What determines if something is religious or not is whether it is moral. Also, since our G-d is a G-d of goodness almost always when you are doing a Mitzvah you should enjoy it. It is a Commandment from the Torah to serve G-d with joy.

In fact, in the Torah portion, Ki Thavo, where we learn about the curses that will befall the Jewish people if they do not follow G-d's Commandments,

it specifically says that these curses will come upon you because you did not serve G-d with joy and gladness. A dead religion, a religion that has no inner joy and happiness cannot sustain itself. It must end up either in perversion or hypocrisy. The Rabbis explain that when Moshe came down from the mountain with the first set of the Ten Commandments the letters flew off as he approached the people who were worshipping the Golden Calf. After the letters, the spirit of Judaism, had left the tablets, Moshe could no longer hold them. They were too heavy and he was forced to drop them. To Judaism's eyes religion is not a dour, doom and gloom thing. Almost every religious occasion in Judaism is called a simcha. Simcha in Judaism means joy.

In this same Torah portion, Ki Thavo, we learn how the Jewish people were to take up their first fruits to Jerusalem and to thank G-d for the opportunity to live in Israel and practice their religion. There are three words here that are used, V'ato Hinay Havaisee which the Rabbis explain to mean that a person is to at this present time immediately bring from his own with joy to thank G-d. All of us have the capacity to act. All of us have the capacity to be joyful, and all of us have the capacity to make our mark in the world. Our religion helps us act, helps us be joyful and helps us make our mark by allowing us to see the many possibilities in this world.

We are not just animals. If we would be just animals then those people who conceive of religion as a terribly confining experience would be right, but we have a spiritual nature as well. Hard work and discipline are needed to achieve our spiritual nature. How glorious is music, one of the greatest spiritual powers available to man, but in order to appreciate music we have to work at it. In order to play an instrument we have to practice for hours. If we want to just listen or dance to

music we must still develop our ear. This practice and self-discipline liberates us. It does not confine us because it opens a whole new world to us. It helps us develop our potential. This is what Judaism does, also. It opens before us worlds of the intellect and the mind that people do not even know are there unless they study our tradition. The great pleasure and joy that comes from hearing a new inspiring idea, from seeing the world from a different perspective is many times exhilarating beyond compare. The deepening and developing of human relations in family and among friends, too, opens other worlds of understanding. They cannot even be comprehended by people who only believe man is an animal.

Many words that we use today in English also reinforce a negative image of Judaism. The word repentance in English means to pen up. When cattle break through a fence you must repent them. We all know the expression pent-up emotions. In Judaism there is no word repentance. There is a word Teshuva which means to reply. In Judaism this concept is entirely different from repentance. You are not supposed to constrict your activities, your worlds. You are supposed to expand them. In Judaism great people, great Rabbis who never did anything wrong, who never stole or killed or cheated have to do Teshuva, too. What do they have to do Teshuva for? They do not have to repent for anything, but what they have to do is to acknowledge that they have not lived up to their full potential. Teshuva in Judaism means, "G-d, I know You gave me the opportunity to glimpse and to see and to achieve in many worlds. I have not fulfilled all my potential. There is so much more I could have learned, so many more good deeds I could have done, so many other people I could have touched, so much more of Your Torah I could have learned". That's why these great Rabbis need to do Teshuva. They have not replied to all the challenges they could have. That, too, is one of the main meanings of the Shofar.

The Shofar, usually the way it is used throughout the Torah, is a symbol of strict justice. When Barak surrounds a city of cowards who refused to send their troops to help fight against the Canaanite enemy he blows 400 Shofars. Joshua blew the Shofar and the walls came tumbling down. However, we are told that when we blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashonna G-d moves from the seat of strict justice to the seat of mercy. How can this be since we have learned every other place in the Tanach that the Shofar signifies strict justice? How can it now have the capacity to change strict justice to mercy? The Rabbis answer that it all depends upon who blows the Shofar. If the Shofar is blown against you from someone outside of you then it signifies strict justice, but if you blow the Shofar, if you realize that you have not opened up all the worlds that are open to you, if you realize you have not reached your full potential, if you realize that you have not touched and helped and developed relationships with all those you could have, then it truly is a symbol of mercy because it allows us to renew ourselves.

Judaism is not a confining religion. It is a religion which believes in growth and self-development. The Rabbis interpret the phrase that we are all created in G-d's image, Teselem Elocheem, to mean that we are created as a shadow of G-d, and that it is our job to flesh out this shadow. The word Tsel in Hebrew means shadow. Anyone who becomes a drunkard or a drug addict or a compulsive gambler or a nymphomaniac or even a perpetual procrastinator or one who has a fear of self-discipline limits themselves. They cannot see or even achieve the great worlds of the spirit that are there for us to appreciate, enjoy and add to. None of us is perfect. None of us has ever reached up to all our potential but we all must strive to do so. Judaism does not seek the easy way. It does not say go into a monastery, avoid the world. It says that approach

is wrong. We must live in the world and we must grow in the world and we must fulfill our potential in the world, but in order to achieve spiritual greatness we need self-discipline. We want people to have joy in life, to have a sense that they can make their mark in the world, and that they can act. Life is wonderful. Our toast is always L'Chaim, to life. Judaism enhances life, all of life, the spiritual as well as the physical. It does not constrict it. May G-d give us all such an enhanced life in the coming year.

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In the Torah portion Ki Sivo we learn about a ceremony that was filled with pageantry. We learn how when the first fruits were to be brought up to Jerusalem this was done with great ceremony. When a first fruit was spied on a tree a string or a piece of straw was tied around it and it was saved and all the first fruits were brought up to Israel. They would be met by the notables of Jerusalem and there would be singing and dancing, the oxens would be wreathed and their horns covered with gold, there would be a great ceremony. This is indeed strange because the whole monetary value of the first fruits was almost nil. In Judaism we are told we have to give a lot of charity. I do not think Reagan would have liked conditions in Israel because before you even paid government taxes you had to give 25% of your crop to charity. 10% went to the Leviites, 2 to 3% went to the priests, another 10% you gave to the poor or you took it up to Jerusalem and spent it on food and drink for your family and friends and the poor, and another 2 to 3% was on gifts, but there was no big ceremony when you gave this charity. It is important to give charity because G-d is our silent partner. Every farmer knows you can work from dawn to dusk and do everything right and still fail. There could be no rain or too much rain, war could come, there could be too good crops and your crops are not worth anything, etc. G-d is our silent partner. Today He does not demand 50%. He only asks that we give 10% to the poor. In ancient Israel 25% of your crop had to be given away, but no big ceremony was made. The Leviite just came and took his share, but here for the first fruits a big thing is made. Why should this be so? It seems to me that the Torah is telling us something very important and that is that we are always to see the new and fresh in life. Life should never be stagnant or dull. There is so much beauty, so many worlds that can be opened up to us. We just have to learn how to see them. The first fruits remind us of this. The world is filled with so many exciting things. I once had a teacher who said I would never understand anything if I could not understand the beauty of a drop of water under a microscope. The wonderful shapes of water

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under a microscope, the laws of physics and chemistry that it exemplifies, there is great adventure in a drop of water. If we will but learn how to discipline ourselves to see all these wonderful worlds that are there for us. Take music. How glorious is a symphony, a concerto, even rock music. We have to develop our ear to appreciate them. Jewish study is different than secular study. In secular study when you are given a problem you solve it and then you go on to the next problem. In Jewish study when you are given a problem you do not stop when you solve it. You are supposed to see if there are any other solutions not just one. We do not need alcohol or drugs to dull our senses. The world has so many challenges. We Jews have always known that and stressed that. That's why even though there are fewer Jews than there are people in Texas, one-third of all the Nobel prize winners have been Jewish. There are only 13 million Jews in the whole world. The world is filled with wonders. We should not be afraid of committing ourselves because we will see wonderful things. There are so many challenges in the world. It is our job to see them. The story about the professor who spent 30 years figuring out why professors are absentminded. When he finally got the results he forgot them. Life is beautiful and interesting. We just have to open our eyes to it.

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In the Torah portion, Ki Savo, we learn about the ceremony of bringing the first fruits, and we also learn about the terrible curses which would come upon the Jewish people if they did not fulfill G-d's commandments. We also learn about a special ceremony which took place when the Jewish people entered the land of Israel. It seems that these elements have nothing in common and it is hard to see why they were all brought together in this Torah portion. However, if we look carefully at this Torah portion we can see a thread which runs through it. The Torah teaches us here that the curses would come upon the Jewish people because they did not serve G-d with joy, with happiness. It says "because you did not serve the Lord your G-d with joy and with gladness of heart when you had everything". This theme of joy is emphasized in the ceremony the Jewish people performed when they crossed the Jordan "and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and you shall eat there and you shall be happy before the Lord your G-d". It also says about the ceremony of the first fruits "and you shall be happy with all the good which was given to you by the Lord your G-d". Happiness, joy, is the condition which Judaism wants its adherents to have. In fact, almost every Jewish religious occasion is called a simcha, a joy. One of the reasons why Judaism is withering in America is because Jews no longer feel that it is a great joy. Instead, they feel that it is a burden. They say "Shevair Suzine Ayid", "It's hard to be a Jew". Once the joy and happiness go out of Judaism it is hard to maintain it. In this Torah portion we learn about the bringing of the first fruits. A big ceremony was made of this. When the first fruit came out straw was tied around it and great processions went into Jerusalem and there was great singing and dancing and the priests met the people. It is hard to see why this should be such a big thing. We Jews believe in paying taxes. In ancient Israel even before you paid your government taxes you had to give 25% of your crop away. We do not believe in supply side economics. We say everybody has to have a floor. After that there can be free economics, but people should not be left to starve. We had to give 2% to the priests, 10% to the Leviites, another 10% to the poor. You also had to leave the corners of your field for them, etc. These first fruits were very minor. Why was such a big deal made of it? The answer, I believe, is because

it teaches us what joy is all about. It teaches us that we are to see the new and the beautiful in things. The fruits that come up this year may be like last years. There is always something interesting and new to see in life. Life is not just an endless repetition of the same experience. People believe that there is nothing new in the world. They lost joy and hope. There is always something new and fresh to see in the world. The world is like a sea. On the surface it looks level, but beneath there are many depths that cannot be determined on the surface. In life by the time you are 20 or 21 or by the time you get married you have already had all of life's experiences, but there is a depth to experiences. Unfortunately, many of our young people do not realize this. That's when marriage can be so beautiful because you can grow in it. You can get a great depth or experience from it. Many young people are coming to me today to get divorced. They tell me that they are bored. I say, "Don't you fight?" They say, "No, we are just bored". I say, "Maybe you should fight. Then you would not be bored". Boredom is one of the curses of the modern world. That's why young people are turning to drink and drugs. The word for happiness in Hebrew, simcha, is composed of three letters and tells us how to be happy. The first letter stands for shir, or song. Each of us should have a song in our hearts. A young married couple should have goals and want to work together for the future. The next letter is a mem which stands for maseh, deeds. You cannot say you love somebody and then not be willing to do anything for them. A parent who says, "Oh, I never see his ballgames or go to his recitals, or help with his homework or talk to him, but he knows I love him" is fooling himself. In order to be happy you have to do things, especially do things with someone you love. Sitting and not doing anything is one of the main signs of depression. Finally the ches stands for warmth. You should be warm, open, willing to take a chance that you might even be hurt. Cold, aloof manners only invite despair and boredom. One of the problems with the Western world is that you are not allowed to sing and dance or cry because you should not show your emotions. You are only allowed to do it if you drink. You should be able to sing, to cry, to laugh. You have to be able to do these things if you are to be happy. The young couple should always be happy.

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We hope that they will realize what happiness means, and that they will always have a song in their hearts, that they will do things for each other and be warm. The story is told about one of the Rothchilds who went to a country province. He went up to one of the farmers and he bought two eggs. The farmer said it would be 100 francs. He said, "100 francs, are eggs so scarce in these parts?". The farmer looked at him and said, "No, just Rothchilds". Each of us should be precious to each other always finding new things and never being bored.

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In the Torah portion, Ki Savo, we learn about the special prayer that was said when each household brought their first fruits. We also learn about the blessings and the curses that will come upon the Jewish people if they do or do not follow the rules of the Torah. Immediately after the curses we learn an interesting thing. It says, "and Moshe called to all the children of Israel and he said to them 'you saw all which G-d did to your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and G-d did not give you a heart to know or eyes to see and ears to hear until this day!'. From here the Rabbis base their saying that not until a person reaches the age of 40 does he understand all the events that transpire around him. It was now 40 years since the people had left Egypt. It was 40 years since they had received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Even in America we recognize the fact that until a person is almost 40 he does not acquire wisdom. Presidents of the United States have to be 35 before they can assume office. It is true so many times people do not appreciate what they have for many years. In fact, many times it happens to me when I visit a house of mourning or I am at the cemetery that people will tell me, "I didn't realize what I had until it was too late". Sometimes it is only after we lose something that we appreciate its worth. Sometimes only after curses befall us can we understand how much something means to us. In this same Torah portion we learn about the first fruits. We learn how a big ceremony was made when these first fruits were taken up to Jerusalem, how there was a ceremony that was conducted that was filled with pageantry and pomp. Why should this be so? After all, the amount brought up was almost insignificant. A Jew had to give 25% of his crop even before he paid taxes. He had to give 2% to the priests, 10% to the Levites, another 10% to the poor or to take up to Jerusalem, and an additional 3% by leaving the corners of his field, by designating his firstborn, etc. The Rabbis, though, tell us that the first fruits ceremony was so important because it taught us how to appreciate life, how to always see the new and the beautiful in it. After all, the budding of crops is an old process. The individual bud is just a new manifestation of this old process. We are to see the new and the exciting in the world. So many times you hear the phrase, "I am bored, what can I do with myself?" A Jew should never feel this way. He should

always see the new and the exciting and the beautiful in this world. This is true for institutions as well, and the institution of marriage is one of these important institutions in which you should always see the new and the beautiful. At weddings I always like to explain why we break a glass. There are many explanations, but the explanation I like best is that marriage is compared to a fine piece of cut glass. A beautiful cut glass decanter will last forever. It does not rust and decay like other things. Every morning the colors and hues of the new day can be reflected in it. Every day it looks new and ever exciting. However, it is very fragile and it can be easily broken if it is not taken care of. I believe that in the prayer that a person said when he brought the new fruits we have recounted what is necessary in order to keep a marriage ever new and ever beautiful. The sentence says, "V'Atoch Hinay Heiveisee, Behold now I brought". The Rabbis explain this to mean that there must be a sense of immediacy and a sense of joy and a sense of adequacy brought from your own. Many marriages fail because each partner does not allow the other one to feel adequate. A person must be made to feel adequate, that the job he does is worthwhile and important and that he can do it. Too often today women are made to feel inadequate. It is alright to blow someone else's children's noses because that requires a Ph.D but to blow your own children's noses is considered nothing. People should be made to feel that they can rise to the task. They should not be knocked down all the time. In fact, I just read an article in the paper that stated that we have it all wrong when we try to raise women as boys. What we should try to do is raise boys as girls. We should teach them how to suppress their aggressive impulses not how to develop them. In fact, this is part of the Jewish rationale in requiring men to do more Mitzvahs than women to sublimate their aggressive impulse. Each partner should be made to feel that they are adequate to the challenges at hand, that they have the ability to overcome obstacles. Secondly, there should be a sense of immediacy in the relationship. Each partner should be there when the other partner needs them. In times of stress a partner should not run away. If a woman just had an operation or had a trying experience at home the husband then should not decide to go on a business trip or if a man came home from a hard day at the office after being fired

or being humiliated the wife should not decide to go to a meeting. They should be there for each other. Finally, there should be joy in the relationship. There should be laughter, even a little kidding. Each partner should be able to laugh at themselves. They should be able to share moments of joy. This is a way that we can learn to keep a relationship ever new and learn to appreciate it not after 40 years but now. After all, not all the Jewish people had to wait 40 years to appreciate what happened to them. Moses knew about the relationship with G-d and what happened to them. Aaron knew. So did Joshua and others. Each of us can and should learn to appreciate what we have now and not have to wait until it is gone or after curses to realize what we have.

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In the Torah portion Ki Sovo we have listed the curses that will come upon the Jewish people if they do not observe G-d's law. This is the second time in the Torah we have listed the curses that could happen to the Jewish people if they do not observe the Torah. Why should we have to repeat them a second time? In the Book of Leviticus in the Torah portion Bechukosai we have listed the first time the curses that will befall the Jewish people. What's more, why is it that the curses are listed in the same Torah portion in which we learn about the dream of the first fruits? We know that there was a great ceremony, a joyous ceremony that was performed when the pilgrims came up from their individual farms to bring their first fruits to the city of Jerusalem to the Temple. Also, we learn, too, about how every three years all the charity obligations had to be taken care of and if your charity obligations were not taken care of every three years the people would have committed a great sin that all the tithes had to be taken out of the house and they all had to be paid. They should preferably have been paid within the same year, but if they were not paid within three years it was considered to be a very terrible thing. We also learn about the special ceremony that took place on Mount Abel and Mount Griseem, about how in this ceremony half the crowd stood on one mountain and half on the other mountain and the priests stood in the middle and some of the Levites and they said, "Cursed be the person who makes light of his father and mother," and the people answered, "Amen," and they all said, "Blessed be the person who treats his parents correctly," and they all answered, "Amen," etc. Why should it be that the curses should be in this Torah portion, that they should be in the Torah portion which contains the giving of the first fruits and where we are reminded that we have to pay our charitable obligations and in the Torah portion which contains this ceremony? After all, there is no chronological order in the Torah, and things

are put together in the Torah for a specific reason. Therefore, it is hard to understand, first of all, why the curses had to be repeated a second time, and, second of all, why the curses are found in the Torah portion which has the first fruits and charity obligations and this special ceremony.

It is true that the curses that are mentioned in the Book of Leviticus in Vayikra are different than the curses that are mentioned here in Devorim. In the Book of Leviticus the curses are mentioned in the plural and they are only 49 of them, while here in the Book of Devorim there are 98 curses and they are listed in the singular. Some people also say that the curses that are mentioned in the Book of Leviticus concern the destruction of the first Temple while the curses that are mentioned in the Book of Devorim concern the destruction of the second Temple. There is a major difference between why the first Temple was destroyed and why the second Temple was destroyed. The first Temple, the rabbis say, was destroyed because society, itself, was corrupt, that murder and idolatry and sexual immorality were condoned and were practiced. Therefore, because these three cardinal sins, according to Judaism, were practiced in the time of the first Temple the first Temple was doomed, but during the time of the second Temple there was no idol worship, there was no murder being condoned by society, there was no sexual immorality. The rabbis say that the second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred. People could not contain themselves. They felt they could speak ill of other people, destroy their reputations, destroy the agreements that they made, violate trust because their cause was so holy, that because they were so holy their means justified the ends. Sometimes it did end in violence, but society, as a whole, did not condone murder

or sexual immorality or idolatry, but the individual in the society felt that he could take liberty with truth and honesty and integrity because the cause that he felt was so important and so holy demanded that he be able to do these things, so we see that the curses that occurred in the second recounting of them in the Book of Deuteronomy in the Book of Devorim concerned the individual. Therefore, they are repeated here because we all have to realize that many times the curses that come upon us come upon us because of our attitude to life, that instead of having an open, honest, sincere attitude to life we engage in trickery and backstabbing and deceit, that these types of curses will eventually destroy society, too, but they will certainly bring unhappiness and destruction to our own individual lives.

Why did the Jewish people stress the bringing of the first fruits so much? Why was there a special ceremony? After all, in ancient Israel a person had to give at least 25% of his income to charity even before he paid taxes. He had to give 2% to the poor, 2% to the priest, 10% to the Levites, another 10% you had to bring up to Jerusalem or give to the poor. You had to give the firstborn of your flocks, the first of the shearing of the sheep, etc. at least 25%, but there was no ceremony involved in giving this other charity, but there was a big ceremony involved when you brought up the first fruits. Of course, the answer to that is because in life many times happiness flows from seeing the potential, from seeing the new, seeing the beauty, seeing the freshness in nature. Many times we bring curses upon ourselves because we are bored and we feel that everything is blah. We become depressed with everything. So we have a new peach, well we had a peach last year, but we do not see the infinite possibilities in this peach. We do not

see the newness, the freshness in it. I remember I had a professor once who brought in a drop of water to class and said the water was the most exciting thing in the whole world, and then he began to explain its character and chemical composition and the way it was formed and its beauty and its shape, etc. There is so much beauty and freshness and newness that all of us can make a fresh start. In order to have happiness we have to have a positive attitude toward life. This is what these first fruits were to teach us. Every day there is something new, new possibilities available.

The second thing that we must know in order to have a good life is that we must be willing to share what we have with others. We must realize that we are part of a community, that we cannot be greedy. Unfortunately, there are many people who do not realize that. There are many people who do not feel that they have to share with anybody. They made it and it is theirs, as if they made it unaided without the help of G-d. We all know that you can be the best farmer in the world and still fail if there is no rain or too much rain. You can be the best businessman in the world but if you happen to open a business at the wrong time at the beginning of a recession or when oil prices are going to drop you are going to lose your shirt. It is not all up to us. G-d is telling us that if we want to be happy we have to also learn how to be generous. Do not be smug and complacent. There are many people who unfortunately feel that they do not have to share anything, that they can have a good life and a religious life without sharing, but that is not what we say when we declare that we have given all our charity obligations. It says, "And you shall say before the Lord your G-d, 'I have removed the holy from the house and also I gave it to the Levites and the stranger to the orphan and the widow like all which Your commandments which You

have commanded me'." In other words, they say, "I have taken out the holy from the house." There are some people who try to mask themselves and clad themselves in holiness but they fail to take care of their neighbor. They are smug and complacent and they are self-righteous and do not feel that they have to help anybody else. They say, "Oh, that person got sick because he did not take care of himself," or, "That person got poor because he spends too much money on foolish things".

In Judaism we are never supposed to look at why a person got sick. We are not supposed to look at why a person is poor. We are just supposed to help them. There is a moral obligation to help a person. We do not look for the causes of why a person is sick. We do not say, "Well, that person went out into the rain without a jacket and, therefore, that person got a cold by himself so we do not have to help him." We have to help him no matter what the reason. If we want to lead a happy and good life then we have to have a compassionate heart, and without having a compassionate heart then, of course, we cannot be a good Jew. You can do all the other mitzvahs but if you are not charitable, if you are not open, first of all, you are not going to be a human being who reaches out to others and you are going to be insulated in your own selfishness and selfishness is not satisfying and selfishness will eventually bring your life a curse.

That is also why it says here, "Hashkeefo - look down, G-d". After you have given these charities you say, "Look down, G-d, from Your holy habitation from heaven and bless Your people, Israel, and the land which You gave us." They use the expression "Hashkeefo", which is usually in Hebrew the language for anger. When G-d looked at the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah it uses the same root of that word, "Shakof". That usually

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is a sign of anger when G-d looks down, but we say that charity has the capacity of turning a life which could be cursed into a life of blessing. It has a way of converting meaningless lives into meaningful lives.

Perhaps that is the saving grace of American Jewry. American Jewry, in many instances, has given up on many of Judaism's basic principles and practices, but one thing that is to the credit of American Jewry and that is that they are charitable. They have helped their brethren. Especially after World War Two they saved hundreds of thousands, millions of Jewish lives. We have helped found the State of Israel. The very act of giving charity has transformed many people's lives and brought them back closer to Judaism and closer to their roots. We all know that charity is the very basis of Judaism, that Abraham is the epitome of charity. Of course, it is not everything because we also know that if we only have charity and nothing else it is still possible to lose your children, to lose your Jewish identity and so forth, but charity is the very basis. Without charity nothing else can flourish, so even if G-d looks down on the Jewish people and sees that maybe they are not worthy as long as they are giving charity there is hope that they will again fulfill all the obligations of the Torah, that it will transform their lives, that any curses that they are bringing upon themselves by their foolish actions can be transformed because of the charity obligation of helping your fellow human being will transform you and bring you closer to G-d and closer to the Jewish people.

That is the same thing with the ceremony that was mentioned at the time of the curses, too. The things that were mentioned during the ceremony were things that are only in the heart of man. In order to transform

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the heart of man we have to see the new in life, the potentials in life, the opportunities of life. Many times when people are confronted with problems they just fade away into the face of the problems. They just collapse. Instead of trying to face the problems by realizing that they are an opportunity, a challenge, that they are not insurmountable obstacles but challenges which can open life up to an individual, unless you realize these things then your life will be cursed because you will feel these problems are insurmountable. So the reason we learn these curses here in the Book of Devorim is to teach us, first of all, that we can transform our life, that it is not just national goals and national events which will determine whether we are happy or not but also our own attitudes which will determine whether we will be happy or not. These curses will come to the individual because of his own actions, and if we want to live a good life we should see the new in things, we should see the potential in things, the beauty in life, and that life is not just an endless circle of boredom. We should also be generous in giving and not be greedy. If we are greedy then we are going to destroy our lives as many very rich financiers have done in England and here in the United States. They had everything but they destroyed their life because of greed. In the United States, which has a five trillion dollar economy, why don't we have a national health insurance? Why are there homeless in the streets? In World War Two we spent hundreds of billions of dollars with a lot smaller economy. We could solve these problems if we have the will to solve the problems. We cannot be obsessed with greed. If we are obsessed by greed then our life will turn from happiness into curses. Therefore, this is why these things are put together with the curses. We have to see the beauty, the opportunity, the freshness, the newness, and we have to face every obstacle with the idea that it

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is a challenge and opportunity and not that it is an insurmountable problem that we cannot overcome.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a boy who was about 15 years old and his father owned a clothing store. He was working with his father and his father said he had to go out for lunch. He said if a customer came in, just look at the jacket, see what it costs, give him his change, and he would be back in an hour. A customer came in, picked out a jacket, and brought it to the register. The boy looked and it said 95 on it so he told the customer it would be 95¢. The customer gave him a dollar and he gave him five cents back, and the customer left. His father returned and asked, "Well, how did it go?" The boy said, "Well, a customer came in and it was marked 95. I gave him five cents change out of the dollar." The father said, "Five cents change? That was supposed to be \$95. How could you have done such a thing?" and he screamed and yelled at the boy. The boy began to cry and cry and finally the father could not take it any longer and said, "Oh, stop crying. We still made 45 cents on it." When people are greedy they turn their blessings into curses. Let us all hope and pray that none of us will act greedy, that we will all be willing to help each other, that we will all see the newness, the freshness, and the potentiality in life and its great beauty, and that we will all look at the problems that face us as opportunities and not as insurmountable problems so that we will truly have a happy life so that the Mashiach will come. Amen.

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In the Torah portion Ki SAVO we learn about the bringing of the first fruits. The first fruit were brought every single year. When one of the seven species that Israel is noted for ripened, a farmer would go down to his orchard and he would take a piece of straw and tie it around a new fig and he would then designate it to be brought up as a new fruit for that season. The same thing went for a pomegranite, a grape, etc. When he went up to Jerusalem there was a big celebration. He was met by the elders and there was music and dancing and singing and the horns of the ox were gilded, etc. It was a very big thing. It is very hard to understand this, though, because in ancient Israel a person had to give 25% of his crops to charity even before he paid taxes. He gave 2% to the poor, another 2% to the Kohen, 10% to the Levites, another 10% had to be brought up to Jerusalem or given to the poor depending upon which year. Also, you had to give your firstborn to the priests. You had to give the first of your challah to the priests. There were so many donations that you had to give, and yet there is no ceremony about the other offerings which are much more substantial. It is true that the first fruits could be up to about one-sixtieth of your crop but any amount would count. You could just bring up a very small amount. Why here was such a great celebration enacted? Not only that, when you came up and you brought your first fruit you made a special declaration. You said, "An Aramian tried to destroy my father. He went down to Egypt and he dwelled there few in number and he became there a great nation, mighty and numerous, and the Egyptians they treated us bad and they afflicted us and they put upon us hard work, and we cried unto the Lord, our G-d, and G-d heard our cry and saw our affliction and our trouble and our oppression, and G-d brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with

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great terrors and wonders and signs, and G-d brought us to this place and He gave us this land flowing with milk and honey, and, behold, now I bring the first fruit of the ground which You have given me, G-d." Then you leave it before the Lord, your G-d, and you bow before the Lord, your G-d, and you are happy at all the good that G-d gave you and to your household and you and the stranger that is in your midst. In other words, you make this declaration, but you did not make a declaration when you give 10% of your income to the Levites. You do not make this declaration when you take 10% of your income up to Jerusalem. You do not make this declaration when you give 10% of your income to the poor. Why is it that you should make this type of declaration? What's more, why do we start this declaration by saying an Aramian tried to destroy my father? An Aramian was Laban, Jacob's father-in-law. Then it says he went down to Egypt because an Aramian tried to destroy my father, he went down to Egypt. What do the two things have to do one with the other?

We learn right afterwards that a person had three years in order to fulfill all his charity obligations, and after you fulfilled your charity obligations you also made a declaration and you said, "I did not eat in morning for many of these things that are due to give to charity." Why do they say you should not eat in morning? What's more, when the rabbis interpret the beginning of this Torah portion, "And it will be when you come to the land which the Lord, your G-d, will give you, an inheritance, you will inherit it and live in it", the rabbis explain that it was only for the sake of the first fruits that the Jewish people were able to live in the land of Israel. If they would not have brought first fruits they could not live in the land of Israel. They would

not be worthy of living in the land of Israel. Why is it that this small amount of first fruits allows you to live in the land of Israel, when this is not said about the other charities that you bring, about the other 25% of your crop that you are commanded to give away? Why is it here that the first fruits were so important?

It seems to me that the reason why the first fruits were so important was because the first fruits thundered against the idea that was held in the pagan world and is still held by many today that life is nothing more than a circle: spring, summer, fall, winter, birth, teenage, middle age, old age, death. Life is really going nowhere. Life is really meaningless. There is nothing fresh and new and exciting in life, itself, that life cannot be improved. In fact, one of the big problems that America had when we sent the Peace Corps overseas is that the villagers were not interested in improvement. What difference did it make if they had a bigger well? So you live a few more year? What difference does it make? Nothing is going to change. Nothing fundamentally is ever going to change. Life really cannot be improved. Life cannot really be made better. There is no concept that life can be improved. Life was just a circle. We do not believe that life is a circle. In Judaism we believe that life is a spiral. True, there is spring, summer, fall, and winter, but we can change things. We can make things better in life. We can also make things worse, but our view of life is that life is a spiral. If you see the beautiful, the exciting, and the wonderful in life you can transmute your own life and make it more meaningful and enrich it and you will then truly deserve to live in the land of Israel because your life will be filled with meaning and you will be able to improve it. Of course, that is

why so many Jews are involved in the arts and sciences because we believe we can improve life and change things. Also so many Jews are involved in movements for social change because we think things can be made better. Of course, some of the things that Jews espouse are bad and they make things worse and not better, but we have the capacity to make things better. For large parts of the world's population they thought nothing could ever change and the best thing to do was to get drunk or get on drugs so you could bear the pain of the world. For large parts of the peasant population of this world that was exactly their philosophy, that there was nothing you could do about life, just bear its problems and wait until you go to the next world and in the next world you will enjoy life, but life here is hopeless. It is just an endless circle. We do not believe in that at all.

That is, of course, why the pilgrims who brought their first fruits had to make this declaration, "An Aramian tried to destroy my father." Laban tried to destroy my father. How did Laban try to destroy my father? By destroying his values, by making Jacob believe that nothing could ever change, that the world was a circle, by inculcating in him the values that the only thing that counted in this world was money. It did not make any difference how you got the money, that it did not make any difference at all, that as long as you are comfortable and can buy your drink and so forth and enjoy your power, then that is it. Nothing is ever going to change the world. Nothing will get better in the world. Therefore, if it means you have to swindle your son-in-law and cheat your grandchildren, so be it. Who cares? That was Laban's philosophy. Laban changed Jacob's salary how many times? He tried to swindle and cheat his own daughters. Unfortunately, you

