



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Bechukotai

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June 4, 2016  
Bechukotai

**Threshers, Harvesters &  
Sowers**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## ABSTRACT

How would you define your personality type? Are you a thresher? A harvester? Or a sower? Perhaps you are all three?

Say what?

In this week's Torah reading, G-d promises: *“Your threshing will last until the harvest, and the harvest will last until the sowing...”* But what does this agriculturally backward blessing actually come to teach us?

A creative and enlightened interpretation by the great Chassidic Master, Sfat Emet, explains this blessing as defining (in the proper order) the three levels of *tzaddikim* and, indeed, the three types of people and three steps to all manner of productivity.

He says that threshing will lead to the harvest, which will lead to the sowing of life and light. For: 1) threshing is discerning between the wheat and the chaff, the digestible and the indigestible, the good and the bad; 2) harvesting is the ability to receive and embrace G-d's gifts of sustenance; and 3) sowing is the act of spreading the blessings you have received.

Your personality may be naturally inclined to one of the above, but with a little work, you can accomplish all three, turning the mundane earth of life into a dynamic garden for the Divine.

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### THREE PERSONALITY TYPES: THRESHERS, HARVESTERS & SOWERS

#### 1. Grass Eaters (Joke)

A wealthy man was riding in his limousine one afternoon when he saw two men along the roadside eating grass. Disturbed, he ordered his driver to stop, and he got out to investigate.

He asked one man, "Why are you eating grass?"

"We haven't money for food," the poor man replied. "We have to eat grass."

"Well, then," said the rich man, "you can come home with me to my house and I'll feed you."

"That's very kind, my good sir, but I have a wife and two children with me. They are over there, under that tree."

"Bring them along," the rich man replied generously. Turning to the other poor man he announced, "You come with us, too."

The second man, in a pitiful voice said, "But sir, I also have a wife and six children with me."

"Bring them all, bring them all," the rich fellow answered with a smile on his face.

They all climbed in the car, which was no easy task, even for a car as large as a limousine. Once underway, one of the poor fellows turned to the rich gentleman and said, "Thank you, oh righteous one, for your kindness, warmth and generosity in feeding all of us, so many poor and starving people." To which the rich man replied, "Glad to do it. You'll really love my place. The grass is almost a foot high!"

## 2. Bounty of the Earth

The bounty of earth is a blessing from heaven. (Grass included.) The grain products we eat, the fruits and vegetables, the dairy and poultry, the fish and meat, are all direct results of earth's bounty. If nothing grew, there would be nothing to eat. Flora would wither and fade, and before long fauna too would cease to exist.

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Bechukotai*, the final portion of the Book of Leviticus, opens with the blessings that G-d promises to bestow upon the Land of Israel if the Jewish people will walk the divine path. Says G-d:

*"If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and fulfill them, I will give you rains in their time, and the land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit."*<sup>1</sup>

A beautiful blessing indeed: the rains and produce and fruit of life, all arriving in timely fashion. Then G-d continues with another blessed outcome of following the divine path:

*"Your threshing will last until the harvest, and the harvest will last until the sowing; you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land."*<sup>2</sup>

Here are enumerated the three basic steps of the agricultural process, which lead one into the other without pause due to G-d's blessing and the consequent overabundance of produce. The threshing of grain – the separating of the wheat from the chaff (that is, the edible grain from the inedible stalk) – will last until it's time for the harvesting of the next type of produce, which will last until it's time for sowing and seeding of the earth.

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 26:3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 26:5.

But more than describing an agricultural process, this is really describing an amazing blessing. As explained by the 11th century Torah commentator Rashi,<sup>3</sup> this means that your “threshing will be so plentiful that you will be occupied with it until the next harvest, and you will be occupied with that harvest until the sowing season.”

From this explanation, it seems as if the blessing is a quantitative one more than a qualitative one. Literally, there will be so much abundant produce that you will be occupied full time, from season to season, threshing to harvesting to sowing.

### 3. Farming 101

When reading this verse – despite Rashi’s explanation – doesn’t something seem out of kilter to you?

Don’t we first have to sow before we can harvest? And don’t we have to harvest before we can start threshing?

Yet the Torah states: *Your threshing will last until the harvest, and the harvest will last until the sowing.*

You needn’t have taken Farming 101 in college to know that this is backwards – sowing the earth comes before harvesting, and harvesting comes before threshing. Why does the Torah change this natural order?

True, the order can be understood according to Rashi’s explanation – that the verse is speaking of the blessing of abundance: a threshing that will last until the harvest and the harvest will last until the (next season’s) sowing. Yet, wouldn’t the verse be clearer if it explicitly stated, that “your sowing will lead to a harvest, which will lead to a threshing that will last until next year’s sowing”?

While we are in the asking mode, let us pose a general question:

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<sup>3</sup> Ad loc from Torat Kohanim 26:6.

As we may have noticed from the Torah readings of the last few weeks, the Torah expends many words on agricultural laws, farming references, and soil directives. Yet, as we stand here today, probably no one here in this room is a farmer, works in agriculture, or even knows the difference between a hoe and a backhoe, or between a spade and a sickle. The word “sow” brings to mind a tailor more than a farmer. Right? So what relevance do these (rather substantial) parts of the Torah have for us in modern times?

Sure, thousands of years ago, in an agrarian society, the majority of humanity worked in agriculture, but today – even with the popularity of farm-to-table consumption and the Whole Foods / farmers markets / artisanal local produce trends – when most of us hear the word “farm” we think of “pharmacy.”

Perhaps we need another, deeper explanation of how these three farming steps – threshing, harvesting and sowing – metaphorically apply to our personal lives.

#### 4. Three Types of Tzaddikim

The great 19th century Chassidic Master, Sfate Emet,<sup>4</sup> applies this verse to three personality types. He says that the three steps of the agricultural process actually describe three types of righteous individuals (*tsaddikim*) whose every fiber is committed to the will of heaven, to cultivating this earth into a flourishing and blooming divine garden.

The first type of *tzaddik* is the thresher. The thresher’s expertise is refining, defining and clarifying the product by separating the good from the bad, the edible from the inedible, the digestible from the indigestible.

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<sup>4</sup> Bechukotai 5643.

This is the work called *birur* – the work of clarification and definition, of sifting and sorting through all the elements, and of selecting the positive from the negative. Just as the farmer threshes in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, this type of *tzaddik* threshes in order to separate the positive aspects of life from the negative.

The second type of *tzaddik* is one level higher. This *tzaddik* is the harvester. The harvester's expertise is the ability to reap the growth, to collect and gather in the bountiful blessings from on high. Growth is everywhere but harvesting it is not so simple; the harvester has the unique ability to reap its blessings.

The third type of *tzaddik* is the sower. This is a *tzaddik* of the highest level because he plants wherever he goes. His actions are seeds that will sprout into trees, bearing beautiful fruit and, ultimately, producing more seeds to perpetuate the cycle of life and light.<sup>5</sup>

Herein, teaches the Sfat Emet, lies the intent of G-d's blessing. Each one of these steps will lead to and initiate the next step: threshing (or separating the good from the evil) will lead to the harvesting of crops (of the divine energy and sustenance) which will in turn lead to sowing and planting (of more good). This is the endless cycle of growth through blessing.

The Sfat Emet concludes that, because whatever exists in general also exists in particular. These three levels of righteousness exist within every single one of us as well. Every Jew has a thresher, a harvester, and a sower living within him or herself, and the goal is for the sifting between good and bad to lead to harvesting our blessings and, ultimately, sowing seeds wherever on earth we may find ourselves.

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<sup>5</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 6, p. 308. Vol. 26, p. 422. Vol. 16, p. 529.

## 5. Deeper Understanding

Now we may read the blessing of our Torah portion with a deeper understanding: *Your threshing will last until the harvest, and the harvest will last until the sowing.*

When you learn to differentiate between what is healthy for you and what is not, what in life is edible and digestible and what is not, what is good and light and what is bad and dark, then this will lead to your harvesting the multitude of gifts that are bestowed upon you by heaven here on earth, which will ultimately lead to your sowing and planting more of the same in every aspect of your life.

This now explains many things:

- 1) why our verse is constructed in this specific order – threshing first, then harvesting, then sowing
- 2) why the blessing is a qualitative blessing in addition to a quantitative one
- 3) what is the relevance of agriculture in our lives today, when but a small percentage of us are actual literal farmers

This blessing may be about working in the field, farming and gardening, but it readily applies to any work we do, any part of our lives where growth happens. The formula may be expressed in agricultural language but the metaphor is as relevant to growing in our personal lives, in our spiritual lives, and in our professional lives.

Our verse teaches us that growth in all areas of our lives is dependent on three steps: First we must discern and sift through positive and negative (**thresh**), then we can **harvest** copious blooms of energy, with the result that we **sow** seeds of goodness and kindness wherever, however, forever.



## 6. Personal Lesson: Thresh, Harvest, Sow

These three steps contain the secret to leading a meaningful, successful, blessed and fruitful life.

The first step in leading an optimal life is to thresh – to distinguish between right and wrong and sift through the good and the bad.

The second step is to harvest. All too often the blessings are right in front of us but we do not gather them in, or worse yet, we think we are incapable of receiving and internalizing them.

The third step is to sow this earth with seeds – to plant goodness and kindness anywhere and everywhere.

This all happens if you do what G-d says: *“If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and fulfill them.”*

The Talmud<sup>6</sup> reads this verse as a plea:

Not *If you follow My statutes*, but rather *If only you would follow My statutes*. Almost as if G-d was beseeching and pleading with us to follow His ways. For this is the best possible way to live, if only we would see that. Thus the Creator begs us to live this way.

## 7. Pesticide Free (Joke)

Yankel’s mother-in-law is coming to visit. Yankel’s mother-in-law only eats organic vegetables from the farmer’s market, unsullied by pesticides or other such sinful evils. Thus, Yankel finds himself one dreary morning heading on over to the farmer’s market to procure organic vegetables for his beloved mother-in-law.

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<sup>6</sup> Avodah Zarah 5a.

Stopping in front of one promising farm stand, bursting with ripe flora of all colors, shapes, and sizes, Yankel inquires: “These vegetables are for my mother-in-law. Have they been sprayed with any poisonous chemicals?”

The gardener answers: “No, you’ll have to do that yourself.”

## 8. Conclusion

This is, obviously, a joke. We all love and cherish our mothers-in-law and all our in-laws. But this joke does convey a seed of truth.

In addition to controlling what substances we spray *on* our fruit – righteously moist inspiration or, heaven forefend, poisonous chemicals – we also control the production of the fruit itself. By 1) threshing, separating the good from the not good, we learn to 2) harvest, capitalizing on our gifts and blessings, which in turn leads to 3) sowing, planting new seeds that result in luscious, nutritious, and delicious fruit.

It is potently empowering to know that the fruit we produce is dependent on our actions. If we go around spraying poisons, our actions will be toxic. If we walk the path of G-d, the fruit will be perfect and beautiful – fit even for a beloved, and discerning, mother-in-law!

Shabbat Shalom!

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