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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

see that here in America today among a certain portion of the people, even our own people, where all they are interested in is themselves and amassing money for themselves. People cheat their wives out of property, wives that they have loved and been with for 40 years. Maybe you could understand that they fell in love with someone else and divorced their wife, but do they have to cheat them out of the property, too? This is a Laban philosophy. In Judaism we say that that is false and wrong. What is important in life is not things but the relationships and you can deepen them. You can have a relationship with nature and a relationship with man and you can find nature's secrets and you can deepen relationships and make them better. You can make life always more beautiful, more exciting. That is the Jewish view. The Jewish view is that if you live a moral and decent life you are going to have a much better life. Your relationships are going to be better and stronger. You will see the exciting things in life. Every day you can see new things in the relationships, every day you can find new things in science, every day you can see new things in nature. There is more beautiful music to create. There are wonders in the world. I remember I once had a chemistry teacher who brought in a bunch of buffalo chips. We looked askance and even turned up our noses a little bit. It smelled a little bit. He said, "This is the most exciting thing in the whole world," and for the whole semester he proved it. He proved about all the chemical composition and biology and everything else. In fact, he won a very great prize for this. I had another professor who worked on a similar project and won a Nobel Prize. When it comes to life there are so many things we can learn.

Laban tried to cheat our father. All he was interested in was money and power, no matter how he gained it, and that was what forced us

to go down to Egypt because he influenced his grandchildren. Jacob tried to prevent it by leaving, but it was too late. His children had already been influenced, and why is it that they sold Joseph into slavery, which was a cause of their own enslavement in Egypt? It was because they were afraid he would have too much power, too much money. He got the coat of many colors, the striped coat, which then signified money and power, etc. We were forced to go to Egypt where we did not have any money or any power.

Then we learn about what the real things in life are. Yes, when it comes to life there is great beauty. Yes, there is tragedy, too. That is why we are not supposed to eat these special foods that went up to Jerusalem. We are not allowed to eat them in mourning because there are tragedies in life, but we should not dwell on them. We should look at the good things in life. Yes, we will have to overcome the tragedies, but we can overcome the tragedies if we look at the beauties in life. In life we should never be bored or filled with ennui because there are so many exciting things to see and learn, so many more beautiful things to appreciate. They are there. That is what the Bikurim said. The Bikurim come every single year, but every year they are different and every year there is more things we can learn and more insight we can gain into even the fruits and vegetables that we grow. Every year we can use them to deepen our relationship with others. Life can be very beautiful and exciting but it is up to us to make it beautiful and exciting. We can dwell on the tragedies of the past, wallow in them and be defeated, or we can look at the beauties in nature and relationships and go on and achieve and do great things. We create ourselves beautiful things for future generations.

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I am reminded of the story they tell about a new game that came out. It is called S & L Monopoly. What you might ask is the difference between S & L Monopoly and regular Monopoly? Well, in S & L Monopoly you buy all the hotels and properties and houses with other people's money, not with your own. You cannot appreciate life, you cannot see life's beauty, you cannot see the newness and freshness in life, the exciting aspects unless you do it yourself. If you wallow in tragedy, if you do not approach life with open eyes and an eagerness to learn then you are in trouble. The Sasover Rabbi said that the greatest sin in Judaism is depression. The greatest sin in Judaism is to give up hope. In life there is always hope. There is always newness and freshness. If we will always appreciate that then we will lead good lives and decent lives, exciting lives, interesting lives and we will truly then be worthy, as the Torah said, of remaining in the land of Israel. Because of the Bikurim we will truly be worthy of bringing the Mashiach. May He come soon. Amen.

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In the Torah portion Ki Sovo we learn about the terrible curses that are going to come upon the Jewish people if they did not follow G-d's ways. Unfortunately, we have seen all these curses occur even in our own generation just 50 years ago during the Holocaust. It is interesting to note that immediately after we learn about the curses it says, "These are the words of the Covenant that G-d commanded Moshe to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab besides the Covenant that He made with them in Choraiv." Choraiv, of course, is Mount Sinai. The Jewish people, before they entered the land of Israel, renewed the Covenant. There is a difference between a contract and a covenant. A contract states that I am obligated to do certain things if the party with whom I am making the contract does the things that he is supposed to do, and if I do not do what I am supposed to do he does not have to do what he is supposed to do, and vice versa. A contract, then, is dependent upon whether or not each of the parties fulfills the conditions in the contract. That is different than a covenant. A covenant means that we have a relationship no matter whether or not each of us fulfills our side of the bargain. As long as one of the parties is still alive, then that covenant exists and will always exist. This is similar to the relationship that a parent has with a child. A parent always has a responsibility to that child and the child always has a responsibility to the child as long as the child or the parent lives. In fact, even afterwards there are certain duties and obligations that are still incumbent upon a child for the parent and a parent for the child. Many times, of course, if a child will disappoint us by going into the wrong path we still are obligated to help them. If a child many times goes into drugs or alcohol then we help them many times by not giving them any money so that they cannot use it for those drugs and alcohol so that they will be willing to seek treatment and then we have to provide the treatment for them. In fact, the rabbis make it very clear that when it says in the Ten Commandments, "Honor your mother and father" it does not just mean that you should give your father a seat of honor or that you should make sure that your mother and father always get Mother's Day

cards or Father's Day cards or that you always call them regularly. It means that you have to physically support your parents when they can no longer support themselves, that you have an obligation to make sure that your parents have food and clothing and shelter. That is what it means to honor your father and mother. It is a covenantal relationship between a parent and a child, and that is the same type of relationship that G-d has with us when we speak about a bris. A bris is more than a contract. A bris is a covenant, and G-d assures us that no matter how we act He will always have a relationship with us. It says G-d is eternal. This relationship is eternal, that G-d will always see to it that the Jewish people exist since G-d, Himself, is eternal.

We stress this immediately after we read about these terrible curses so the Jewish people should never feel that they are abandoned by G-d. It is interesting to note that in the Shacharis this morning we quote from the Torah. When it says, "They shall observe the sons of Israel the Sabbath to do the Sabbath for their generations as a Bris Olom, as an eternal treaty, an eternal covenant, between Me and the sons of Israel. This is the sign of the covenant." Notice that when it is written in the Torah it is written once without the letter Vahv. The Vilner Gaon says that it does that on purpose because Olom in Hebrew has several meanings. It just does not mean like it means in English world. The world Olom in Hebrew also means to be hidden. Therefore, many times the covenant is hidden. Many times the Jewish people do not want to observe the Sabbath, do not want to observe the sign of the covenant, so many times it seems that the covenant is hidden, but the covenant is never abrogated. The covenant is always there. We will always see that the Jewish people will exist when the Jewish people always have an opportunity to return to the moral and to the decent ways. In fact, we all know that the rest of the world considers the Jewish people to be a covenant people, and they look at us as a representative of morality and the Ten Commandments in the world. That's why when Hitler said what he said and he postulated his theorums he specifically

sought us out to destroy us because he said openly, "I hate the Jewish people with their semitic G-d who has His thou shalt and His thou shalt." The Jewish people have throughout the ages contributed so much to the world. WE have contributed so much to the world by giving the concepts of morality, of the Ten Commandments, the concept of the Sabbath, the concept of welfare programs, of making sure that we help the poor.

On fact, in this week's Torah portion we learn about the bringing of the first fruits, and the rabbis all ask the question, what's so great about bringing these first fruits? Why were these first fruits brought with such great ceremony and pomp? They would just bring a little bit of fruit up to the Temple and they would be met by all the priests and there would be a whole retinue of important officials and bands and the oxen's horns would be gilded with gold when actually a Jewish person had to give 25% of his income away even before he paid taxes. First of all he had to give 2% to the poor by leaving the corners of his field. He had to give another 2% to the priests. He had to give another 10% to the Levites. Then he had to give on the third and sixth year another 10% to the poor. On the first and second year and on the fourth and fifth year of the seven year cycle he would have to take 10% of his income up to Jerusalem. He would have to spend it on food and drink and, of course, he could not spend it all on food and drink for himself so he had to share it with his family and his friends. In fact, that is even why today when a Jew has a simcha, a joyful occasion, that what we do is we share food. This is not true of all religious groups. That's because of this second tithe that had to be brought and also the sacrificial system, itself. Very little of most sacrifices were put on the altar, just a few drops of blood and some of the suet, the fatty part, but the rest was all eaten by either the priests or the people, themselves, with their friends and relatives. So it is hard to understand why there was such a big ceremony involved with the bringing of the first fruit. After all, a Jew also had to give the first of his challah.

He had to give the offering of his firstborn of the cattle, etc. Why was this singled out?

The rabbis say because this was a symbol of what happens when the covenant gets dim, and we see today in the world that Israel is being challenged all the time whether we should be able to keep the land of Israel even though it was covenanted to us, whether the Jewish people should be allowed to continue their various practices in different parts of the world where we have been challenged in the past and where we will continue to be challenged now, and many Jews, themselves, seem to be abandoning the covenant with our high intermarriage rate and our high acculturation and assimilation rate. It is hard to understand how this covenant can be reinvigorated, but the rabbis in this week's Torah portion tell us it can be. What is the secret for it? The secret is the first fruits, that there is always so much new and so much interesting in the world that we can find out, and there are so many new avenues we can find in our own religion that apply to the world which allows the world to benefit from the Jewish people. The Jewish people have not given up teaching the world all it has to know about Jewish principles. The world still needs the principles of Judaism. It was we who stressed education first. It was we who stressed the importance of self-control and discipline in what we eat, etc. It was we who taught the world that they had to have adequate labor laws and treat people with dignity, and there is still so much more that we have to teach the world. The world needs Judaism. We have to remain Jews not just so Judaism will survive, but that the world needs to learn the messages of Judaism, and what we are called upon to do is to look once again into our sources. The rabbis say in this Torah portion it is not the mitzvah of bringing the new fruits which is stressed because, after all, in the Torah portion Mishpatim which is found in the Book of Shmos, or the Book of Exodus, we learn there about bringing the first fruits, but what is stressed here in this Torah portion is the fact that we had to make a declaration when we brought these first fruits. We had

to say, "An Aramian tried to destroy my father and he went down to Egypt and he dwelt there in a few number and he became there a great nation mighty and numerous and the Egyptians afflicted us and they gave upon us hard work and that G-d took us out of Egypt and brought us to this good land." In other words, the important thing here was that in spite of all the problems that the Jewish people faces we should realize that we can overcome them and we can bring new fruits to the world. We can bring new insights to the world if we look into our sources of our religion and we can see that many times when the covenant is dim it can be reignited. It can once again flourish so that the Jews, themselves, want to uphold it and that the world, itself, will realize how much they need it and this is why we make this declaration because there are two great difficulties that we Jews have always faced throughout the ages. The first difficulty is, of course, the difficulty of Laban, who was the Aramian who tried to destroy our father, Jacob. He wanted to make Jacob dependent upon him. He wanted to make Jacob like him. He wanted Jacob to surrender his ideals. He wanted Jacob to be exactly like him in the way he acted in business where he was swindling people. He wanted him to adopt his attitude toward life generally about the way that he would treat other people. He did not want to physically destroy Jacob. He wanted to just change Jacob so that Jacob would become like him in all respects. That, of course, is a great test that Jews face today and many of them are assimilating because they say it is so much easier to assimilate. Why do we have to stay Jews? Let's be like everybody else. When the first generation came to this country they really did not have much of a choice many times. It was not that if they would keep Shabbos they would earn \$9000 a year and if they did not they would earn \$10,000. If they kept Shabbos they would earn zero, so many of them had to give up Shabbos. Many other principles of Jewish life we see that Jews have surrendered because it is better, we can make more money, we need to integrate into the community around us and so what if we become exactly like them? Well, if you become exactly

like them then you lose the Jewish message and the world loses, too, and you quickly assimilate and acculturate.

The second great danger is that the Jewish people after they help many, many nations that these nations turn on them, like Egypt did. Here Joseph, the Viceroy of Egypt, saved Egypt and what did Egypt do? It turned on the Jewish people. In our own day we saw Germany turn on the Jewish people. We have seen this throughout history. We know today that Israel has embarked on delicate negotiations. Israel has to be careful because you can never tell in the future who is going to turn on Israel again. Israel has to be self-sufficient. Israel has to make sure she can take care of herself without relying on promises of other people. That's of course very, very important. So we see from this Torah portion that the Jewish people can renew the covenant. All they have to do is go back to the sources. They have to find the new fruits. When crops grow every year it looks like the same crop, but it is not. There is always something new, something special. I remember when I went to a chemistry class at university and one of the professors brought in buffalo chips, which is a fancy word for something that does not smell so good. He said this was the most exciting thing in the whole world. He began to prove it, how we can learn so much about the past from it, how we can learn so much for the future, how there are so many chemicals we can derive from it that will make our food grow better, that will make us healthier. He got us all filled with enthusiasm so we, ourselves, too, were starting to do experiments with buffalo chips. In life there are so many exciting things to learn and especially in our tradition there are so many new insights that can be gained that will be helpful not only to us but to the whole world. The rabbis tell us that the ram that Abraham sacrificed in place of Isaac was created in twilight. Twilight is when you cannot see too good, when things are hidden, when it is still not so clear. We are living in a period where things are not so clear again, where there is only one major super-power left, where many ideals of civilization, even basic

ideas of science are being challenged. Things are not so clear, but out of this dusk can come a renewal, a renewal of the covenant which will cause us all to be better Jews and allow us to contribute more to the world so that the world can become a wonderful and a beautiful place, a world in which morality and peace will reign, and a world in which all men will live as brothers. This is possible and none of us should give up on the covenant even though sometimes it seems to be very, very dim.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man whose friend came up to him and said, "Be very careful today. Be very watchful because I just went to a fortuneteller and he told me that you are going to run into a ton of money today." He got so excited he called his wife and told her he was going to run into a ton of money today, but he could not get his wife, so he got into his car and started to drive home and, sure enough, on his way home he was hit by a Brinks truck. Unfortunately, there are many of our people who have decided that money is more important than anything else, and that they would rather sell out the Jewish ideals and would rather give up on the covenant because it really has no value anymore, but to them we say no. Although it may seem hidden, although the political situation may seem murky, although the cultural situation may be dim, yet the covenant will always be there and the covenant will rejuvenate itself and will cause not only the Jewish people to survive but mankind to thrive and live better and moral lives. May we all realize this so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

KI SOVO 1994
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion Ki Sovo we have a declaration that an individual is supposed to make at the end of the third year and the seventh year of the Shmita cycle in which he says that he has given all his charity obligations that he was supposed to have given. You are supposed to say before the Lord, "I have removed the holy things from the house. I have also give to the Levi and to the stranger and to the orphan and the widow with all Your commandments which You have commanded me. I have not violated from Your commandments, and I have not forgotten, and I did not eat when I was in mourning from it, and I did not remove it when I was ritually unclean, and I did not give from it to the dead. I have listened to the voice of G-d, my G-d, and did all which You have commanded me. Look from Your holy habitation, from the heaven, and bless Your people, Israel, and the land which You gave to us as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing of milk and honey." This is called a confession in Hebrew. In the Mishnah Sota this is called the confession of the giving of the tenth. In fact, in the Mishnah Sota we have listed those prayers or confessions that you can say in the vernacular. We know that you can pray almost any prayer in the vernacular. In the synagogue we pray in Hebrew so that Jewish unity should not be disrupted, so that the Jews should be united throughout the world, especially in our dispersion, but in this Mishnah Sota it is said that the declaration which is Sota would have to make the declaration that you have removed all your charity obligations, and also we learn about the reciting of the Shema, that these can all be done in the vernacular, in any language which you understand.

It is hard to understand how this is a confession. Why do the rabbis say this is a confession? To us a confession usually means that you confess that you have done some sin, that you have done something that was beneath human dignity, that you have violated some of the commandments of Hashem, but here it does not mention that at all. Here it says something the exact opposite. In fact, the Mishnah goes on to say this is a Shevach, a praise, for mankind, and this is not a confession

of failure. If we look at this declaration carefully we can see that it almost borders on arrogance, and that if it would not have been written in the Torah it would have been impossible that we could have thought that we could say it because it says, "I have listened to the voice of the Lord, my G-d, and I have done everything which You have commanded me." This is a very strong statement. Has everyone done everything that G-d has commanded? Are there no sinners in the world? Of course, we recognize that man does sin. We do not believe in the concept of original sin. We do not believe that man is born doomed, that he must fail, that he has no choice but to sin, but we also do not believe that man is born good, that man will always choose the good. We believe that man is born neutral, that man will always take the easiest course of action unless he is trained to do good, but it seems very strange that this should be listed as a confession. Of course, the word Veeduee in Hebrew comes from the word Modeh, which almost means to thank as well as to admit. In this expression of Veeduee we have characterized one of the main teachings of Judaism, and that is that we are a complex creature who is subject to conflicting drives and pulls, and we have to take into consideration both these conflicting drives and pulls when we come to make any type of decisions about ourselves or any actions that we are to take. It is true that we all sin. Even Moshe Rabbeinu sinned. We do not have to sin. We are not compelled to sin, but many times we act beneath ourselves. Of course, we have to recognize our sins in order that we can correct them. Therefore, normally when we talk about confession we talk about the confessions that we say on Yom Kippur, on the sins that we have sinned by speaking Loshan Hora, by the sins of not honoring parents, and so forth, and that is normally what we call a Veeduee, but this also is a Veeduee because it says that we have the capacity to be good. We have the capacity to fulfill all our potentialities, that we can overcome our weaknesses, that we can become better than we are. In fact, the word Olam in Hebrew means not only world but also hidden, that it is our job to reveal the hidden potentialities

that are within each of us. Each of us is a world unto himself. If we can reveal these hidden potentialities then we can always start anew. We can always overcome our iniquities, our back slidings and shortcomings.

That is also why I believe right before we have this special declaration we also learn about the declaration of bringing the first fruits, because why was there such a big ceremony about bringing the first fruits? Because the first fruits tell us that there is always a new beginning. There are always new fruits. You are not bound by past mistakes. You can come back and always have a fresh start and that, of course, is the very basis of the High Holidays that we are about ready to enter, is that we should never feel that we are doomed to repeat the past, that we can always come with a new way of looking at things, that we can always look at ourselves in a new way so that we can improve what we are and who we are and make ourselves better, that we have limited potentialities to overcome our own deficiencies.

That is why, too, I believe that in this Torah portion we also learn about the special ceremony that was conducted at Mount Abel and Mount Griseem. Mount Griseem was the mount of blessing which is verdant and filled with all sorts of agricultural produce while Mount Abel was a barren mountain, and right between the mountain the Levites and the Kohanim stood and they addressed half the tribes who were on one mountain and half the tribes who were on the other mountain. It is interesting to note that on the mount of blessing there was Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Yesachar, Yosef, and Binyamin. It is hard to understand why Shimon was listed first on the mountain of blessing? Why should he be listed first? The mountain of blessing, of course, teaches us that we must in order to be filled with blessing in this world learn how to control our appetities. We know that from dieting today. If you eat until you become a glutton then you are going to be so fat that you are not going to be able to enjoy the world and will have many diseases. Of course,

the same thing applies if you do not eat anything at all. If you worship the will power not to eat, and worshipping the will power is also a form of idolatry, and you get anorexia you will also die from that, too, but we are talking that a person should have the self-restraint. That does not mean that he should suppress completely all his desires but that he should do things in moderation so that he can enjoy life fully. That was Griseem, which talks about limits, and Mount Abel was the mountain of destruction because there people were doing anything that would satisfy their heart's desires, but it is hard to understand why Shimon was mentioned first. It was the tribe of Shimon who just a few weeks earlier had sinned at Baal Peor, who had worshipped the idols of the Moabites and Midianites with licentious rites, and they were the ones who almost caused the destruction of the Jewish people, but here they are listed first? Why are they listed first? To teach us that they should not be written off, that they can come back, that they have the potentiality to overcome all their deficiencies and become great people in Israel. The same is true of all of us, that we have the capacity to overcome all our deficiencies and to be great people. In order for confession to be effective you must have two elements. You must have the element of recognition that you have sinned, that you have done bad things. You have to confront your shortcomings, but then you also have to believe that you can overcome them. Otherwise it does not do any good to confess. So what if you confess your sins? Does it mean that you are just doomed to repeat them? So you confess them? And you do them over and over again because there is nothing you can do about it? That is not the Jewish view. The Jewish view is that within confession is the belief that you can overcome your problems once you recognize them, that just talking your problems out does no good. You also have to feel you have the capacity to overcome your problems, and that is why the rabbis say, based on the verse in the Song of Songs where it says, "I am black with my sins but I am also beautiful". How can you be black with your sins but beautiful? Because my sins may be there

but I can overcome them, and that is why in a different context we learn how Moshe Rabbeinu did not want to take the mirrors of the women in order to make the laver in the Temple. The laver in the Tabernacle was where the priests had to wash before they could perform the service of G-d. They had to purify themselves first, and G-d said to take the mirrors of the women and use them. Moshe said, how could he use an object of vanity, but G-d told him he must take the mirrors, and eventually Moshe understood why G-d wanted him to do it. We all know that potentially every single woman is beautiful. I know because I have conducted many, many weddings and I can truthfully say that every bride is beautiful. Every woman can be beautiful, but she just has to know how to put on her makeup, what features to accentuate. This she must do by confronting sincerely and honestly what her features are, her good points and bad points and make herself beautiful. This is, of course, the same thing that we are talking about here. The Kohanim, when they wanted to purify themselves, first had to confront their deficiencies and learn how to overcome them and make their souls beautiful by confronting their weaknesses but realizing that within themselves they have the potentiality to make themselves beautiful.

Unfortunately, there is an opinion today that says that all you have to do is talk your problems out, that that's all you need to do, but that is not true. You can go to a psychiatrist or rabbi or friend and talk your problems out and you may get momentary relief but it will not solve your problems. Solving your problems is only when you face them and realize you have the capacity to overcome them. You have the capacity to be better than you are now. Everybody has that capacity. That is why this particular declaration is considered a Veeduee, a confession because unless you believe that you have the capacity to do everything which G-d has commanded you. Unless you believe that you have the capacity to fulfill all your charity obligations, unless you feel that you have the capacity

to be a good person, then your confession will not help at all. The whole key to confession, to repentance, to making yourself a better person is to realize that you have the capacity to overcome all your deficiencies. If you realize that then you can truly confess your sins because then you can overcome your sins.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a department store that had a terrific sale. It was supposed to open at 10:00 a.m. and by the time 10:00 rolled around there was a whole line of 500 people. There was a little short man who came to the beginning of the line and just seemed to crash the beginning of the line. A big strong husky looking man looked at him and grabbed him and said, "Get back to the end of the line." Five minutes later this little short guy came to the front again. This time the husky man got mad and grabbed him and twisted his arm and said, "Get back to the end of the line." Five minutes later he came to the beginning of the line again and that big husky man said, "If you come to the head of this line once more, I'll break every bone in your body." The little man looked at him and said, "Okay, okay. I'll open the store tomorrow." The key to confession of sins is not just that you face your sins. That is the first part of it, but the key to it is to realize that you have the capacity to overcome your sins once you face them. Let us all hope and pray that we will face our sins and not just state our sins but realize that we have the capacity to overcome them and in this way become better people so that the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

Ki Sovo 1999

In the Torah portion, Ki Sovo we learn how the Jewish people are to bring their first fruits up to the temple after they enter the land of Ireal. The Sifri comments, "Do this mitzvah and you will enter the land of Israel." How is it possible for him to make such a statement? You can't bring the fruits until you till the land. What does it mean, "Do this mitzvah and you will end the land?" Perhaps we could understand this by recalling the Medrash which states how when G-d was about ready to give the Torah, the angels all protested, They said, "G-d, you shouldn't give the Torah to mankind. They will ruin it. They will corrupt it. You should only give it to us." God turned to Moshe, "What answer can you give these angels?" Moshe said, "The angels can't do anything wrong. They are purely spiritual creatures." How can they implement the Torah, which requires physical actions? We all know that in Judaism we achieve holiness spirituality by going through the physical. It is similar to great music. A violin concerto by great composers causes us to achieve higher spiritual heights. But what is a violin anyway? It is taking a piece of horsehair and rubbing it over a piece of catgut. The angels were forced to conceive the Moshe was right even though human beings can mess up the Torah, disregard the Torah, misinterpret the Torah yet only they can use the Torah to achieve great

spiritual heights. This is similar to have happened in the wilderness with the evil spies. These spies were actually great men but they didn't want the Jewish people to enter the land of Kanann. They wanted the Jewish people just to stay in the desert and learn Torah. To them, the Torah was a beautiful and spiritual thing. They didn't want the Torah to be involved with physical reality. They knew that many interpretations of the Torah would arise and the Torah would justify many mistakes. They wanted the people just to stay in the desert and receive manna and water from G-d and just study Torah. G-d though doesn't want this and didn't want this. He wants us to use the Torah to elevate the physical and make it spiritual. This was also emphasized in the story we learn about Shimon Ben Yockai who spent twelve years in a cave with his son fleeing Roman prosecution. At the end of twelve years, he was told it was not safe to come out. When he came out, he noticed a Jewish farmer plowing his field. He got angry and he cursed him. The man died. G-d became angry with Shimon Ben Yockai and told him to return to the cave. He had to stay there an extra year. G-d wants us to be involved in worldly occupations along with the study of Torah. This is the Halacha and it is the opinion of Rabbi Ishmael. It's true. There are going to be a lot of disagreements when spiritual is applied to real life. We know that even today the arguments about Kosher and Glatt Kosher. We

know that the has adopted certain standards, based upon what Rabbi Soleveichik said that the public would misunderstand if any products are derived from non-kosher products are used in the manufacturer of another product even though this product would no longer be edible even to a dog or if it had been treated by sulfuric acid so that it's considered halachicly a new product. We know that there is a halachicly disagreement on how high a makitzah has to be. The height varies from thirty-one inches to eight feet. Infact, the Hassidum believe you shouldn't even see a woman at services. There are disagreements on how a Mikvah should be built. But inspite of all this, G-d wants us to try our best to apply the Torah portion that you shall come to the Cohen who will be in those days. And Rashi comments to the Cohen way are in other words the Rabbi of your congregation gets to make these decisions. Even though you may think differently, then there always are. You still must listen to your Rabbi.

It is inevitable that everytime you take spiritual principles and try to apply them to the physical world, you are going to have disagreements. Some people may throw up their hands and say, "This Who Torah business is a bunch of hooley." It is nothing more than nonsense and this may lead them to disregard and violate the Torah entirely. That is why in this Torah portion we have a list of the blessings and the curses which will come upon

the Jewish people if they keep the Torah and the curses will come upon them if they violate the Torah. So we learn in the curses that if the people did not keep all the mitzvahs of the Torah, they will receive certain punishments. We then learn if the Jewish people will keep the mitzvahs, but they will not observe them joyfully, they will get worse punishments. And finally, we learn that if Jewish people observe the commandments even if they do it joyfully but without respect they will get the worse punishments. I would think that it would be the exact opposite. If the Jewish people observe all of the commandments joyfully but with out respect, they would get a light punishment. And if they observed the Torah joyfully but without respect they would get a harsher punishment and if they didn't observe all of the commandments but some of them joyfully and with respect, they would get the harshest punishment. But if that is not so, the mitzvahs are meant to bring us close to G-d. Infact the relationship between a husband and wife is the paradine for the relationship between G-d and Israel. We all know those taking ideals of love, devotion, dedication and ambition and translate them from a spiritual to a physical are going to result in many disagreements. The couple is going to have to figure out together how to translate their spiritual vision into a physical reality. There are always going to be problems, however if closeness can be maintained, then the marriage can endure. If

not, it can't. We know that sometimes a spouse usually a husband doesn't spend the time he should with his family. He doesn't do all those things he should have done, but when he is with his family it is a joyful, happy experience. He also shows his wife and children respect. He doesn't belittle them or unjustly criticize them. He shows his appreciation. He praises his wife that marriage can endure even though the wife is not totally happy. Closeness has still been maintained. If however, the husband does spend the right amount of time and does what he is supposed to do but there is no joy in the marriage, she or he always feels that the other is going through the motion. This marriage too can endure if through the wife or husband is not happy. Although things are getting done, the responsibilities are being taken care of in the third scenario even though the husband does what he is suppose to do and does it joyfully, he shows no respect to his wife. He is constantly belittling her, criticizing her and making fun of her, his marriage almost certainly doomed because there is no closeness. In our relationship with G-d we need closeness and in our marriages we also need our closeness. Without closeness, a feeling of togetherness, a marriage cannot endure. You know that in a marriage each party must feel the others pain. This is what closeness means too.

I am reminded of a story they tell about a woman who went to a psychiatrist and she told him that her husband thinks he is a refrigerator, and she is very upset about it. He told her, "Don't be so upset. This happens many times to people and they get over it." She said, "You don't understand. This is very serious. He sleeps with his mouth open and I can't go to sleep with a light on."

Couples must empathize with each other. They need to feel each other's pain. They need to maintain closeness. May we all during the coming year feel close to each other and to Hashem so that we will have a good year and so that the Mishgah will come quickly in our days.

Amen