How Were Bikkurim Brought to the Temple?

Source Sheet by Rachel Buckman

One of the names of Shavuot in the Torah is the Festival of the First Fruits. These first fruits (bikkurim) are traditionally of the “seven species” – the special agricultural produce of the Land of Israel: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (Deuteronomy 8:8). According to Jewish tradition, the bikkurim were brought to the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem, as described in the verse below.

Text #1
Exodus 23:19
The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God...

Text #2
Additional information about how to bring the bikkurim to Jerusalem is provided in the following verse.

Deuteronomy 26:2
(2) you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name.

Text #3
The procedure is further described in the Mishnah in Tractate Bikkurim. The text talks about the cities of the maamad. To facilitate a rotation of priests serving in the Temple, the country was divided into twenty-four districts (mishmarot or maamadot). The city of the maamad was the city where the head of the maamad lived. When bringing the bikkurim, the inhabitants of the entire district would gather in the city of the maamad and together travel to Jerusalem.

Mishnah Bikkurim 3:2-3
(2) How were the bikkurim taken up [to Jerusalem]? All [the inhabitants of] the cities of the maamad would assemble in the city of the maamad, and they would spend the...
night in the open street and they would not enter any of the houses. Early in the morning the officer would say: “Let us arise and go up to Zion, into the house of the Lord our God” (Jeremiah 31:5).

(3) Those who lived near Jerusalem would bring fresh figs and grapes, while those who lived far away would bring dried figs and raisins. An ox would go in front of them, his horns bedecked with gold and with an olive-crown on its head. The flute would play before them until they would draw close to Jerusalem. When they drew close to Jerusalem they would send messengers in advance, and they would adorn their bikkurim. The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] would go out to greet them, and according to the rank of the entrants they would go forth. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them saying, “Our brothers, men of such and such a place, we welcome you in peace.”

Discussing the Texts

- What are bikkurim?
- Who brings bikkurim?
- Where are bikkurim brought to? Who are they given to?
- What are the bikkurim put in?
- Describe the trip to Jerusalem. If you had been there, what would you have seen and heard?
- What questions do you have about the bikkurim ceremony?