



# AlephBeta

## KI TAVO: THE SUPRISING ORIGINS OF MA'ASER

This guide corresponds to the video: [The Surprising Origins of Ma'aser](#)

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### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

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1. Moses opens this parsha by telling the children of Israel about some of the new laws they will have to keep:
  - a. One of those is the law of ma'aser, tithing, which is when we separate out some of what we've grown in the past year, and give some to the Levi, some to the needy, or we bring it to Jerusalem and eat it ourselves.
  - b. Now, we heard about the basic law of tithing earlier in the Torah, but here we hear about a *related* mitzvah: *vidui ma'aser*, the *declaration* of ma'aser. Not only do you separate out your tithes every year, there's also this big ritual at the end of every third year, where you kind of take an inventory and make sure that you've been doing it right.
  - c. And it's not enough to just *do* the self-audit -- you have to stand up before God and literally say: *I did it! I took the ma'aser out of my house! I've given it to the needy, I brought it to Jerusalem!*
  - d. Why isn't it enough to give ma'aser - why does it come with this dramatic statement?
2. There happens to be a story involving ma'aser, a story from much earlier in the Torah — about one of our forefathers, Jacob, who made a vow to give ma'aser to God.
  - a. The story begins in Genesis 28. Jacob has just taken the blessings that were meant for his brother Esav, and Esav is in a murderous rage. So Jacob is forced to run away. And, the first night, when Jacob stops to rest, God comes to him in a dream and promises to take care of him. When Jacob wakes up, he turns to God and says, "God, if you *really* do these things for me, I'll separate the tithe for you."
  - b. So what is Jacob saying here? Where is this offer of ma'aser coming from? It sounds like Jacob is saying, God - I know that staying in my father's house isn't an option right now. But I'm heading into the unknown here, and I'm scared. So please, God, take care of me as I head out, and please, *please*, return me in peace to my family. Then I'll give you that ma'aser, deal?
3. So there we have it. Hundreds of years before God tells us the laws of ma'aser, Jacob, on his own, volunteers to give ma'aser to God!
  - a. But there's something odd about Jacob's promise. Jacob *says* he's gonna give ma'aser... but does he ever actually give it?
  - b. The Torah never tells us that he does. Jacob said he'd give ma'aser only when all of these *conditions* were met. If God was with him, if God guarded him, and if he returned in peace to his father's house. So...were those conditions met? Did everything that Jacob asked for actually come true?
  - c. Let's go through the list.

- i. Was God with Jacob during those years Jacob was away from home? *Did* God protect Jacob? Well, Jacob himself says so, years later
  - ii. God also walked with him and protected him.
  - iii. But what about Jacob's third request: And I will return, in peace, to my father's home. Does that happen? Well, Jacob does return to his father's house... It happens roughly two decades later, when Jacob leaves Lavan with all of his wives, his kids, his wealth, and he returns to the land of Israel, back to his childhood home. But there was tension between Jacob's wives. There was tension between Jacob's kids. Jacob played favorites with his son Joseph, and his other sons grew to hate Joseph for it. And that hatred got stronger and stronger, until, eventually, it culminated in the Sale of Joseph. And *that* story concludes with the entire family leaving the house of Jacob's father, and descending to Egypt. That doesn't sound very peaceful to me. There was sinah, hatred, and therefore no shalom.
- 4. So maybe Jacob never brought that ma'aser. Because, for his entire life, he was still waiting to check off the full list. He was waiting for there to be shalom. And by the time Jacob nears death, far from his father's home once again, maybe the sad truth has become clear to him. His promise...will never be complete, because he will never end up, b'shalom, back in his father's homeland.
  - a. But...what about Jacob's descendants? Would it ever come true for them? Would there ever be a time when the family of Jacob would return in peace to this land?
  - b. Hundreds of years after Jacob yearned for that peaceful return to his father's land, finally, the children of Jacob would live to see that day. And that is what Parshat Ki Tavo is talking about..
  - c. Why wouldn't these laws of ma'aser go into effect as soon as we enter the land? Why is it only once we've driven out our enemies and started to put down roots?
    - i. Because that's when the terms of Jacob's promise will be fulfilled. That's when Jacob's family will finally be returned to his father's house and be at peace, fulfilling the terms of אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי, אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי, אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי.
    - ii. And there's even a little hint right here in the last phrase - וַיֵּשְׁבֶתְךָ בָּהּ, and you settle there. Doesn't וַיֵּשְׁבֶתְךָ sound like וַיֵּשְׁבֶתְךָ - I will return to my father's house? This same word - וַיֵּשְׁבֶתְךָ, settle, וַיֵּשְׁבֶתְךָ, return - it's like the Torah is saying, with a wink and a nod, you know when you will bring this ma'aser? When the terms of Jacob's vow are finally fulfilled.
- 5. So now, we understand the Jacob connection - how the ma'aser we bring, when we finally return to Israel with peace, in some way, seems to be based on Jacob's ma'aser, hundreds of years earlier. And I think we might have an answer to our original question too: why we make this whole, dramatic ma'aser declaration.
  - a. Most mitzvot don't need this kind of pomp and circumstance. But ma'aser is different. It's a mitzvah from God, yes, but with a rich history, going back hundreds of years, all the way to Jacob.
  - b. Jacob had made a promise, but he couldn't fulfill it, nor could so many generations that followed.
  - c. And hundreds of years later, when we would enter the land, we would finally be able to bring Jacob's ma'aser. And when we did — well, it would require more than a mere handoff, more than saying "Here ya go" and walking away. It would need a grand speech — because it's a grand act. *We haven't transgressed your commands, God — and we haven't forgotten.*