



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Ekev: The Power of a Blessing

I have never experienced a day of real hunger in my life. Have you? We are surrounded by such an abundance of food that we are the generation who are trying to eat less; not more.

In a 2016 report, the Guardian reported that 60 million tons of food is wasted annually by retailers and consumers (\$160bn), about a third of all foodstuffs; and much of it is discarded because it doesn't conform to the aesthetic standards that stores and consumers want. How can we learn to deeply appreciate food more?

This week, the Torah teaches us that our relationship with food should generate a greater mindfulness, and an attitude of humility and appreciation. We read about the contrast between the wilderness and Eretz Yisrael:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years...He subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had ever known... For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing... When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. (Deut 8:2-9)

These verses contrast the wilderness years, where our sustenance was provided by God, with the natural land of Eretz Yisrael. There, natural water springs and abundant agriculture will provide our daily needs.

The thing to remember is that though the Land of Israel functions according to nature, God is no less present. Our collective wilderness experience is to serve as a constant reminder that God is the source of our prosperity, even as we utilize the world of agriculture to sustain ourselves.

How do we retain this awareness? **“When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.”** Halakha calls this Birkhat Hamazon, Grace after Meals, in which we thank God after we eat. This relatively minor exercise seeks to stimulate an awareness that our food itself is a divine gift no less than manna in the desert.

So please discuss:

- Do you say Birkhat Hamazon other than on Shabbat?
- What does Birkhat Hamazon thank God for? Is it just food? - Read the second paragraph of Birkhat Hamazon (*V'al Hako!*) or the segment of *Rachem*. What does that have to do with food?
- Nowadays we frequently don't eat bread at meals. How can we take a moment before/after our food to be appreciative?

The truth is that Birkhat Hamazon goes far beyond thanking God for our nourishment.

Moses instituted ...the first blessing - "Who feeds" - when the manna descended for them.

Joshua instituted the blessing of the land when they entered the Land of Israel.

David and Solomon instituted the third blessing: "Build Jerusalem"... David ... as he conquered the city; Solomon when he built the Temple.

They [the Rabbis] instituted the blessing: "Who is good and does good" at Yavne, in reference to the [Roman permission to bury the] slain Jews of the city of Beitar at the culmination of the Bar-Kokhba rebellion. (Talmud Berachot 48b)

Does Birkhat Hamazon praise God for food or for other things?

In the Talmudic summary above, the first blessing is for food, the second is for land, the third for Jerusalem, sovereignty and the Temple – national institutions. The fourth blessing originates in a period of national loss of sovereignty, in which a Jewish attempt at restoring independence was violently quashed, and many tens of thousands killed. Jews decided to continue to appreciate even the small moments of grace and attribute their good-fortune to God, as if to say, even in a state of national ruin, that as long as the nation persists, we will acclaim God as good and He who acts with goodness.

What is this jump from food to wider issues of land, national institutions etc?

Let us return to the verse: “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God **for the good land which He has given you.**” In other words, food is merely the starting point. We use the blessing of our basic sustenance as a springboard to thank God not merely for individual nourishment but for sustaining the nation as a whole. After all, our welfare is not merely dependent upon food, but on a wider safety net of family, country, national purpose, law and order.

As Halakha frequently does, through a small daily performance, we find the opportunity to address far deeper and wider themes that are critical to our lives.

God warns us that when we become settled in the land, we are prone to an attitude that sees ourselves as the sole source for our personal and national success:

Take care lest you forget the Lord your God ...When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God... when you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.” Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth” (Deut 8:12-18)

By instituting our daily blessing over food, Jewish law hands us a real gift; it allows us to be more mindful of the blessing of food; but from there, it affords us a moment to ponder and appreciate all the myriad blessings that surround us on a daily basis.

Please discuss:

- Are we susceptible to the Torah’s warning of haughtiness? Of saying “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”
- How do we counterbalance those dangers?
- Could regular daily blessings provide an antidote? If not, what might work?

Shabbat Shalom!