

## Parshat Eikev – The Power of a Bracha

Simon Wolf

This week's Parsha contains within it what according to many Rishonim is the only Beracha (blessing) mandated by the Torah. In a verse that is quoted in Birkat HaMazon, the Torah enjoins, "and you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you (ואכלת ושבעת וברכת) (את ה' אלקיך על הארץ הטבה אשר נתן לך)." <sup>1</sup> In the Mishna, <sup>2</sup> Rabban Gamliel and the Chachamim disagree as to the antecedent of this Pasuk. According to Rabban Gamliel, the juxtaposition of the seven species that the Land of Israel is blessed with (שבעת המינים) <sup>3</sup> and the mention of Lechem (bread) <sup>4</sup> in the verses preceding this precept qualifies the nature of the sustenance that requires one to bless God for the bounty they have savored. On the other hand, the Chachamim believe that only Lechem (bread) <sup>5</sup> obligates one to recite Birkat HaMazon since it is the fare that is mentioned most adjacent to the injunction to bless God. The normative practice is like the position of the Chachamim. The simple understanding of the disagreement between Rabban Gamliel and the Chachamim is that it fundamentally revolves around the scope of those items that are included in this Torah directive to bless God with Birkat HaMazon (Lechem vs. Lechem and Shivat HaMinim). There are a slew of Rishonim <sup>6</sup> that suggest that the Chachamim only disagree with Rabban Gamliel as to what is the proper text of the Beracha after consuming the Shivat HaMinim, though they agree that it is a Torah prescribed obligation. Therefore, according to those Rishonim, the summary version of Birkat HaMazon (ברכה מעין שלש), which is known colloquially as Al HaMichya (על המחיה), according to the Chachamim is also a Torah ordained blessing. The Shulchan Aruch <sup>7</sup> does not follow these opinions, but rather subscribes to the Rambam's <sup>8</sup> view that only Birkat HaMazon is subsumed in the Torah's directive. Though, the

Mishna Berura suggests that given the plethora of Rishonim that believe that the Shivat Haminim require an after-blessing from the Torah, one should be scrupulous and take their position into consideration. <sup>9</sup> One of the key normative distinctions as to whether a Beracha is Torah prescribed or only Rabbinically ordained is if one must repeat the blessing when they are in doubt as to whether they have fulfilled their obligation. <sup>10</sup> This is based on the dictum <sup>11</sup> that with regards to an uncertainty surrounding a Rabbinic law, one opts for leniency and therefore would not repeat the blessing, whereas by a doubt vis-à-vis a Torah statute, one chooses the more stringent path and therefore they would make the Beracha again. <sup>12</sup> Returning to the source of this obligation to bless God, **why does the Torah preface that one needs to be satisfied before they bless God?**

The Gemara in a number of places seems to imply that Birkat HaTorah (ברכת התורה), the blessing recited before learning Torah, is also a Torah mandated blessing. <sup>13</sup> The Rif and the Rosh do not quote these Gemarot in their Halachic compendiums and the Rambam also does not cite this Beracha in his Sefer HaMitzvot, implying that they all believe that this blessing is only mandated Rabbinically. The Shulchan Aruch seems to follow this view. <sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the Ramban, <sup>15</sup> the Sefer HaChinuch, <sup>16</sup> the Rashba <sup>17</sup> and many other Rishonim and Achronim believe that Birkat HaTorah are Torah prescribed blessings. The Mishna Berura once again here favors heavily those that believe that it is a Torah law though he is wary of completely dismissing the alternate view. <sup>18</sup>

The Sefer HaChinuch speculates as to why is it that the Torah requires a Beracha before engaging in Torah study whereas it only requires a blessing over sustenance once it has been consumed. He suggests that when it comes to physical pleasures, the animalistic side of the human being can only be truly grateful after they have undergone the sensory experience. In

<sup>1</sup> דברים ח, י

<sup>2</sup> ברכות מד. (ו, ח)

<sup>3</sup> ארץ חטה ושעורה וגפן ויתאנה ורמון ארץ זית שמן ודבש (דברים ח, ח)

<sup>4</sup> ארץ אשר לא במסכנת תאכל בה לחם לא תתחסר כל בה ארץ אשר אביה ברזל ומהרריה תחצב נחשת (שם ט)

<sup>5</sup> לחם מחמשת מיני דגן: חטים, שעורים, כוסמין, שבלת שועל, ושיפון (חלה א, א)

<sup>6</sup> בה"ג סי' א ברכות פ"ז סוף עמוד פב, רשב"א ברכות לה. ד"ה הכי וגם מד. ד"ה ורבנן, תר"י כד: בדפי הרי"ף ד"ה גמ' קדש, רא"ש ברכות ו, טז, טור או"ח רט

<sup>7</sup> שו"ע או"ח רט, ג

<sup>8</sup> רמב"ם הל' ברכות ח, יב

<sup>9</sup> משנ"ב או"ח רט, ג, ס"ק ט-י

<sup>10</sup> ברכות כא. אמר רב יהודה ספק קרא קריאת שמע ספק לא קרא - אינו חוזר וקורא,

ספק אמר אמת ויציב, ספק לא אמר - חוזר ואומר אמת ויציב. מאי טעמא - קריאת שמע דרבנן, אמת ויציב דאורייתא.

<sup>11</sup> בית יוסף סז, א ובמשנ"ב או"ח רט, כ ובשער ציון כא ולא כמו הפני יהושע ברכות לה.

ד"ה בגמרא אלא סברא...מיהו נראה לענ"ד דאפילו אם תמצו לומר דסברא זו הו'

נמי מדאורייתא אפ"ה אתי שפיר הא דקיי"ל דספק ברכות להקל משום דלא שייך להחמיר דכיון דאסור לברך ברכה שאינה צריכה...

<sup>12</sup> ע"ז. ר' יהושע בן קרחה אומר: בשל תורה הלך אחר המחמיר, בשל סופרים הלך אחר המיידל.

<sup>13</sup> אמר רב יהודה: מנין לברכת המזון לאחריה מן התורה - שנאמר: ואכלת ושבעת וברכת. מנין לברכת התורה לפנייה מן התורה - שנאמר: כי שם ה' אקרא הבו גדל לאלהינו. (ברכות כא.) ואין לי אלא ברכת המזון, ברכת התורה מנין? (ברכות מח.)

<sup>14</sup> ע"פ שו"ע או"ח רט, ג

<sup>15</sup> השגות הרמב"ן לספר מצוות לרמב"ם שכחת עשין מצוה טו...והעולה מזה שברכת התורה לפנייה מצות עשה דאורייתא

<sup>16</sup> ספר החינוך מצוה תל וכל שאר הברכות כולן הן מדרבנן, חוץ מאחת שהיא מן התורה, וכן הוא מפורש בגמרא בברכות כא. והיא ברכת התורה לפנייה

<sup>17</sup> ברכות מח: ד"ה הא

<sup>18</sup> משנ"ב או"ח מז, א

contradistinction, Torah study which is a pursuit of the intellect and of the heart, a transcendental experience, there the individual can realize the need for gratitude even before engaging in the activity. This helps to explain why Birkat HaMazon is required after one eats, but still does not fully explain why only if one is satisfied are they obligated to bless God.

No matter what blessings you believe are Torah ordained, Chazal saw these Torah blessings as a paradigm to be extended to a much larger swath of instances and activities.<sup>19</sup> They instituted Berachot before and after one has experienced any pleasure or gratification, as well as numerous blessings of thanksgiving to and praise for God.

In the beginning of this week's Parsha, Moshe discusses the success of the travails of traveling through desert in creating a bond between the people and God. God afflicted Bnei Yisrael and tested their resolve in order to ensure that they understood that adherence to the will of God is their primary objective and the only mechanism that will guarantee them a favorable and rewarding future.<sup>20</sup> The Maan was particularly instrumental in forging this relationship. Bnei Yisrael's daily dependence on God for sustenance inculcated them with an understanding that man "does not live solely on bread, but rather by the word of God."<sup>21</sup> God created a very simple connection between the people's behavior and the beneficence that He showed them. When they acted appropriately, everything went smoothly and when they deviated from God's expectations, they were faced with adversity. Moshe then indicates that the same quid pro quo will exist when they enter the Land of Israel. Similar to the way God provided their material needs in the desert, God will have the land give forth its bounty to furnish them with their necessities and desires. Of course, Eretz Yisrael will only flourish and sustain the people if they continue to cling to God and follow His directives. Later in the Parsha, Moshe explicitly connects the material success of the people to their behavior in the Parshia that is read twice a day in the daily prayers, V'Haya Im Sha'mo'a (והיה אם שמע). There Moshe tells the people that the vital rainfall needed for sustenance and survival in Eretz Yisrael will be dependent on their fidelity in following the laws of God. If they comply, the rain will be timely, the crops abundant and they will

enjoy the material successes of the land. On the other hand, if they, ו"ח, do not obey the word of God, the precipitation will cease and they will be overrun by their enemies and exiled from the land.

The connection between the Maan mentioned by Moshe in the beginning of the Parsha and the rain mentioned at the end of the Parsha is reinforced by the fact that in Parshat B'Shalach when Bnei Yisrael are granted the Maan in the desert it uses the verb Matar (מטר) to describes God's "raining bread" from the heavens to provide for Bnei Yisrael.<sup>22</sup> It is similar to the description of the Land of Israel in this week's Parsha whereby God is always looking after the needs of the land which is sustained by the heavenly rains (למטר השמים) (תשפתה-מים).<sup>23</sup>

Despite the parallels, there is a key difference between the Maan in the desert and the rainfall in Eretz Yisrael. The providing of the Maan was daily whereas the rainfall is seasonal. Living in the desert in the presence of God meant that the behavioral ramifications were nearly immediate. The link between one's conduct and the resultant outcome were prompt and obvious. In Eretz Yisrael, there is a delay between the repercussions and one's defiance or failure to adhere to God's instructions. This presents a new challenge that Bnei Yisrael had not faced until now in the desert. Moshe is acutely aware of this possible tribulation and he therefore informs the people of this potential obstacle. He warns them, "Lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments...when you have eaten and become satisfied and you dwell in fine houses that you have built. Your herds and flocks have multiplied, your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered. And then your heart will grow haughty and will forget the Lord your God who freed you from the bondage of Egypt...(who did all these wonderful things for you in the desert)...who fed you Maan in the desert...and you will say to yourself, my own power and strength has created this wealth for me (כחי ועצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה)."<sup>24</sup>

Moshe notes in this warning that there exists a significant problem in that there is an inverse correlation between religious adherence and material success. The verse in Ha'a'zINU states, "So Yeshurun grew fat and kicked away, you grew fat, large and expansive; He forsook the God who

<sup>19</sup> ברכות לה.

<sup>20</sup> וזכרת את כל הדרך אשר הולכתך יקוק אלהיך, זה ארבעים שנה במדבר למען ענתך לנסתך לדעת את אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותי אם לא (דברים ח,ב)

<sup>21</sup> ויענה וירעה ויאכל את המן אשר לא ידעת ולא ידעו אבותיך למען הודיעך כי לא על-הלחם לבדו יחיה האדם כי על-כל-מוצא פי-יקוק יחיה האדם (שם ג)

<sup>22</sup> ויאמר יקוק אל-משה הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים ויצא העם ויקטלו דבר-יום ביומו למען אנסנו הילך בתורת אי-לא (שמות טז,ד)

<sup>23</sup> והארץ אשר אתם עבדים שמה לרשתה ארץ הרים ונקעת למטר השמים תשפתה-מים (דברים יא,יא)

<sup>24</sup> דברים ח,יא-יז

made him and spurned the Rock of his support.”<sup>25</sup> As Karl Marx famously said, “...Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again...Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”<sup>26</sup> The more successful and self-reliant an individual is, the more likely they are to attribute that achievement to their own capabilities, resourcefulness and ingenuity. Man is created in the image of God and as he becomes more successful he is apt to fancy himself as a God rather than a beneficiary of God’s benevolence. He conflates himself with God rather than acknowledging the munificence that God has showered upon him. As Moshe points out, it is the material success and luxuriating in the cornucopia of wealth that inevitably leads to a forsaking of God. The satiation and satisfaction (שביעה) engender a false sense of smugness and security that stunts one’s ability to see beyond themselves. It causes one to look down upon those less fortunate and unable to look upwards to the godly Grantor. This challenge causes Eliyahu to explain the verse in Yishayahu, “I have refined you, not as silver, I chose for you the crucible of affliction,”<sup>27</sup> that when God searched for the best endowments for Bnei Yisrael, he found none better than poverty.<sup>28</sup> That is a very dour assessment as to the best solution for this challenge. So, while poverty ensures better compliance with the God’s will, God would considerably prefer that Bnei Yisrael comply with his Torah out of success because that would make them much more effective emissaries of God’s way in the world (אור לגוים).

The solution to this problem Moshe maintains is that one must always “remember that it is the Lord your God that enables you to have the strength by which to make this wealth (וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי (הוא הַנִּתֵּן לָךְ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת הַחַיִּל.”<sup>29</sup> It is not a matter of platitudes, saying the right thing, or performance, doing the right thing, but it is an all encompassing attitude that permeates the essence of the individual. It is evident in the humility by which they present themselves, in the way they treat others and in the scrupulousness by which they adhere to the laws of the Torah. The will of God,

not the individual, is foremost in every decision. While this is a beautiful concept, how does one practically engender this proper attitude or set this moral compass?

In between the portrayal of the material bounty of the Land of Israel and the description of the risks entailed in that wealth sits a pivotal verse that is the secret antidote to the formidable perils of wealth. In the Pesukim, two verbs are followed by a third verb that is key to understanding how to combat the negative effects of material success. One Pasuk begins, “when you will **eat** and be **satisfied**...and your heart will **grow haughty**... (פֶּן תֹּאכַל וּשְׂבַעְתָּ...וּרְמַם לְבָבְךָ).”<sup>30</sup> Yet just prior to that there is an alternate version of the same scenario, “and you will **eat**, and you will be **satisfied**, and you will **bless the Lord your God** for the good land which He has given you (וּאֲכַלְתָּ וּשְׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ). (את ה' אלקיך על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך). The parallel language and juxtaposition of these verses indicates that the Torah sees Birkat HaMazon as being the crucial counterforce in combating the negative attitudes spawned by material success.

This insight can also more fully address the question posed by the Sefer HaChinuch, “Why did the Torah prescribe that one bless God only after one has eaten?” At the moment of highest risk (ושבעת), the Torah enjoins one to look outside of themselves, to shake their smugness and turn to God wholeheartedly and say thank you. It is not just gratitude for the food one consumed, but for the great land that God provided to facilitate one’s success (על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך). It is not just an acknowledgement of the discrete pleasure one has just experienced, but a greater recognition of the tools and the means that God granted the individual to create the bounty they are enjoying. Using this paradigm, Chazal extrapolated this concept when they extended the necessity for blessings to not only after one has experienced pleasure and contentment, but also to before they engage in enjoyable experiences. The Gemara says it only logical that one bless God before they partake of worldly pleasures since anyone who benefits from this world without a Beracha is as if he has misappropriated that which God has provided him, or, in other words, it is as if he has stolen from God.<sup>31</sup> This is most evident in the

<sup>25</sup> וַיִּשְׁמֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֹט שְׂמֹנֶת עֲבִית כְּשֵׁית וַיִּטֵּשׁ אֵלֹהֶ עֲשָׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעָהוּ (דברים לב,יא)

<sup>26</sup> Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* by Karl Marx

<sup>27</sup> הִנֵּה צַרְפְּתִיךָ וְלֹא בְּכֶסֶף בְּחֻרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹר עֵינִי (ישעיהו מ,י)

<sup>28</sup> אָמַר לִיָּה אֱלֹהֵי לְבָרִי הִי וְאָמַרְי לֵה לְרַבִּי אֲלַעֲזָר: מֵאִי דַכְּתִיב הִנֵּה צַרְפְּתִיךָ וְלֹא בְּכֶסֶף בְּחֻרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹר עֵינִי - מִלְּמַד שֶׁחֲזַר הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל כָּל מִדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת לִיתֵן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלֹא מִצָּא אֵלָא עֲנִיּוֹת (חגיגה ט:)

<sup>29</sup> וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי הוּא הַנִּתֵּן לָךְ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חַיִּל לְמַעַן הַקִּים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם כִּי־יִהְיֶה (דברים יח,י)

<sup>30</sup> דְּבָרִים ח,י"ד

<sup>31</sup> אֵלָא, סִבְרָא הוּא: אִסּוּר לֹו לְאִדָּם שִׁיְהֵנָּה מִן הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּלֹא בְּרַכָּה. וְכֹל הַנְּהַנְּה מִן הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּלֹא בְּרַכָּה - מַעַל...כִּאִילוּ גּוֹזֵל לְהַקְּב"ה וְכִנְסַת יִשְׂרָאֵל (בְּרַכּוֹת לה.-לה:)

Beracha recited before one eats bread which thanks God for "taking bread out of the land (המוציא לחם מן הארץ)." The wheat is God's creation, but the processing of the wheat to produce bread is largely the result of man-made toil. Yet, we still credit God with producing the bread from the land. A Beracha beforehand prompts one to recognize that everything belongs to God and fosters the acknowledgment that the enjoyment of the upcoming benefit is all a blessing from God and not solely a celebration of personal achievement. Similarly, blessings of thanksgiving for mundane activities (אשר יצר) and the passage of time (שהחיינו) when understood properly and said with true gratitude nurture a sense of appreciation for all the gifts that God bestows upon each individual.

This week's parsha reminds us to count our blessings and to be more meticulous and conscientious in our making of Berachot because it helps orient the person towards recognition of God's central role in the successes or achievements that they have attained (כי הוא הנותן) (לך כח לעשות חיל). That acknowledgement helps inoculate the person against the perils of haughtiness and the temptation to reject compliance with God's will even when they are blessed with material success and that is the power of a Beracha.

Shabbat Shalom