*V’savata U’veirachta*: Satiation and Blessing

D’var Torah *Par’shat Ekev* August 8, 2020

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

Why do we say blessings – *b’rachot* – in the Jewish tradition, before and after we eat?

I will come back to this question, but first a totally different one: Who decides what others need, and how much others need? How do we make social policy when it comes to providing for those in need? What does it mean to be in need? And when it comes to providing the mechanisms of aid for those in need, how do we determine what society owes an individual, and what an individual owes society?

Entire political parties have risen and fallen over these philosophical questions. I say philosophical, because very often the practical decisions that lawmakers reach when it comes to aiding the needy – and defining need – are anchored in their distinct philosophies of government and society.

Is there a Jewish philosophy of need and aid? For certain we can say that Jewish thought does not lead inexorably to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Or to Liberalism or Conservatism. It doesn’t work that way.

Judaisms does, however, offer a sizeable number of commandments relating to aiding the poor, the needy, the stranger, the widow, the homeless. *Patoach tiftach et yad’cha.* “Open your hand generously to the needy,” from next week’s portion, *R’eh,* might be considered a sort of “philosophy” of Judaism with respect to human need.

Judaism distinguishes between *aniyei ir’cha*, the needy of your own locale, and the needy of other municipalities and provinces, but in the end it seems to require us to concern ourselves with pretty much all the needy. That, too, is a general philosophical observation. Maybe we should call it an “ethos” of Judaism more than a true philosophy.

And this ethos seems to apply both to individual Jews and to the Jewish people as a whole. That would indicate that Judaism expects individuals to behave compassionately and generously toward the poor, but to do so through communal institutions and practices.

Our parashah for this Shabbat, *Par’shat Ekev*, seems at first glance to be not so much about the needy, but about appreciation for what we have. All through the parashah Moses reminds the Israelites that they have been sustained on manna, on divine love, on a big defining idea (i.e., the covenant of Torah), and on not much else. And that they have fared well throughout their desert trek, and will fare even better in the verdant new land if – *and only if* – they continue to live with gratitude and appreciation.

How should they express gratitude and appreciation? For one, by “hearing,” i.e., hearkening and obeying the system of mitzvot that will distinguish them from the “corrupt” nations that God wants to replace with the children of Israel. *V’haya im shamoa tish’m’u et mitzvot ado-nai.* “It shall come to pass if you surely listen to my commandments,” words from our parashah that constitute the middle paragraph of the liturgical unit knows as the *Sh’ma.*

The S’fas Emes teaches that the word *v’haya* in this paragraph, “it shall come to pass,” indicates *simcha* or joy, meaning that when the Torah leads with this word, it is about to express a joyful episode or idea. If so, then the commandment to hear these mitzvot anticipates an act of joy that precedes the doing of the commandments themselves.

This, he says, is what Pirkey Avot means when it declares *s’char mitzvah mitzvah*, “the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah,” meaning not simply that there’s no payoff for doing the commandments, but that the act of letting oneself be commanded to be grateful is in fact the “reward.”

However, it is a reward that must be prepared for. How does one prepare for the joy one experiences in doing mitzvot and sensing gratitude? By reciting a *b’rachah*, a blessing, before performing the act itself.

Now we are getting closer to the question of why we recite blessings in Jewish practice. We don’t recite the formula “Baruch atah Hashem” because the Torah commands it, for in fact the Torah doesn’t provide that formula, nor does it specify which actions must be preceded by blessings, or which blessings must be connected to which foods and beverages. All of that is Rabbinic. It comes from the classical Rabbis of the years between the First Century BCE and the Fifth Century CE.

And whereas it used to be nearly impossible for those without a high-level yeshiva education to study the discussions of the Rabbis on this and other topics, the path-breaking work of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who passed from this life yesterday, makes it possible for us to delve into these matters in full.

In Rabbi Steinsaltz’s introduction to chapter 7 of the Talmudic tractate B’rachot, he points out that while most blessings are required by Rabbinic law rather than the Torah itself, there is nonetheless one set of blessings that the Torah does indeed command. Those are the blessings before and after eating a full meal, meaning a meal with bread, the so-called *Birkat Hamazon.* And *that* commandment is found in our Torah portion:

“For the Eternal 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; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper. *V’achalta,* therefore when you have eaten, *v’sava’ta,* and when you are satiated, *uveirachta,* then you shall *bless* the Eternal your God for the good land which God has given you.”

From this one word, *uveirachta*, “and you shall bless,” comes the commandment to verbalize our gratitude following each meal, and thus to condition ourselves to connecting eating with satiation, but also with gratitude for being able to meet our needs, and with the joy that comes from being able to recognize and express that gratitude.

Chapter 7 of Tractate B’rachot goes into great detail about what blessings should be said, and by whom, and in what order, and how many need to be present to recite a formal invitation, or *zimmun*. But it all boils down to the fact that gratitude is essential to the Jewish ethos, and that without such an awareness one cannot begin to assess the needs of the needy.

That is to say, until one recognizes what it takes to achieve satiation for oneself, one cannot know how much food, or shelter, or wages, or job benefits, or unemployment compensation, or eviction protection, or health care provisions, will make the difference between the “needy” and the “cared for.” One might go so far as to say that the ritualized *b’rachah* system exists in order to routinize empathy, but also to apply that empathy to social policy.

I want to close with a touching Hassidic story recorded in the compendium *Iturey Torah* by Avraham Yaakov Greenberg. It concerns the Magid of Mezeritch, who was Dov Baer ben Avraham, the mid-18th Century direct disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

According to the story, a wealthy man entered the Maggid’s study. The Maggid asked him what he ate every day. “Precious little,” replied the rich man. “I eat like a pauper. I subsist on bread and salt.” The Maggid scoffed at him and told him to eat meat and drink wine every day, in the customary manner of the wealthy.

After the man left, the Maggid’s students asked him why he had said such a counterintuitive thing to the rich person. The Maggid replied to his students: “If he eats meat and drinks wine every day, he will understand how the pauper gets by with bread and salt. But if he himself, as a wealthy man, eats only bread and salt, he will think it’s sufficient for the pauper to get by on even less.”

There you have it. When we make policy for the needy, we cannot pretend that we ourselves are needy, unless in fact we are. We first need to realize that we are rich; that we are blessed; that we are satiated. We need to acknowledge that fact and offer a heartfelt blessing of gratitude. *V’achalta v’sava’ta u’veirachta.* Only then can we begin to figure out what we must do – and how much we must do, and for how long – to bring our fellow human beings to the point where they, too, can say the *Birkat Hamazon* not as an empty ritual, but as a declaration of the truth of their own lives.