

This week's parashah, Eikev, continues Moshe's discourse about how the Israelites are to enter the promised land, and how to behave once they arrive. There are many directions this parasha takes, but I want to focus on one line.

Deuteronomy, Chapter 8, verse 10, instructs us, "V'achalta v'savata u'verachta et Hashem elokecha al ha'aretz hatova asher natan lach." "When you have eaten, and you are satisfied, bless Hashem your God for the good land which God has given you."

In a very pshat, literal understanding, this line is commonly considered to be the proof text for Birkat HaMazon, the blessing after eating. But somewhat more interesting, Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda, an early medieval Kabbalist and teacher of what would become known as "mussar", spiritual discipline, notes that "We do not find any other place in the whole Torah except here where G'd commands us to "bless" His name. . . According to the plain meaning of this legislation we must appreciate that we are not dealing with the needs of the Lord but with the needs of man."

Though we have inherited a whole tradition of blessings of enjoyment over food, smells, sights as well as over mitzvot, this is the only blessing commanded by Torah. Once we are satisfied, before we turn our attention to meeting the next need, we take a moment to bless. Blessing the satisfaction we have experienced is more important than blessing the satisfaction we anticipate.

Now this may sound like a simple commandment about gratitude. But gratitude is not simple. I know that Margot will be speaking about her take on gratitude tomorrow, but I want to share some of my observations about what this brings up this evening.

In general, gratitude is a challenging posture to cultivate. It's easier to feel entitled to our blessings, to think, as Eikev warns us in verse 17, "My own power and the might of my own hand has won this wealth for me."

As Dr. Neel Burton writes for Psychology Today, "[Gratitude] opposes itself to some deeply ingrained human traits such as our striving to better our lot, our need to feel in control of our destiny, and our propensity to credit ourselves for our successes while blaming others for our failures." It's particularly difficult nowadays, he writes, for "In our consumerist society, we tend to focus on what we lack, or on what other people have that we do not, whereas gratitude is the feeling of appreciation for what we already have."

But the wording of this commandment: "When you have eaten and you are satisfied, bless Hashem your God for the good land which God has given you." Is peculiar in ways that actually have a lot to teach us about how we cultivate gratitude.

First of all, "for the good land" - reminds us that food comes from the land; that to have a relationship to food is to have a relationship to place, and that requires humility. Since this verse comes in the context of entering the land of Israel, and clearly referring to that land, we might think the commandment only applies when we are there. But Nachmanides teaches: [God] commanded that you should bless at every time about the satiation and the land that [God] gave you - that [God] gave it as an eternal inheritance to you, and you will be satiated from its goodness. But behold, the obligation of this commandment is in every place."

It's not clear whether he means that even in exile we should be grateful for the land of Israel, or even in exile we should be grateful for food, whatever its source.

What important to me is what's unambiguous – even in exile, we should be grateful. As tempting as it is to say, “how can we bless the land, how can we bless our food when there is so much wrong?” – we are still commanded to find that blessing.

And further, Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda teaches, “when you reflect on the painful periods of your history, the sufferings you experienced in the land of Egypt, and you also look back on the discomforts experienced during your long trek through the desert, you will be inspired to bless the Lord as soon as you will enjoy eating the produce of this land.” So Bahya takes the commandment, “When you have eaten and you are satisfied, bless,” to be about a larger posture – cultivating an attitude of gratitude, even after hardship.

We are doubly challenged right now – not just by the messages of our consumerist society I noted before, but by the larger state of the world. When wildfires rage in California, when parents at the border still do not know where their children are, it is deeply seductive to engage in sympathetic misery and think – with so much wrong with the world, how can I be joyful? It is possibly okay to feel happy? How dare I take time to be grateful for my own blessings in the face of all the bigger things that are wrong?

Both Rabbi Bahya and Nachmanides, in their commentaries, counter that, and ask: “In the face of all that is wrong with the world, how dare we *not* express joyful blessing for the good that we have?” In the face of widespread hunger, how dare we *not* be grateful when our stomachs are satisfied? In the face of violence, how dare we not be grateful for our relative peace?

They both take this commandment about blessing the good land and apply it in the face of complex realities – exile, discomfort and hardship. This is not just in the moments when it is easy to feel grateful. They remind us that even when we are lost, even when we are looking back on a painful history and forward to a troubled future, this commandment is in force: take the moment after you eat to notice that you are satisfied, and to bless. Blessing and gratitude is not a luxury, but a necessity.

That pause for blessing, for noticing the simple fact that our bodies are satisfied, can be a powerful practice in the face of an onslaught of overwhelming news. And a powerful anti-dote to the sympathetic misery that beckons. We might think that misery and overwhelm is the same thing as solidarity. We feel exhausted by it, so we must be working, right?

Nope. And it is only from the place of recognizing how well we are actually resourced that we have the hope of acting for good in the world.

Exile is reality, and yet: we have been fed with the produce of the land. So bless.

I think this a powerful argument in favor of any spiritual practice that helps us slow down, get into our bodies, and notice the difference between what is going on inside and what is coming from outside. This is, by the way, why I keep encouraging you all to sign up for this Psalms Project leading up to the High Holidays. It's a concrete practice that will help us slow down, and notice the state of our own body and soul each day. We need concrete practices together to help us resist misery, to reach for the good – not blind us to what's wrong but to help us have the energy to face it with persistent joy, and God willing – a little blessing.