

Levi Cooper

RELIQS
FOR THE
PRESENT

CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS
ON THE TALMUD

Berakhot II

Maggid Books

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BERAKHOT
CHAPTER SIX

Is there a blessing over manna?

OUR LIVES ARE saturated with blessings. Before almost any act and in almost every situation, there is an appropriate benediction. This is most certainly the case when we put food into our mouths. Our sages set out the rules for blessings to be recited before eating (*M. Berakhot* 6:1–3).

On fruits – that is, crops that grow on trees which produce fruit annually without withering away in the winter – we recite: “Blessed are You, O God, our Lord, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.” Wine, despite its similarity to fruit, has its own unique benediction in recognition of its importance. The opening words are the same, and we conclude by saying: “Creator of the fruit of the vine.” The benediction over certain other fruits such as bananas, and over vegetables, ends: “Creator of the fruit of the ground.” There is a dissenting opinion, not reflected in normative practice, which maintains that the blessing over vegetables is “Creator of various species of herbs.”

A special blessing is mandated for the all-important staple – bread. This blessing concludes: “the One Who brings forth bread from the earth.” The Mishna does not describe a benediction for non-bread grain products – such as pasta, cake, and porridge – but the Talmud does so. It mandates the blessing: “Creator of various kinds of food” (*B. Berakhot* 35a–b).

Further in the Mishna a general blessing is coined: “for everything exists by His word.” This blessing is recited over food that is not grown in the ground, such as meat and milk. This blessing is universal

and comprehensive. It is effective if it is recited before eating any food, even if that substance has its own blessing.

After explaining all of this, the Talmud rules that it is forbidden for a person to benefit from this world – that is, to eat anything – without first reciting a blessing. The Talmud goes further, explaining that eating without a blessing is akin to embezzling Temple property; that is, items that have been set aside for a holy purpose.

A further talmudic condemnation of eating without the preceding benediction does not evoke Temple imagery. Rather it states that benefiting from this world without reciting a blessing is akin to robbing the Almighty and the Congregation of Israel. One Hasidic master – the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordekhai Alter of Góra Kalwaria (1866–1948) – once quipped that since eating without reciting the appropriate blessing is akin to stealing, this obligation is not primarily religious in nature and hence should be incumbent on Jew and gentile alike.

Rabbi Menaḥem Azarya da Fano (1548–1620), the famed Italian kabbalist and halakhic authority, describes the grand feast that will celebrate the End of Days (see *B. Bava Batra* 74b–75a). The main course will be the Leviathan, a gargantuan sea creature that will satisfy all. The tent where the righteous will gather will be made from the hide of this creature of mythical proportions. A real meal should be accompanied by bread, yet our sources are surprisingly silent on whether bread will be served at this banquet. The Rema of Fano – as he is known – offers a novel suggestion. According to a midrash, a jar of magical manna was preserved from the desert-wandering days. As the threat of the destruction of the First Temple loomed, this jar was spirited away to a safe hiding place. According to the Rema of Fano, for the Leviathan feast this jar will be recovered and served as the bread of the meal.

What blessing should be recited on the manna? We can hardly say “the One Who brings forth bread from the earth,” since manna did not come from the ground. Following the pattern of our sages, the Rema of Fano suggests that before eating the manna we will make the novel blessing: “the One Who brings forth bread from heaven.”

Years later, the Hasidic master Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh Shapira of Dynów (1783–1841) recounted a discussion he had at the table of his teacher and relative by marriage, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch of Żydaczów

(1763–1831). His teacher wondered aloud what blessing would be recited on the manna. Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh suggested the approach of the Rema of Fano: “the One Who brings forth bread from heaven.” Those present were unconvinced and continued to debate the possibilities.

Finally one student impishly suggested that no blessing would be recited on the manna. Those present were shocked at the thought: eating the Almighty’s holy manna with no blessing? Absurd! But the student was not deterred, and he explained his reasoning to those sitting around the table. Every object in this world contains sparks of godliness, for there is no reality in this world devoid of the Divine. Without godly sparks, no physical matter would exist. When a blessing is recited before eating, it targets the Divine sparks hidden inside the food and releases them from the physical bonds of this world. In this way the recital of a blessing elevates a mundane physical food from the plane of the material to the realm of the spiritual. The benediction changes the culinary experience from a routine satisfaction of bodily needs to a sacred act with mystical significance.

Thus far with regard to normal foods. The manna, however, was an otherworldly substance, a Divine food. It was so infused with godliness that it had no fully physical manifestation. As such, its consumption was not a physical act that required spiritual elevation and hence no blessing was called for.

Hearing this explanation, Rabbi Zvi Elimelekh was so impressed that he wondered how the holy Rema of Fano had said that a blessing would be recited on manna in the End of Days. Indeed, a close reading of our talmudic passage seems to support the student’s approach: “It is forbidden to benefit from *this world* without a blessing.” The manna was not of this world, and hence required no blessing.

Until we are fortunate enough to taste the manna, when we derive benefit from this world it is appropriate to acknowledge the hand of the Almighty by reciting a blessing. In this way we reveal the Divine even in the mundane.

Let the Torah not depart from our mouths

AS JOSHUA IS about to lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land, the Almighty instructs him that Torah should never depart from his mouth. He should immerse himself in Torah study day and night. This directive is understood not only as a private command for Joshua, but as a dictate for the entire Jewish people, who are charged with being constantly involved in the pursuit of Torah.

This edict alone might suggest that there is no room for any other venture; our time should be dedicated solely to the study of Torah. In response, Rabbi Yishmael opines that the biblical verse *And you will gather your grain* (Deuteronomy 11:14) balances the all-encompassing requirement to study Torah (*B. Berakhot 35b*).

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai, however, feels differently: “If a person ploughs at the time of ploughing, sows at the time of sowing, harvests at the time of harvesting, threshes at the time of threshing, and winnows at the time when the wind blows – what will become of Torah?” Saying “I will just take care of this, and then I will begin study Torah” is a trap – declares Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai – for at every stage there is always some task that will prevent Torah study.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai therefore suggests a different formula: “When the people of Israel do the will of God, their work is done for them by others; then indeed Torah need not depart from their mouths.” The prophetic verse *And strangers will arise and shepherd your flocks* (Isaiah 61:5) describes this reality. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai continues detailing the flip side: “When the people of Israel do not do the will of the Almighty, they must do their work themselves.” This is the situation described by the verse *You will gather your grain, your wine, and your oil*. Moreover, the people of Israel will be forced to do the work of others, as per the biblically described punishment *And you will serve your enemies* (Deuteronomy 28:48).

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai himself put this outlook into practice during the years that he and his son hid in a cave from the Roman authorities (*B. Shabbat* 33b). Buried up to their necks in sand and involved solely in plumbing the depths of Torah, Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar subsisted on water and carobs that were miraculously provided.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai sends a very different message, perhaps reflecting his view later in life (*B. Menahot* 99b). The Talmud first suggests that studying a single chapter of Torah during the day and a single chapter of Torah at night is a fulfilment of the directive that Torah should never depart from our mouths. The Talmud immediately cites a tradition in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai that further lessens the minimum requirement. Even if a person only reads *Shema* in the morning and in the evening, that person has fulfilled the requirement encapsulated in the verse: *This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth* (Joshua 1:8).

The question arises whether this minimum requirement should be publicised. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai declares that it is forbidden to disseminate this teaching, for such a simple road would be too seductive for the unlearned. Seeking the easiest and least taxing way to fulfil the obligation, the masses would go no further than the twice-daily *Shema*. Sadly, earnest Torah study would be the lot of scholars alone.

The Talmud cites a later sage who suggested the opposite: it is a *mitzva* to cite this rule before the unlearned, for it opens a door to Torah for the uninitiated.

On the practical level, one commentator recommends scheduling a daily time slot for Torah study (*Ben Ish Hai*). It should not be cancelled, even if an important business opportunity suddenly arises. The logic for this suggestion is twofold.

First, even though in this scenario Torah study is occupying only two or three hours of someone's day while the rest of the time is spent earning a living, it is as if the entire day is dedicated to learning Torah. This surprising claim is creatively based on a legal principle concerning presumptions. We generally assume – for instance in matters of *kashrut* – that a single item removed from a group of items belongs to the category of the majority of the group. However, if one item alone lies

before us, we no longer consider it as having departed from the majority. In this case we say that the particular item has an even chance of coming from either the majority or the minority. This item has the status of *kavua*, being set, and therefore is not considered as having the status of the majority. So too, if one's Torah study is *kavua*, that is, set at certain times of the day, we do not look at what is being done during most of one's daylight hours. The *kavua* nature of the study session means that we have no recourse to majority/minority calculations. A few hours dedicated to learning can affect how we view the entire day.

The second advantage of the practical suggestion that set times be established for Torah study is based on a psychological observation, not a legal maxim. Those who put aside all money-making opportunities, even for a few hours, and commit this time to Torah instead are making a strong statement about the relative worth of the two endeavours. People who do not cancel a study session for the sake of a business deal are expressing their faith in the Almighty, Who provides a livelihood for each person. The money that could have been earned will come through other avenues. In the meantime, the person has clearly prioritised Torah study.

To this analysis we can add an insight gleaned from a comparison to ritual law. One who eats on Yom Kippur is liable to the severe punishment of excision. However, in order to be liable for this, one must eat an amount greater than a plump date. Eating less than this prescribed measurement – a *ḥatzi shiur* (literally, half measurement) – is forbidden as well, but it is not an infraction of the same magnitude and does not carry the same punishment. When it comes to many positive commandments, there is no concept of *ḥatzi shiur*. For example, a four-cornered garment needs *tzitzit* on each corner to render it wearable. There is no value in tying such fringes on only two of the four corners. While the obligation to study Torah is a positive commandment, its fulfilment is not defined by a minimum measurement. As Torah study is a requirement at every moment, whenever we study Torah we fully fulfil the obligation at that time. A small effort, therefore, is never wasted. This is why even reciting *Shema* fulfils the Torah requirement of that moment. The number of hours spent with Torah is less important than one's relationship to those hours.

If Torah time takes place only when there is nothing else to do, Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai's lament is appropriate: "What will become of Torah?" In contrast, if the hours spent in Torah study are consecrated for this purpose, the result is that they illuminate the entire day, express the relative importance of Torah, and fulfil the requirement that the Torah should not depart from our mouths.

BERAKHOT 35B

Torah and labour

OUR SAGES SEEK to define the relationship between the grand enterprise of Torah study and the necessity of earning a livelihood. They begin by questioning the message of the verse (Deuteronomy 11:14): *And you will gather your grain, your wine, and your oil* (B. *Berakhot* 35b). One of the commentators explains the question (*Tzlah*): Is it not obvious that, once the rains have fallen in a timely fashion and the produce has grown, we then proceed to gather the produce? What additional lesson is contained in this passage?

The Talmud tackles this verse by contrasting it with the Almighty's instruction to Joshua: *This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth* (Joshua 1:8). From the directive to Joshua, we might conclude that we may never cease studying Torah. If this were the case, a person would be precluded from earning a livelihood. Rather, the promise of gathering produce teaches us that the obligation to study Torah retreats before the responsibility of gainful employment.

One commentator explains that those who study Torah while relying on others to provide sustenance will eventually abandon their Torah study (*Rashi*). Indeed, elsewhere our sages teach that Torah which is not combined with work ultimately comes to naught and leads to sin (*M. Avot* 2:2).