

Parashat Behar
Rabbi Fred Klein

When a Jew eats, she is enjoined by our tradition to make a *berakha rishona* and *berakha achrona*, a blessing both before and after eating. What is the purpose of a blessing before eating? One may very well understand the blessing following a meal; one is satiated and naturally thanks God for the bounty they have just received. When we are invited to the home of a friend to eat, it is only polite to thank the host following the meal. However, one would not thank the host before the meal is put on the table! The Talmud grapples with this question.

Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without a benediction is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof', and it is also written, 'The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!' There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said in the other case after.

The implication of this Talmud has radical implications, as it equates the partaking of food without a blessing is actually *stealing* from the Divine. The blessing is actually a request from the Divine to benefit from the bounty of this world in the first place. In our analogy above, it is a request from the host for the permission to eat!

Let us not underestimate the implications of this concept, confusing it with a general view of gratitude. We may feel gratitude for all the bounty we own, and recognize how fortunate we are. However, we would not naturally ask permission to eat that which we produced, bought, or earned with our own labor and sweat. If we pry deeper, the Torah is making a radical statement about ownership- mainly that it is an illusion. No one owns anything in any real sense; they merely have rights of use. If I have bought or produced something, is it mine? If I own land and benefit from that which is on my land, is it mine? In sum- No. As God created the entire universe, there is only one true owner. This fundamental concept of *berakhot* (blessings), which grows out of the concept that God created the entire universe, is developed writ large in *Parashat Behar*. Every concept in the *parasha* points in this direction. The laws of the Sabbatical year teach us that the land must be left fallow every seventh year (Leviticus 25:4-5). Just like there is a Shabbat of days on a personal and micro-level, there is a Shabbat of years on a communal and macro-level. Both are reminders that our world, driven by human initiative and creativity, must retreat before the realization that these concepts are relative.

However, on a biblical level, the reforms of the sabbatical year transcend the concept of land, and impact upon people and debts. The 'Shabbat of the Sabbatical cycle', the Jubilee year, has revolutionary significance. During this year land is returned to its original owner, debts are canceled, and those who needed to sell themselves into slavery to pay debts are freed (Leviticus 25:8-54). In other words, the Torah is mandating an active redistribution of wealth. The justification? "The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Leviticus 25:24). Not

even the Jewish people have a 'natural right' to the land. Only God has a natural right to ownership.

Whether this system ever existed or is a utopian dream is difficult to know. Clearly, *chazal* (the Rabbis) understood that this vision was not realizable in their generations and had to make accommodations to the practical reality that many people would not leave the land fallow and would not make loans if they knew they would soon be canceled.

Still, the Torah challenges us today to reconsider the notions of property, entitlement, and ownership—three pillars of modern capitalism. While capitalism works, are there those who suffer in the process; do we have a responsibility to them? In an election year marked by the increasing gap between rich and poor, the proper balance of wealth both locally and around the world is something we all must grapple with.

Many people question the relevance of 'ritual commandments,' but on further reflection, the blessing of *hamotzi* on the bread has everything do with politics, society, and justice.