

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Bechukotai 5774

You Can Get Satisfaction

Most of Parashat Bechukotai deals with the disastrous consequences of rebellion. If the Jewish People fails to obey God's commandments, pain, death and exile will follow. However, this stern warning is prefaced by a description of the utopic existence that awaits us if we fulfill the laws of the Torah. This bright future, and the new society that we are to build, are described in remarkably simple language:

...you will eat your food (bread) to the point of satisfaction, and [you will] live securely in the land. I will grant peace in the land so that you will sleep without fear. (Leviticus 26:5,6)

The most prominent feature of this vision of the future is peace, and it has been the hope and prayer of Jews for millennia. Surely, the promise that the day would come when they would live as free people in their homeland is a message that empowered and motivated, uplifted and energized not just the individual, but the nation as a whole.

The specific expression of peace, though, speaks to the individual: "You will sleep without fear." The emotional or psychological

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state it addresses is intimate, almost visceral – the terror in the night which gives no respite. At times, fear is irrational, the product of a psychological pathology; other times, fear is the logical reaction to the realities at hand. Throughout Jewish history, one of the most debilitating aspects of exile was fear itself. The Jew in exile often wandered, but more often feared wandering. Our people often had the collective sense that we were building on quicksand, our fate dependent on the largesse of a fickle despot. As if our lives were subject to the changing winds of an impending storm, the Jewish experience was that of a driven leaf, in constant

expectation and dread of being uprooted, of wandering in search of shelter. As the social historian Jacob Katz noted, "It is not a listing of the number of expulsions, whether few or many, which sums up the period, but rather the ever-present dread and possibility of eviction."

The antithesis of this dread is the ability to sleep without fear. It is the certainty, as one puts one's head down at night, that they have reached a place of permanence and security. The blessings which will accrue to us if we follow the commandments demonstrate the fascinating interplay between the political health of a society and the psychological health of the individuals living in that society: The blessings of peace on the national level trickle down to the individual and create tranquility on the most personal, intimate level. This is real peace.

Which leads us to the final element of this utopian vision: satisfaction. This blessing seems so simple, yet its implications are far-reaching. Again, the experience is literally visceral: to be satisfied by our food. To any person who has ever experienced deprivation, this blessing is no trivial matter. For all the world's hungry children – and, for that matter, adults - such a blessing would be literally life altering: "May you never go to sleep hungry. May your food satisfy and satiate you."

Satisfaction, or the lack thereof, may depend upon two disparate causes, one objective and the other subjective. One cause of dissatisfaction stems from the physical realm of the body's basic needs. If there is simply not enough food to supply the body's energy requirements, it is not satisfied. The other cause lies in the realm of the mind, which is not happy with what it has, despite objective reality.

Western man suffers acutely from this sort of dissatisfaction, despite an unprecedented abundance of goods. Perhaps it is simple jealousy; perhaps someone else has more, perhaps theirs is better, or perhaps we simply want what we do not have. Whatever the cause, modern man's dissatisfaction causes him pain that is often as profound as the pangs of hunger experienced by the child in a drought-stricken third-world country. Psychological pain can be just as debilitating as physical pain, if not even more so; the blessing contained in the verses of Parashat Bechukotai addresses both.

Some years ago, I sat down to a meal with a colleague. Before we began to eat, he blessed me, not with the customary “bon appetite” or the Hebrew equivalent – bte’avon. Instead, he said “la-sovah:” May your food satisfy you. When I noted this somewhat unusual expression, he explained that this was a blessing he received on a daily basis from his employer, the Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Shlomo Goren, based on the verses of Parashat Bechukotai: May you find your food physically and psychologically satisfying.

In addition to the three layers of blessing found in our parasha, there is an additional element that should not be overlooked – an element that we mention after every meal: “And you shall eat, and be satiated, and you shall bless God for the land He has given you.” In this verse, found in the Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy), we are commanded to go beyond physical satiation, beyond psychological satisfaction, and to consider the spiritual aspects of the food we eat. We must not forget that the source of our sustenance is God.

The Israelites who wandered in the desert for forty years must have had a very unique perspective on this important lesson. Each day they would lift their eyes and watch as their food descended from heaven. This food was perfect in every way– nourishing, satisfying, perfectly suited to their needs, and effortlessly available in unlimited quantities. When they finally entered the Land of Israel and established an agrarian society, they were called upon to retain the absolute certainty they had achieved in the desert, that sustenance comes from God, despite having to work for their daily bread. In their new agricultural society, the Israelites would become partners in their own destiny. They would share responsibility for their sustenance, and effectively become partners with God. This partnership is the source of blessings that they could not experience when they survived on manna – the blessings of Parashat Bechukotai. This partnership is the source of true satisfaction, true stability – and true peace.

For a more in depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/05/audio-and-essays-parashat-bchukotai.html>

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