Mahatma Gandhi taught, “Earth... provides enough to satisfy everyone’s needs, but not for everyone’s greed.” Histapkut, from the Hebrew word for “enough,” is the antithesis of greed. Where greed breeds insatiable desires, histapkut (נספחות, “simplicity”) enables a person to experience satisfaction from having even the most basic needs met. It is contentment without complacency.

The paradox of histapkut is that when we give up things, we feel greater joy rather than increased yearning. Alan Morin is writes, “The primary target in sight here is to liberate yourself from the bondage of insatiable desire. And you are satisfied.” This kind of satisfaction does not depend on accumulating objects or accolades.

Parashat B’chukotai begins with a promise and a threat. The promise assures us that we will derive satisfaction in major areas of our lives, should we walk faithfully in the ways of Torah. The threat details the countless forms of discontent we will experience, should we turn away from a life of Torah. The language of blessings and curses is hyperbolic and vivid.

Such lists of blessings and curses, presented as divine responses to human behavior here and elsewhere in the Torah, tend to disturb us. In our lives, we regularly experience blessings that we know we could not have earned by the merit of our efforts alone, and we witness curses grievously disproportional to anyone’s misdeeds. If the opening verses of B’chukotai are to serve as more than mere scare tactics, we need to reconsider the nature of what it means to be blessed or cursed.

Whether we perceive the circumstances of our lives to come from God, fate, chance, or other people, we often experience them as something thrust upon us without our doing. However, the ability to perceive a circumstance as a blessing is, in and of itself, a tremendous blessing, and Mussar calls that perception histapkut. By contrast, the perception of a circumstance as a curse is itself a torturous curse.

Specifically, the ability to find satisfaction when our basic needs are fulfilled can bring us calm and even joy, while the compulsion to chase endlessly after all that we desire may cause more suffering and damage than the deprivation we fear so much. Moreover, the compulsive hoarding of resources stemming from such unfounded fear often leads to actual deprivation for others, making histapkut a crucial middah for us to cultivate.

Let us consider the impact of a well-developed middah of histapkut on the blessings and curses described in our parashah. To what extent is the content of a given blessing or curse a matter of perception or state of mind?
When we read, “You shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land” (Leviticus 26:5), a reasonable understanding is that we are being assured of sufficient food and a lack of violent enemies—or, at least, strong protection from such enemies should they exist. Similarly, “I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone” (Leviticus 26:6) might indicate that no one will seek to threaten or harm us or that no one will succeed in doing so, especially since this blessing is followed by examples of military victory.

Yet, what physical circumstances could be described by the curse “I will wreak misery upon you” (Leviticus 26:16; also translated “I will direct panic against you”4) or the threats of despair (m’chalot einayim) and despondency (m’divot nafesh) in the same verse?

Some verses even state explicitly that a given curse refers exclusively to a state of mind. Examples include “You shall flee though none pursues” (Leviticus 26:17) and “As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts. . . . The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword” (Leviticus 26:36–37).

The impact of these curses is entirely on attitude or mental health. Nothing physical has been taken, nor has any external situation changed; yet these are among the most painful and debilitating of the curses described in this parashah. Furthermore, these curses of the mind rather than the body invite us to reexamine some of the blessings that may otherwise have seemed to focus only on the body.

The blessing “You shall eat your fill of bread” (Leviticus 26:5) takes on a new layer of meaning when juxtaposed against the curse “And though you eat, you shall not be satisfied” (Leviticus 26:26). Apparently, one’s “fill of bread” refers to more than just the quantity of food available or consumed. Indeed, Rashi taught that “a single grain would become blessed [when consumed].”5 In other words, the amount of food would not change, but rather its effect on the person eating it.

Similarly, it would seem redundant to state, “I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone” (Leviticus 16:6) immediately after promising that “you shall . . . dwell securely in your land” (Leviticus 16:5), unless the second blessing added something new, such as the ability not only to be safe but to feel safe as well.

We cannot determine how much bread leads to satisfaction, nor what fortifications lead a people to dwell securely in their land, because satisfaction and security result from the interaction of physical realities with a mental and spiritual state of mind. To what extent can we control these states of mind through Mussar practice? What can we do if this trait is particularly weak in us?

In response, I share with you this memory. After leading a weekly discussion group based on Alan Morinis’s book Everyday Holiness, I invited Dr. Morinis as scholar-in-residence. During the visit, I had the
opportunity to ask him a personal question. I was concerned that my struggles with the middah of seder (סדר, “order”) could prevent me from undertaking the disciplined process of Mussar practice.

Dr. Morinis glanced at the tallit I had thoughtlessly tossed onto my desk after services. “Why not start simply by taking care to neatly fold or hang up your tallis after every service?” he suggested. Then, he asked me if I knew why he had chosen that particular practice as a way to begin. “Yes,” I replied. “You know that I already have kavod (כבוד, “honor”) for the tallit, and the best way for me to strengthen a weak middah is to link it to one in which I am already strong.” I knew this lesson because it was one of the many I had learned from Dr. Morinis himself.

Although this technique depends upon the relative strength of each individual’s middot, let us consider the impact of linking histapkut with gratitude, for example. Dayeinu, we say at the Passover seder—“It would have been enough.” We say this about each one of the things God did for us as part of our redemption from Egypt, even though none of them alone would have been enough to make us a people free to live a life of Torah.

Saying that each of those gifts was enough means that any one of the miracles would have been reason enough for us to be grateful. Blessings do not lose their value when they are only part of a larger story. Even Moses does not get the full experience, and yet what he does get is sufficient.

From this perspective, any one of the blessings in B’chukotai would have been enough. We could feel satisfaction from rain coming down at the proper season so that the earth yields its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. Every one of the blessings listed in our parashah, like every one of the blessings we experience today, could lead us to say, Dayeinu, “It would have been enough,” and yet we yearn for so much more.

Our lives, we tell ourselves, will not be livable unless we get into the right college (or any college), unless we get the perfect job (or the one we want right now), unless we live where we want to live, unless other people do what we want them to do. The real blessing is to be able to live with what we have right now and to live with what we are right now. Our imperfect bodies, our imperfect minds, our imperfect lives can be enough, and when we know this, we are blessed beyond compare.

Questions to Ask

What can we learn from the progression of blessings—from climate to agriculture to nourishment, from safety and peace in the land to restfulness and confidence in the body and mind, from a strengthened covenantal relationship to abundance and freedom?

Why might the conditional promise of blessings and threat of curses in B’chukotai be presented to us in the plural form? On what level of family or community does it ring truest to our experience of natural consequences? What enduring impact can
an individual’s words and actions have on the earth and its inhabitants, and how formative can a society’s messages and actions be on an individual?

Practice for the Middah of Histapkut
Set an intention to live without a product or service that enhances comfort or convenience in your life and to do without whatever that may be for a period of at least one month. Pay attention to the discomfort or inconvenience you experience. Are you missing the product or service itself, or is your affliction “all in your head”? Could you live in contentment without this product or service long-term?

Other Middot to Consider
The concept of reward and punishment presented in B’chukotai challenges us to find a healthy balance in the trait of anavah, “humility.” On the one hand, it requires us to acknowledge the limited extent of our direct control over some of the most essential aspects of our existence. On the other hand, it opens our eyes to the vast power we yield over nature and the weight of our responsibility to both current and future generations.

NOTES
3. For example, in Parashat Ki Tavo, parallel lists of blessings and curses are contained in Deuteronomy 28:1–19, part of a longer list from Deuteronomy 27:15–28:68.

5. Rashi on Leviticus 26:5.