

Ekev, 5780¹

I would venture to say that, for most of us, March of 2020 represented our first ever confrontation with the specter of completely running out of food. Recall how supermarket shelves were emptied by anxious hoarders, and rumors spread that food production plants across the nation were shutting down. Recall how people were afraid to step foot into markets, and food delivery websites listed almost every store item as "unavailable," with any trace remaining items requiring 2-3 weeks for a possible delivery. Many Jews who traditionally adhered to the stringency of physically disposing of all of their Chametz before Pesach (i.e., as opposed to selling it to a non-Jew to purchase back after Pesach) opted to sell and buy back rather than destroy their Chametz this year, fearing that food might simply not be available after Pesach.

While this situation was fortunately novel to most us, on the stage of world history, it is certainly more the rule than the exception. A cursory reading of the book of Bereishit repeatedly underscores the scarcity of food in the ancient world. Throughout every generation in history -- including our own -- people have gone hungry, and this has affected their perspective on food in deep ways. Perhaps most impactful to our national collective consciousness is the experience of Holocaust survivors. To the survivor generation, food became sacred. Disposal of food was morally reprehensible, no less profane than the Torah's prohibition against wanton disposal of sacrificial meat. To so many of them, considerations of taste and preference were wholly irrelevant; if it's edible, how could you think of throwing it out?

Immense gratitude for the food we eat is among the most foundational of Jewish values. Birkat Hamazon, along with all of the subsidiary Rabbinic blessings recited before and after eating, constantly reminds us to never take food for granted: *ואכלת ושבעת וברכת* -- eat, enjoy, and bless. That's it. In this most basic three-step formula, we find a secret to life that has been known for millennia, but perhaps forgotten somewhat in recent decades: the ability to transform the most routine eating from an act to a celebration, experiencing joy when consuming even the most unimpressive of victuals. The power of this practice to elevate one's life is immense. As opposed to mindlessly munching while you focus on something else, your soulful recitation of blessings reminds you that you could very well be starving at this moment, feeling just like you felt a week ago in the throes of Tisha B'Av. But instead you have this loaf of bread. You are so, so blessed. No matter what else you are worrying about -- at this moment, what could be bad?

The power of gratitude lies specifically in its experience. The difference between intellectually running through statements of gratitude as opposed to feeling gratefully blessed is comparable

¹ I thank my dear friend, Rabbi Daniel Fridman, for inspiring this piece

to the difference between reading about ice cream and eating it. To fulfill Birkat Hamazon in the desired fashion, one must take the time to bring up the actual emotion of gratitude, experiencing it firsthand. This can be challenging from multiple perspectives, including the necessary investment of time and focus, the need to avoid desensitization to a practice repeated throughout our lives, and the fact that in modern culture, most people generally don't do this sort of thing. But just because something is challenging or different than what we are used to does not mean it is not worth striving for. The cumulative impact on personality that can come from the sum of countless small moments of gratitude is hard to imagine.

It is not uncommon to hear people say that they will deliberately avoid eating bread because they do not wish to incur the hassle of reciting Birkat Hamazon. I, myself, have been guilty of such an attitude at times. But whenever we slip into this mindset, which is so easy to do amidst a busy life schedule, we reveal a profound misunderstanding of Birkat Hamazon and of life. Rather than being the burden, Birkat Hamazon is what actually frees us from the burdens of life. When recited with genuine emotion, the gratitude that it engenders is capable of extricating us from the murkiest of situations. We enter an entirely different level of existence filled with joy and appreciation, experiencing a momentary reprieve from whatever it is that was weighing on us. In this vein, some even have the practice of reciting Birkat Hamazon while holding a cup overflowing with wine, which evokes a heart overflowing with joyful gratitude. And when, after finishing Birkat Hamazon, we re-emerge back into whatever challenge we were facing before pressing pause, we bring with us a refreshed and refocused perspective. It would seem that the more a person feels that he or she does not have time to recite Birkat Hamazon, the more he or she *ipso facto* could benefit from its recitation. Simpletons bless so they can eat, while the wise eat so they can bless.

The more that I live and observe in my life, the more I have come to believe that the greatest joys come from immense appreciation of the simple blessings in our lives. While we spend a good deal of our focus and time on this earth seeking new thrills, travels, and acquisitions, it is specifically the things that are already present and easiest to take for granted -- right under our own roofs -- that have the ability to truly change our lives. COVID-19 has drastically brought this to the forefront of our attention. While the loss of life remains, unqualifiedly, a depressing Divine mystery, many of the secondary effects of the quarantine, including the fears of food scarcity and the reduced access to extravagant pursuits, have been important teachers. We would do well to keep these lessons in mind long after this episode ends.