

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Eikev
August 1, 2026 *** 18 Av, 5786

Eikev in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3041/jewish/Eikev-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Eikev," means "because," and it is found in Deuteronomy 7:12.

In the Parshah of Eikev ("Because"), Moses continues his closing address to the children of Israel, promising them that if they will fulfill the commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah, they will prosper in the Land they are about to conquer and settle in keeping with G-d's promise to their forefathers.

Moses also rebukes them for their failings in their first generation as a people, recalling their worship of the Golden Calf, the rebellion of Korach, the sin of the spies, their angering of G-d at Taveirah, Massah and Kivrot Hataavah ("The Graves of Lust"). "You have been rebellious against G-d," he says to them, "since the day I knew you." But he also speaks of G-d's forgiveness of their sins, and the Second Tablets which G-d inscribed and gave to them following their repentance.

Their forty years in the desert, says Moses to the people, during which G-d sustained them with daily manna from heaven, was to teach them "that man does not live on bread alone, but by the utterance of G-d's mouth does man live."

Moses describes the land they are about to enter as "flowing with milk and honey," blessed with the "seven kinds" (wheat, barley, grapevines, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and dates), and as the place that is the focus of G-d's providence of His

world. He commands them to destroy the idols of the land's former masters, and to beware lest they become haughty and begin to believe that "my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."

A key passage in our Parshah is the second chapter of the Shema, which repeats the fundamental mitzvot enumerated in the Shema's first chapter, and describes the rewards of fulfilling G-d's commandments and the adverse results (famine and exile) of their neglect. It is also the source of the precept of prayer, and includes a reference to the resurrection of the dead in the messianic age.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah: 49:14 – 51:3

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/543183/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the second of a series of seven "haftorot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

The exiled Jewish people express their concern that G-d has abandoned them. G-d reassures them that it is not so, comparing His love and mercy for His people to that of a mother for her children, and even greater than that, too.

The prophet Isaiah then touchingly describes the ingathering of the exiles which will occur with the Messiah's arrival and returning to the initial subject matter of this haftarah, that of the Jewish people's complaint of being abandoned by G-d, he reminds them of their rebellious behavior that brought about the exile and suffering. He concludes with encouraging words, reminding us of what had happened to our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. Just as they were blessed with a child

when they had all but given up hope, so too, G-d will send us the Messiah.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Greatness and Humility by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5769)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/eikev/greatness-and-humility/>

A sequence of verses in this week's sedra gave rise to a beautiful Talmudic passage – one that has found a place in the Siddur. It is among the readings we say after the Evening Service on Saturday night as Shabbat comes to an end. Here is the text on which it is based:

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favouritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.”
Deut. 10:17-18

The juxtaposition of the two verses – the first about God's supremacy, the second about His care for the low and lonely – could not be more striking. The Power of powers cares for the powerless. The Infinite One great shows concern for the small. The Being at the heart of being listens to those at the margins: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, the outcast, the neglected. On this idea, the third century teacher Rabbi Yochanan built the following homily:

Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favouritism and accepts no

bribe.”

Immediately afterwards it is written, “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” It is repeated in the Prophets, as it says: “So says the High and Exalted One, who lives for ever and whose name is Holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with the contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” It is stated a third time in the Writings: “Sing to God, make music for His name, extol Him who rides the clouds – God is His name – and exult before Him.” Immediately afterwards it is written: “Father of the fatherless and judge of widows, is God in His holy habitation.” Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 31a

It is this passage that found its way into the (Ashkenazi) service at the end of Shabbat. Its presence there is to remind us that, as the day of rest ends and we return to our weekday concerns, we should not be so caught up in our own interests that we forget others less favourably situated. To care only for ourselves and those immediately dependant on us is not “the way of God”.

One of the more unusual aspects of being a Chief Rabbi is that one comes to know people one otherwise might not. These were three moments that made a deep impression on me.

From time to time, Elaine and I give dinner parties for people within, and also outside, the Jewish community. Usually, at the end, the guests thank the hosts. Only once, though, did a guest not only thank us but also ask to be allowed to go into the kitchen to thank those who had made and served the meal. It was a fine act of sensitivity. No less interesting was who it was who did so. It was John Major, a British Prime

Minister. Greatness is humility.

The oldest synagogue in Britain is Bevis Marks, in the heart of the City of London. Built in 1701, it was the first purpose-built synagogue in London, created by the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were the first to return to England (or practice their Judaism in public: some had been marranos) after Oliver Cromwell gave permission in 1656 for Jews to return after their expulsion by Edward I in 1290.

Modelled on the Great Synagogue in Amsterdam, it has stayed almost unchanged ever since. Only the addition of electric lights has marked the passing of time – and even so, on special occasions, services are candle-lit as they were in those early days.

For the tercentenary service in 2001, Prince Charles came to the synagogue. There he met members of the community as well as leaders of Anglo-Jewry. What was impressive is that he spent as much time talking to the young men and women who were doing security duty as he did to the great and good of British Jewry. For security reasons, people volunteer to stand guard at communal events – part of the work of one of our finest organisations, the Community Security Trust. Often, people walk past them, hardly noticing their presence. But Prince Charles did notice them, and he made them feel as important as anyone else on that glittering occasion.

Greatness is humility.

Sarah Levene (not her real name) died tragically young. She and her husband had been blessed by God with great success and they were extremely wealthy; but they did not spend their money on themselves. They gave tzedakah on a massive scale – within and beyond the Jewish community, in Britain, Israel and elsewhere. They were among the greatest

philanthropists of our time.

When Sarah died, among those who felt most bereaved were the waiters and waitresses of a well-known hotel in Israel where they often stayed. It transpired that she had come to know all of them – where they came from, what their family situation was, the difficulties they were going through, the problems they faced. She remembered not only their names but also the names of their spouses and children. Whenever any of them needed help, she made sure it came, quietly, unobtrusively. It was a habit she had wherever she went.

After her death I discovered how she and her husband came to be married. He was older than she was, a friend of her parents. She had some weeks free in the summer before the start of the academic year, and Mr Levene (not his real name) gave her a holiday job. One evening after work they were about to join her parents for a meal.

In the street they passed a beggar. Mr Levene, punctilious about the mitzvah of tzedakah, reached into his pocket and gave the man a coin. As they were walking on, Sarah asked him to lend her some money – a fairly large sum, which she promised she would repay at the end of the week when he paid her wages.

He did so. She then ran back to the beggar and gave him the money. “Why did you do that?” he asked, “I had already given him some money.” “What you gave him,” she said, “was enough to help him for today but not enough to make a difference to his life.”

At the end of the week, Mr Levene gave Sarah her wages. She handed him back most of the money, reminding him that she had to repay him for the sum he had lent her. “I will accept the money,” he told her, “Because I do not want to rob you of

[your mitzvah.](#)” But – as he himself told me after her death, “It was then that I decided to ask her to marry me – because her heart was bigger than mine.”

Throughout their marriage they spent as much time and energy on giving their money to charitable causes as they did on earning it. They were responsible for many of the most outstanding educational, medical, and environmental projects of our time. I have had the privilege of knowing other philanthropists – but none who knew the names of the children of the waiters at the hotel where they stayed; none who cared more for those others hardly noticed or who gave help more quietly, more effectively, more humanly. Greatness is humility.

This idea – counter-intuitive, unexpected, life-changing – is one of the great contributions of the Torah to Western civilisation and it is set out in the words of our sedra, when Moses told the people about the “God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God” whose greatness lay not just in the fact that He was Creator of the universe and shaper of history, but that “He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.” Those who do this are the true men and women of God.

[Ekev: Keeping Perspective When We Gone Too Far: Power, Vulnerability, and the Land by Rabbi Shoshana Cohen](#)

[The Predictable Corruption of Power](#)

The Midrash Tanhuma, commenting on the opening of Parshat Mishpatim Exodus 21, names the corruption of power almost clinically, contrasting how power works among people with how it works for God.

All of the strength and praise and greatness and might of the King of Kings is that he loves justice.

It is the way of the world that whomever has a strong arm does not want to conduct his business with justice, rather he ignores justice, cheats and steals... and does what is not right with his enemies. But the Holy One Blessed Be, King of Kings, loves justice, and does His will only with justice. (Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 21:1)

Notice what the midrash is actually claiming. God is the most powerful “king” of all — more powerful than any human strong arm could ever be — and yet God’s defining greatness is precisely that this power never corrupts God’s justice. Among people, a strong arm bending justice toward itself is simply “the way of the world” — a description of what power does, structurally, to a person’s sense of what is fair. Power doesn’t just tempt toward corruption; it reorganizes justice around itself until the bias no longer feels like bias. It sets up a question we will return to: If God’s power and God’s justice can coexist without corruption, why can’t ours?

Ramban locates the deeper logic in the laws protecting the stranger, widow, and orphan: “On the side of their oppressors there is power, and I deliver each one from him that is too strong for him.” (Ramban on Exodus 22:20–23)

The imbalance of power is what makes injustice possible in the first place, and God, according to Ramban, is always on the side of those who are weaker. When the Torah grudgingly permits a king, it surrounds the office with restraints aimed at the corrupting mechanics of power itself: “He shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold.” (Deuteronomy 17:17)

The danger named isn’t that the king will be a bad man — it’s

that accumulation itself corrupts.

And when the people ask Samuel for a king “to be like all the other nations,” Samuel answers with a precise inventory of what concentrated power takes: “He will take your sons... He will take your daughters... He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves... and you shall become his slaves.” (I Samuel 8:11–17)

They want the king anyway. The text treats this not as a failure of information but as the predictable pull of wanting to be normal — even when normal means submitting to the very dynamic just described.

The Rhetoric of Deuteronomy 8: Built to Keep Interrupting You

If corruption by power is predictable, the Torah’s answer is not a single warning but a structure of return to the proper path. Deuteronomy 8 is built as a chiasm that moves from exhortation to wandering, to richness to the central command not to forget, then back to richness again, wandering again, exhortation again. The form performs the argument: You cannot simply move from need into plenty and stay there. The text keeps folding you back.

Its diagnosis of what will go wrong once the need is gone is almost a script for the interior monologue of the well-fed:

You shall eat your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied... then your heart will grow proud, and you will forget the Lord your God... And you will say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” (Deuteronomy 8:12–14, 17)

Comfort manufactures a story of deserving — *I earned this, this is mine by right* — that erases the memory of having been

given anything.

Against this, the Torah installs a ritual counter-mechanism: Deuteronomy 26's bikkurim — first-fruits declaration requires the farmer, basket of harvest in hand, to say these very words aloud: “My father was a wandering Aramean... The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us.” (Deuteronomy 26:5–6)

The moment of greatest agricultural triumph is turned into the moment for declaring dependency and history, rather than achievement.

This is a technology, not a one-time lecture — tied to the agricultural calendar, repeated every year regardless of how settled you've become, because the Torah assumes forgetting is the default setting of comfort. The corrective has to be default too.

When Forgetting Becomes Something Else

Here I want to press further than the sources on their own terms. Deuteronomy 8 and its calendar are calibrated to a particular scale of danger: the quiet, structural forgetting of the settled and comfortable — people who once knew what it was to be strangers slowly ceasing to notice the stranger, forgetting the land was a gift rather than an achievement. That is a real sin, but a sin of *omission* and *self-satisfaction*.

What we are watching now goes beyond that. It is not comfortable people quietly resting on “my power and the might of my hand got me this,” but active, organized, state-backed dispossession and violence — carried out not by individuals losing perspective but by groups backed by systems whose purpose is seizure and displacement. This is the manifestation of I Samuel 8's description of the king: the one who *takes* — fields, homes, life itself — as policy, not lapse.

If we faced only the drift Deuteronomy 8 anticipates, its remedy would be sufficient: keep shifting perspective, keep the calendar turning, and the erosion would be arrested before it hardened. But rituals of remembrance are built to interrupt complacency, not to stop a machine already in motion toward conquest. Answering organized violence with only “let us remember we were once strangers” risks becoming its own consoling story — a practice that soothes the conscience of the powerful while doing nothing to arrest the power.

The Torah’s rhetoric of return was designed to make a reckoning possible, not to be one. Reciting “my father was a fugitive Aramean” strips away the story that your power earned you everything — but that’s only the opening move. It doesn’t yet look at what has been done with the power, or to whom. Remembering you were once a stranger is necessary preparation for facing the harm; it is not itself the facing.

In the West Bank village of Tell last week, settlers backed by a Defense Ministry-funded “rapid response security team” entered a Palestinian village in an area formally administered by the Palestinian Authority. Four Palestinians and two Israelis were killed. Soldiers who were present appear not to have intervened against the armed settlers. In the days after, the Israeli prime minister ordered a Palestinian home demolished, promised a crackdown on Palestinian towns, and moved to recognize additional outposts as official settlements, rewarding with land the very actors whose incursion had triggered the violence.

Dahlia Scheindlin’s account of these events in Haaretz describes not only what happened, but how Israeli mainstream and social media processed it, and what that processing reveals about where things stand. She reports a running toll,

prior to this incident, of sixty-eight Palestinian deaths for every Israeli death in the West Bank that year — a disparity that, she notes, goes largely unremarked in Israeli public life unless a Jew is among the dead. And she points to Elisha Yered, the oft-quoted leader of the so-called “hilltop youth,” who has boasted openly on a podcast about a deliberate strategy of pushing into Palestinian areas to force residents out — an aim, she reports, that government ministers have described as modeled explicitly on Gaza.

This situation that goes beyond corruption into full-scale violence, resists Deuteronomy 8’s own diagnosis, which fears the heart that says “my power got me this” — self-deception born of comfort. What Scheindlin describes is not self-deception. It is a chain of actors — settler, army that declines to intervene, minister who rewards the incursion, government that states its aim aloud — most if not all fully aware of what they are doing. This is not the ordinary human failure to remember we were strangers. It is domination that has learned to call itself self-defense. The Torah’s practice of remembering — “we were strangers too” — was built to soften complacency, not to see through a story constructed specifically to make that memory feel beside the point — or worse, to be used cynically to justify terrible violence.

[The Choice, Faced without Flinching](#)

And yet Deuteronomy itself insists a choice always remains: “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse... Choose life.” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20)

This is not offered as an easy consolation. It is offered as a demand that presupposes we can actually see what we’re choosing between.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her essay “The Ethics of Ambiguity,” sheds even more light on moral choice in the face of deep injustice:

Cowardice doesn't pay... Those reasonable metaphysics, those consoling ethics... only accentuate the disorder from which we suffer... what distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself, “Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn't this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it?” (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*)

De Beauvoir cuts against the temptation to resolve a genuinely ambiguous situation into an easy story, with one side wholly righteous. She insists on staying inside that discomfort instead — refusing the “consoling ethics” that pretend away the tension between means and ends, between the violence done and the good supposedly being pursued. Her sharpest distinction is between two kinds of people: the tyrant, who has settled into “the certainty of his aims” and so never has to ask whether the harm he causes undercuts the good he claims to serve, and the person of real moral seriousness, who keeps asking exactly that — “Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn't this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it?” — precisely because she refuses the tyrant's comfort.

That distinction maps directly onto Deuteronomy 30. Choosing life is not a decision you make once and then rest in, the way the tyrant rests in his certainty. It has to be renewed by continual self-questioning, or it curdles into just another consoling story — one more version of the certainty de Beauvoir is warning against. A people convinced of its own

righteousness, no longer asking whether its own violence undercuts its own claimed values, has stopped choosing in any meaningful sense. It has settled into tyrannical complacency.

The Sifrei Devarim, commenting on the command in this week's parshah to "[walk in His ways](#)," asks what that could possibly mean — how can a person walk in the ways of God? Its answer is that we are to imitate God's own attributes: "[Just as the Holy One is called merciful and gracious, you too be merciful and gracious, and give gratuitously to all... Just as the Holy One is called righteous... you too be righteous.](#)" (Sifrei Devarim, 49:1)

That is the positive side of the choice in Deuteronomy 30—we can choose to imitate God in so many ways.

The Maharal answers the question the Tanhuma raised at the start: If God's power and God's justice coexist without corruption, why can't ours? He explains why we're only asked to imitate God's chesed, kindness, and not God's mishpat, justice: "[There is no correlation at all between human justice and God's justice... a person could make a mistake in enacting justice.](#)" (Maharal, Hiddushei haAggadot, Sotah 14a)

Kindness is something anyone can do without making a mistake, but human justice is fallible. We are not God, and we cannot claim God's exemption from the corrupting pull of a "strong arm." That is exactly the gap the Tanhuma opened with: Only God enacts justice without wavering; a human strong arm cannot be trusted to. So our part is limited to chesed and to striving toward justice — never to declaring that our own justice is God's justice. That humility is itself a check against anyone who dresses up violence as righteousness.

The Torah gave Israel a technology against the ordinary corrosion of comfort: a calendar and a rhetoric built to interrupt self-satisfaction with the memory of vulnerability. That technology remains necessary — but it was built for drift, not for conquest; for the sin of forgetting, not the sin of taking. When power's predictable corruption hardens into organized, state-backed dispossession, remembering that we were once strangers is where the reckoning must begin, not where it ends. Only once we have looked — without the comforting story, without resting in the certainty of our own righteousness — at how far this has actually gone, does Deuteronomy 30's choice become a real choice again, rather than a verse recited over what we have already refused to see.

(Rabbi Shoshana Cohen (she/her) leads T'ruah programming on the ground in Israel and Palestine, including seminars, clergy trips, and the year-long Rabbinical and Cantorial Fellowship.)

Eikev: Bread, Blessings, and “Benchphobia”
by Maharat Ruth Friedman

<https://yeshivatmaharat.org/eikev-bread-blessings-and-benchphobia/>

I recently described the phenomenon of “benchphobia,” a tongue-in-cheek term to refer to one's desire to avoid eating bread so one does not have to bench, to someone who is fairly new to observant Jewish practice. She was baffled by it, because “doesn't benching only take five minutes?” She couldn't understand why someone would alter what they eat in order to avoid having to spend a couple of minutes reciting blessings afterwards. Though she is entirely correct, the fact is that many of us do, at least on occasion, decline to eat bread for this reason. Why do we find benching so onerous, and how

can we reframe it?

In order to properly explore these questions we must first remember that, for Chazal, bread was synonymous with the consumption of a full meal. This means that benching was an inherent component of a complete meal, and not something optional.

In the Babylonian Talmud Berachot 48b, the rabbis outline a series of blessings to be recited after consuming a meal with bread. They derive this d'orayta, or Biblical, obligation from a verse in this week's parsha: [“When you have eaten your fill, give thanks \(v'achalta v'savata, u'verachta\) to the Eternal your God for the good land given to you” \(Devarim 8:10\).](#)

There must be something unique about benching, as it is the only bracha associated with food consumption that is biblically mandated and not rabbinic. The Ramban connects the act of benching to our memory of slavery and suffering in the midbar. Just a few pesukim before, in Devarim 8:2-3, Moshe commands the nation to remember their forty-year journey and how God made them suffer in order to teach them to appreciate that God is their sole provider. The Ramban views [“v'achalta v'savata, u'verachta”](#) as a natural continuation of that memory. Because the nation will retain the memory of their suffering in the midbar, when they eat and become full in the Land of Israel, they will appreciate what they have now, and offer blessings to God. The Malbim takes this one step further, and argues that God purposefully made the Israelites suffer in the midbar in order to inculcate within them this appreciation, which they will express through blessing God after they eat.

Viewed through this lens, benching serves a humbling purpose. Indeed Devarim is replete with caution against

allowing ourselves to grow haughty and start to believe that our successes are of our own making. We are repeatedly warned not to fall into this trap, and instead to remember that everything we have comes from God. Thanking God after we eat is one of the mechanisms that the Torah builds into our lives to prevent this from happening.

There is a potential downside to framing benching as an obligation—it then feels like one! As we see with “benchphobia,” when we are presented with the opportunity to avoid doing one of our many obligations, many of us will seize it, even if the actual performance of the obligation is minimally invasive.

How can we frame benching more positively? Is it possible to see it as an opportunity, and not only an obligation? With this in mind, I want to conclude with the perspective of the Shadal, R. Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865). He notes that the word “u’verachta” is not a language of commandment, but of description; you will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless God. As he explains, this language indicates that benching is not intended as a commandment, but rather as a description of a natural process that will happen when we eat. When we arrive in the Land of Israel, we will enjoy such an abundance of food and success that, when we eat, we will instinctively recognize God’s chesed, and we will naturally be drawn to bless God for what God has given us. In other words, benching is not an obligation to be done after eating a meal, but rather a direct and natural outgrowth of the meal itself.

In a world in which we routinely enjoy complete meals without consuming bread, it can be tempting to avoid benching. However, as the Shadal reminds us, viewing benching as an obligation that we can escape is a fundamental

misunderstanding of the intention of the pasuk. The challenge this presents all of us is how we can cultivate in ourselves the sense of gratitude that the Shadal describes, so that thanking God for our food becomes not an obligation to be avoided, but an organic outgrowth of what it means to enjoy abundance.

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[Full Stomachs, Forgetful Hearts by Benjamin Mann](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/full-stomachs-forgetful-hearts/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/full-stomachs-forgetful-hearts/>

It is a good day when I happen upon the elementary school students at the Schechter School of Long Island while they are singing birkat hamazon, the traditional Jewish blessings after a meal. The kids sing the blessings with gusto, and being with them is a sweet perk of my role as Head of School. If you have spent time in a Jewish day school or summer camp, you are probably familiar with this scene: joyous Jewish children reciting birkat hamazon at full voice, with occasional hand motions and claps to punctuate the words. In addition to the generally uplifting nature of the sound of kids singing, for me, teaching children the regular practice of reciting birkat hamazon holds a deeper and essential educational value. We can find its origins in this week's Torah portion.

As part of Moses's series of sermons that we read throughout Deuteronomy, and his persistent plea that the Israelites remain faithful to God and the covenant, here, Moses imagines a future when the Israelites will have settled in the Land of Israel. At that time, they will enjoy all the benefits of the fertile land, and in Deuteronomy 8:10, we read:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the ETERNAL your God for the good land given to you.

This is the verse referenced in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 21a, as the source for the commandment to recite birkat hamazon.

Rav Yehuda said: From where is the mitzva by Torah law to recite Grace after Meals, derived? As it is stated: “And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God” (Deut. 8:10).

While the elementary school students I mentioned above are happy to recite birkat hamazon, I have found that as kids get older (think of pre-adolescents approaching b’nei mitzvah at 12 or 13), they are often less inclined. Through my many years of teaching middle school students, more than one student has asked me hard and critical questions about Jewish traditions we practice in school, including, “*Why do we have to say birkat hamazon?*”

While it is developmentally appropriate for children at that age to question the adults in their lives, I think the question about birkat hamazon holds more than just a push back against authority. After all, in our parashah, Moses pointed to a time when the Israelites would be well fed, so isn’t it natural for them to feel thankful? Why do we need a commandment to say these blessings after eating? More than that, middle schoolers really don’t like being told how to feel. I understand their annoyance: *Why are you commanding me to feel thankful? If I get what I need, and my tummy is full, I will feel it.*

The answers to these questions can also be found in Parashat Eikev. Moses’s imagined future includes a description of people whose needs are met and who become self-satisfied.

We read in Deuteronomy 8:12–14:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the ETERNAL your God

The concern for this haughty attitude is further articulated in verse 17:

and you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”

In other words, people who are full and satisfied are actually unlikely to feel gratitude. They might give themselves credit for the blessings that they enjoy. As Jeffrey Tigay puts it in The JPS Torah Commentary on Deuteronomy, “The idea that material wealth and satiety can lead to pride and arrogance and forgetting one’s dependence on God is a persistent concern in the Bible” (p. 80).

Another text from Tractate Berakhot 32a backs up Professor Tigay’s assertion and brings a list of biblical quotes, including one from Parashat Eikev (Deut. 8:14), to support the idea that being satiated can lead to trouble.

On a similar note, Rav Aḥa, son of Rav Huna, said that Rav Sheshet said: That is what people say in a popular maxim: Filling his stomach is a type of sin, as it is stated: “When they were fed and became full they were sated, and their hearts were lifted and they have forgotten Me” (Hosea 13:6). Rav Naḥman said: This principle is derived not from the verse in Hosea, but from here: “And your heart is lifted and you forget the Lord” (Deut.8:14). And the Rabbis say that this principle is derived from here: “And they will have eaten and been sated and fattened, and they will turn to other gods”

(Deut. 31:20).

While some people innately feel gratitude, many of us need to be commanded to be thankful, especially at times when we feel satisfied, such as after eating. The commandment to regularly recite birkat hamazon is a way to counter these self-aggrandizing impulses, a gratitude practice that inculcates awareness of blessings that we cannot control. That practice has the potential to help us avoid the pride and arrogance Moses describes. Moreover, psychological research shows that feeling and expressing gratitude makes for happier and more optimistic people. Being thankful is good for us.

The practice of gratitude is an important life lesson that all my students need, so birkat hamazon remains a part of Schechter's daily routines. When a reluctant 12-year-old tells me that they don't want to do it, that is an opportunity to begin a dialogue with them, to share the things I am grateful for in my life, and to ask them to reflect on what they are grateful for. Reciting birkat hamazon at each meal offers my students and me the ongoing and frequent opportunity for this important reflection. So, whether it is with the enthusiastic elementary students or the leery upper school students, I will be excited to sing birkat hamazon with them again when they come back to school this fall. *(Benjamin Mann is Head of School at Schechter School of Long Island; Adjunct Assistant Professor at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at JTS)*

Yahrtzeits

Lynn Reyman remembers her brother Jamie Shedlin on Sat. Aug. 1
Marianne Sender remembers her father Roman Popiel on Sun. Aug. 2.
Harriett Katz remembers her husband Erving Katz on Tues. Aug. 4