

Rabbi's Column

Moses is still engaged in his long filibuster against death, which seems to contain several different things: pep talks to encourage the Israelites that with God's help they can inherit the land which had been promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; statements of how the previous generation showed lack of trust in God; several statements about how to conduct business fairly in the new land.

In the opening section of this week's Torah portion, Moses states:

God gave the unknown manna to eat to make it clear that what you consider bread/food is not the only way to sustain life, but anything God declares will sustain life will actually do so.

You will eat, be satisfied and acknowledge that the good land which God has given you shows that God is blessed.

The second verse is the basis for Birkat HaMazon and Bracha Acharona, the blessings one recites after one eats. If one has bread (or any staple without which there is no meal), then the first set of blessings is recited. Otherwise, there are shorter blessings recited, depending upon what exactly was eaten.

In combination, these verses seem to present the case for reciting a full fledged Birkat HaMazon over anything that sustains life. On the other hand, you can read the second verse as indicating that there is no need to thank God if what you have eaten has not actually satisfied you. So the Rabbis chose a middle ground - even though we can survive on anything God declares to be nourishing food, our meal has not been a satisfying meal worthy of being a meal unless bread (or the staple that replaces bread) has been eaten. If the meal has bread, no matter how skimpy it might actually be, then it is satisfying enough that God's blessed nature shines through the meal.

Moses does engage in a bit of hyperbole, or possibly just plain exaggeration in this portion as well. He claims that the clothes never wore out, and neither did the feet, during the past forty years. Since the group he is currently talking to did not actually wander for forty years, it is possible that they simply outgrew their clothes over time and never wore them out completely. It is also likely that they became so accustomed to walking daily that they felt it was no big thing.

As the High Holidays approach, perhaps we can take this statement made by Moses to heart in our own lives. The more we become accustomed to presuming the best about most of those we see, the less likely we will be to have any negativity they present drag us down as well. [These statements always come with the caveat that if a person is damaging you physically or emotionally, get to safety first. Presuming the best about other people is least damaging to oneself when one is safe from being harmed by them.]