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BS"D
By Michael Sionov
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PARSHAT EMOR

Le'iluy Nishmat: R' Menachem ben Chana

Blessings Redefined

A tourist once visited Israel on a hot week in July. He walked around up north, and in his immense starvation and thirst, he noticed a beautiful orchard with a large vine tree. He wearily trudged into the orchard and began enjoying the luscious grapes. The owner walked outside and saw this American tourist really satiating himself as he consumed one grape after another, and he hollered, "Sir! Don't you know the pasuk in Parshat Yitro: 'Do not steal'? Another pasuk commands 'you shall not rob'! Don't you know that this is clearly theft?!" The tourist looked at the owner in astonishment. "Wow," he commented spiritedly. "There's no land like Israel – you get to eat delicious grapes and even enjoy a d'var Torah!"

R' YY Jacobson shared a fascinating and profound insight. The *gemara* (*Berachot* 35) teaches: "It is forbidden for a person to benefit from this world without first introducing that enjoyment with a blessing, and one who indeed enjoys from this world without reciting a *berachah* is considered having transgressed the sin of *me'ilah* (misusing consecrated property [*hekdesh*] belonging to the Temple)... R' Yehuda quoted Shmuel saying [in more succinct terms]: Anyone who enjoys this world without a blessing is enjoying sacred property belonging to Heaven, as the *pasuk* says 'The earth and everything within it belongs to Hashem.'" In other words, reciting a *berachah* is what allows a person to eat, drink, or derive any pleasure from this world. The commentators, however, struggle with a fundamental question. The *gemara* seems to imply that a blessing extricates food from its sanctity, giving it a mundane status which enables a person to consume it. This is perplexing for many reasons. Firstly, how exactly does this formula operate in *halachah*; how does food go from being sacred pre-blessing and become "unholy" post-blessing? This seems ironic given that through the *berachot*, we actually *acknowledge* that this belongs to G-d! And if a blessing doesn't really remove an item from *hekdesh*, then it wouldn't help to prevent violating *me'ilah*! Furthermore, the *gemara* also expounds that eating without saying a blessing is considered theft; why here does it compare it to an even more intense sin of *me'ilah*?

In this week's *parsha*, the Torah discusses *terumah* – sacred produce and food that is tithed and reserved for only *kohanim* to consume. A *levi* or *yisrael* are prohibited from eating *terumah* – in fact, they are so spiritually allergic to it to the extent that if they (illegally) intake *terumah* intentionally, they subject themselves to the penalty of death through the hands of Heaven (unless they do *teshuvah*). It's like a powerful medicine, which can be life-saving for certain individuals and deathly for others. The *Rambam* writes that among the population of *kohanim*, *terumah* isn't exclusive for adult men; even a *kohen's* wife, minor children, adult children (except for a daughter that married a *yisrael*), Canaanite slaves, and animals can enjoy *terumah*. Even a slave who fled or a wife who rebelled – provided that they are still under the jurisdiction of the *kohen* [i.e.

there was no emancipation or divorce] – can have *terumah*.

The *S'fat Emet* is perplexed with a fascinating phenomenon: the Canaanite slave, who was a full-fledged gentile yesterday and currently a partial Jew, has rights to the *terumah* whereas the loftiest of *yisraelim* do not? *Terumah* is divine and holy food; how can it be that *terumah* is spiritually destructive for someone as elevated as Moshe Rabbenu (according to the opinion that he was just a *levi* and not a *kohen*) but not for a donkey belonging to a *kohen* or a semi-converted Canaanite maidservant? How are we supposed to understand this?

The answer is found from a *pasuk* in Parshat Emor (22:11): "If a *kohen* acquires a soul [i.e. purchases a non-Jewish servant], he is part of his estate and can eat *terumah*, and a child born to that home may partake of his bread." The *Rambam* elaborates that all these people – and even animals – can consume *terumah*, not due to their own merit, but simply because they are part of the *kohen's* household and in his domain. The *kohen's* cow or chicken don't have their own identity – they are his property and thus an extension of him. The Canaanite servant is likewise an extension of his master, as is clear from several places in *Shas*. A *levi* or *yisrael*, as holy and lofty as they may be, are coming in their own identity; when anyone or anything from the *kohen's* household eats *terumah*, it is as if the *kohen* himself is eating it, as they are part of his family and come through his account. The holiness of the *kohen* extends to his household because it's one larger entity.

With this, we can understand the depth behind a *berachah*. Contrary to what some may think, a *berachah* is not just a "thank you"; in fact, the word תודה / *thanks* isn't even in the text of the standard blessing. Every *berachah* usually prefaces with the words: "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the Universe." Through these words, we are proclaiming that Hashem is the King, and if He's the Master, we are His servants! And if we are servants of the Master, we, too, can eat the *hekdesh* because we are just an extension of the *hekdesh*. Thus, what blessings accomplish is extremely profound – it redefines who we are as being in the same unit as Hashem, and at that point, of course we can eat His food since we are part of the family! The *berachah* doesn't change the food item; it consciously alters the person! Of course, we were Hashem's children and servants even before the blessing, but the blessing brings about this uplifting awareness and acknowledgement that we are indeed part of the Divine.

So often throughout the day, we recite blessings. Let us try to utilize these priceless moments to infuse ourselves with the tremendous chizuk permeating within the berachah. In times when you may feel isolated, detached, or alone, allow the blessing to reveal the reality that you are a representative of your Creator, an ambassador of His light, and a piece of infinity.

"There is nothing that Hashem allows us to go through that isn't an opportunity to grow through."