

Parshiot Behar-Bechukotai 5773, 2013:

*Focusing Upon Our Essence*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the thornier, daily halachic problems is that of which *bracha* (blessing) to recite on a particular food. Not too surprisingly, a vast literature has been created by our *poskim* (halachic decisors) that contains a plethora of opinions and approaches regarding every questionable item. Bread, wine, cake, fruit, vegetables, and water – by way of illustration - all have their specific blessing to be recited before one is allowed to enjoy Hashem's bounty. *Talmud Bavli, Berachot 35a* teaches us this idea in the following formulation:

Our Rabbis have taught: It is forbidden to a man to enjoy anything of this world without a benediction, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege. What is his remedy? He should consult a wise man. What will the wise man do for him? He has already committed the offence! — Said Raba: “What it means is that he should consult a wise man beforehand, so that he should teach him blessings and he should not commit sacrilege.” Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: “To enjoy anything of this world without a benediction is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven (*hekdash*), since it says: “The earth is the L-rd's and the fullness thereof.” (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, brackets my own)

It is now quite clear that we are mandated to recite a benediction prior to eating any food, and that we need to do this in an knowledgeable and thoughtful manner. Nearly everyone, however, encounters the following question: “Which blessing should be recited over a food composed of clearly differentiated ingredients?” For example, what *bracha* does apple pie or an ice-cream cone require? In these examples, we have foods composed of two different items competing for one mandated blessing. Therefore, it is frequently

unclear exactly what one ought to do. By definition, one of the foods is of secondary import (*tafel*) to the primary one (*ikar*). The question, of course, is which is which? In time honored Jewish tradition, the answer to our query is a resounding: “It depends.” The determinant in this case, according to many *poskim*, is subjective in nature. Whatever is of singular importance to me, whichever food is more pleasing and desirous in my eyes, will become the *ikar* and the other food the *tafel*. In such an instance, only the main food receives the *bracha*, while the other does not. Clearly, *ikar* and *tafel* are both essential concepts in, and constitutive elements of, this area of Halacha.

In a manner of speaking, Parashat Bechuchotai is also focused upon the concepts of *ikar* and *tafel*. The very first *pasuk* states: “If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 26:3, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105) explains this verse based upon the halachic Midrash known as the *Sifra*:

**If you follow My statutes:** I might think that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However, when Scripture says, “and observe My commandments,” the fulfillment of the commandments is [already] stated. So what is the meaning of “If you follow My statutes?” It means that you must toil in the study of Torah [*Torath Kohanim* 26:2].

The key here is to “toil in the study of Torah.” This, then, is the meaning inherent in the expression, “If you follow My statutes.” The Midrash and Rashi are teaching us a crucial point regarding Jewish life and living: Torah must ever be our *ikar*, our essence – and the center of our lives. The one and only way in which Torah can achieve this status is if we are committed with our complete hearts and souls to its study. In a word, we must encounter the Torah, and lovingly develop a heartfelt relationship with it. This requires strenuous hours of assiduous learning and study, i.e., toil. If we will devote ourselves in

this manner, the Torah will become our *ikar*, our essence, and everything else in the world will be *tafel* to its sublime power and beauty.

With Hashem's help, may we continue to grow in our love of, and devotion to, our holy Torah. Moreover, may it become, and always be, our *ikar* - the true essence of our being.  
*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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