



Food and Harvest in the Torah:

When we think about food in the Torah, we usually think about kashrut. However, there is equal attention given to where our food comes from, how we should treat our fields, and how we can use our resources to help those who do not own their own land.

Leviticus 25:3-6

Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of God: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the after growth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce -- you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you.

שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךְ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר כְּרֶמֶךָ
וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ: וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שְׁבַת
שְׂבָתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאֶרֶץ שְׁבַת לֵה' שְׂדֶךְ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכֶרֶמְךָ
לֹא תִזְמַר: אֶת סְפִיחַ קִצְיֶיךָ לֹא תִקְצֹר וְאֶת עֲנָבֵי
נְזִירֶיךָ לֹא תִבְצֹר שְׁנַת שְׂבָתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאֶרֶץ: וְהִיתָה
שְׁבַת הָאֶרֶץ לָכֶם לֹאֲכַלְהָ לָךְ וּלְעַבְדְּךָ וּלְאִמְתְּךָ
:וּלְשִׁכְיֶיךָ וּלְתוֹשְׁבֵי הַגְּרָיִם עִמָּךְ

- Why are we commanded to rest the land? Are we supposed to believe that the land needs a period of time off, like we do?
- What values does this text teach? How does the idea of Shabbat for the land change the way we think about the things we grow?
- Most of us don't farm regularly, or live in Israel, which makes this text challenging to apply to our own lives. How can we make it relevant today?

Leviticus 19:9-10

When you collect the harvest of your land, you should not collect all the way to the corners of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You must not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you must leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am Hashem your God.

בְּקִצְרְכֶם אֶת קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֶךְ
לְקַצֹּר וּלְקַט קִצְיֶיךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט: וְכֶרֶמְךָ לֹא תַעֲזוֹל
וּפְרֹט כְּרֶמְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעֵנִי וּלְגֵר תַּעֲזֹב אֶתֶם אֲנִי
:ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it will go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow -- in order that Hashem your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; it will go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; it will go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I command you to follow this thing.

כִּי תִקְצַר קְצִירְךָ בַשָּׂדֶה וְשָׁכַחְתָּ עֵמֶר בַּשָּׂדֶה לֹא תָשׁוּב לִקְחָתוֹ לְגֵר לִיתוֹם וְלֹאֲלִמְנָה יְהִי לְמַעַן יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֶיךָ: כִּי תַחֲבֹט זֵיתְךָ לֹא תִפָּאֵר אַחֲרֶיךָ לְגֵר לִיתוֹם וְלֹאֲלִמְנָה יְהִי: כִּי תִבְצַר כֶּרֶמְךָ לֹא תַעֲוִיל אַחֲרֶיךָ לְגֵר לִיתוֹם וְלֹאֲלִמְנָה יְהִי: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: עַל כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה:

- In what way is leaving the corners of the field and left over food different from distributing food through tzedakah money or a food pantry? Is one preferable, or are they just different?
- Why does the food that has been set aside no longer belong to the farmer? What can we learn from that distinction?
- What are the reasons given for following this commandment? Do you think the reasons are necessary, or intuitive?

Birkat Hamazon, First Blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַזֵּן אֶת־הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ בְּטוֹבוֹ, בְּחֵן בְּחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. הוּא נוֹתֵן לָחֶם לְכָל־בָּשָׂר, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ. וּבְטוֹבוֹ הַגָּדוֹל תָּמִיד לֹא חָסַר לָנוּ, וְאֵל יַחֲסֵר לָנוּ, מְזוֹן לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, בְּעִבּוֹר שְׁמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל. כִּי הוּא אֵל זֶן וּמְפָרֵס לְכָל, וּמְטִיב לְכָל, וּמְכִיֵּן מְזוֹן לְכָל־בְּרִיּוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, הַזֵּן אֶת־הַכֹּל.

Blessed are you, Hashem our God, Sovereign of the universe, who feeds everything in your goodness, with compassion, kindness and mercy. He gives food to all living things because His love endures forever. And in His great goodness, we have never been in need, and may we never be in want for food. In His great name, God sustains all, does good for all, and gives food to all of His creations. Praised are you, Hashem, who provides food for all.

- What are some patterns or themes that emerge in this blessing?
- How do these themes harmonize or conflict the sources we saw previously?

- Some of the principals in this prayer do not match what we see in reality. Is there a way to harmonize the two?

Food and Poverty:

Psalms 145:16

You open your hand, feeding every living creature according to its will.

פֹּתַח אֶת יָדְךָ וּמְשִׁבִיעַ לְכֹל חַי רִצּוֹן

Isaiah 55:1-3

Behold, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money; come, buy food and eat: Buy food without money, wine and milk without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, your earnings for what does not satisfy?

הוֹי כֹּל צָמֵא לִכְוֹ לַמַּיִם וְאֲשֶׁר אֵין לוֹ כֶּסֶף לְכוּ שִׁבְרוּ וְאָכְלוּ וּלְכוּ שִׁבְרוּ בְלֹא כֶסֶף וּבְלֹא מַחִיר יַיִן וְחֶלֶב: לְמָה תִשְׁקְלוּ כֶסֶף בְּלֹא לֶחֶם וְיִגִיעֵכֶם בְּלֹא לִשְׂבֻעָה:

- What is the perspective on food given in these two texts?
- Are we supposed to see food as a central part of our life experience, or simply something to sustain ourselves? What would be the difference in either case, if any?

Yevamot 47a

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a convert... [He] is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of neglecting the commandments of] gleanings, the forgotten wheat, the corner and the poor man's portion. He is also told of the punishment for transgressing the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed in this way: "Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten [that which is meant for the poor] you would not have been punishable with karet (being cut off from the community), if you had profaned Shabbat you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now if you eat it you will be punished with karet; if you profane Shabbat you will be punished with stoning."

תנו רבנן גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה... ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות ומודיעין אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני ומודיעין אותו עונשן של מצות אומרים לו הוי יודע שעד שלא באת למדה זו אכלת חלב אי אתה ענוש כרת חללת שבת אי אתה ענוש סקילה ועכשיו אכלת חלב ענוש כרת חללת שבת ענוש סקילה.

Midrash Tehillim 118:17

When you are asked in the world to come, "What was your work?" and you answer, "I fed the hungry," you will be told, "This is the gate of the Lord, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry."

לעולם הבא אמרו לו לאדם מה היה מלאכתך, והוא אומר מאכיל רעבים הייתי, והם יאמרו לו זה השער לה' מאכיל רעבים הכנס בו

BT Bava Batra 8a

It is taught: If a person resides in a town for thirty days, he becomes responsible for contributing to the soup kitchen; three months, to the charity box; six months, to the clothing fund; nine months, to the burial fund; and twelve months, for contributing to the repair of the town walls.

- Why is feeding the hungry considered among the top priorities for the community? What do we learn about hunger versus other needs?
- Do you agree with these ranking/ assessments of importance? What would you change? What would you leave the same?
- Is feeding the hungry enough, or should we take pre-emptive steps as well? Which is more important?

Mishnah Peah 4:9

One who gathers [the yield] from the corner of the field and says, “This is for poor person ‘x,’” Rabbi Eliezer says [the harvest] goes to him. The Sages say he must give it to the poor person who arrives first.

Tur, Yoreh Deah 251

One who comes and says, “Feed me,” we don’t check to see if he is a trickster, rather we feed him immediately. If he were naked and comes and says, “Clothe me,” we investigate to see if he a trickster.

- What do we learn about the needs of the hungry versus other types of needs?
- Why is food considered a more urgent need than anything else? Why can’t you value one’s person hunger against another?
- How can you really know if somebody is hungry? Does it matter?

Food, Kashrut and Justice:

Genesis 9:3-4

Every moving creature that lives will be yours to eat, like the green vegetation, I give you everything. But meat with its lifeblood, do not eat.

Rashi on Genesis 9:4

Meat with its lifeblood: God prohibited them from the limb of the living, as it says while the soul is in it, do not eat the flesh.

Lifeblood: While the soul is in it.

בנפשו דמו - בעוד נפשו בו

Leviticus 11:43-45

For I, Hashem, am your God; you should sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You must not make yourselves impure through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth. Because I, Hashem, lifted you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, and You shall be holy, for I am holy.

אל תשקצו את נפשתיכם בכל השׁרץ השׁרץ ולא תטמאו
בָּהֶם וְנִטְמַתֶּם בָּם
כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹנֵךְ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְהִתְקַדְשֶׁתֶם וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי
קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם בְּכָל הַשְׂרָץ הַרְמֵשׁ
עַל הָאָרֶץ
כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹנֵךְ הַמַּעֲלָה אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵהִיֵּת לָכֶם
לְאֱלֹהִים וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי

- What are the reasons given for forbidding certain foods?
- Meat is clearly permitted. However, there are a lot of limitations placed on what kinds of meat can be eaten. How do you negotiate the relationship between these two things?
- How can we use our food to sanctify ourselves? Is Kashrut automatically ethical?

Kedushat Levi on Parashat Noach

The verse which states “Take for yourself from all that is edible” is said in the language that implies one who feeds others. This is explained in the Midrash which states “The woman that was given to me gave me (fruit) from the tree (and I eat)” The past tense, I ate was not used in the verse. The Midrash teaches a general rule that through eating, a Jew eats in the manner of fixing the flaw of Adam HaRishon that was made through his eating. This fixing is done by way of the mitzvot that Jews do when eating, which are blessing said of one’s food and other blessings said in regards to food before consumption. Therefore, the reason why the verse says “I eat” and not “I ate” implies that an element of Adam’s original eating continues to this day. Thus through the consciousness of our eating, we can repair that which was flawed before.

קדושת לבי על פרשת נח
יאמר קח לך מכל מאכל כי לשון מאכל היינו שהוא
מאכיל את אחרים. ובו יבואר מהמדרש: האשה שנתתי
עמדי היא נתנה לי מן העץ ואכל, אכלתי לא נאמר.
המדרש הכלל כי באכילה מישראל אוכל מתקן הפגם של
אדם הראשון שפגם באכילה דהיינו ע"י המצות שישראל
עושים באכילה הן בברכה על האכילה, הן בשאר מצוות
שישראל עושים בהמאכל קודם האכילה. ובכל מאכל יש
מצות מתקן הפגם של אדם הראשון. ובזה מבואר ואוכל,
אכלתי לא נאמר אלא אכלתי ואוכל עוד. כלומר בזה
... שאוכל עוד ע"י מצות יתוקן מה שפגמתי

Glatt Kosher — Glatt Yoshor - Rav Yosef Breuer, Published 1949.

A further comment: "Kosher" is intimately related to "Yoshor [ethics]." God’s Torah not only demands the observance of Kashrut and the sanctification of our physical enjoyment; it also insists on the sanctification of our social relationships. This requires the strict application of the tenets of justice and righteousness, which avoid even the slightest trace of dishonesty in our business dealings and personal life.

God’s Torah not only demands of us to love our neighbor in that we concern ourselves with his welfare and property, but it insists further on a conduct of uncompromising straightness ("Yoshor") which is inspired not only by the letter of the law but is guided by the ethical principle of honesty which, then, would deserve the honorable title of "Yeshurun."

Jerusalem Post interview with R. Haskel Lookstein and Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, May 3, 2008

Interviewer: In 1971 you were the only Orthodox rabbis to declare that non-union lettuce and grapes should be regarded as non-kosher and you urged Jews to boycott them. What is the basis in Judaism for that position?

Greenberg: We were both students of the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. From him we learned the idea that Halacha [Jewish law] is not just a list of ritual dos and don'ts, but a comprehensive worldview that applies to everything that happens around us. The Torah prohibits the exploitation of workers - so why shouldn't that apply to migrant farm workers picking lettuce or grapes? They were being mistreated, so it was natural for us to apply the principle of non-exploitation to their situation, too. It seemed obvious.

- All three of these texts draw a connection between food and ethical conduct. What are the different models given for how our eating can help fix the world? Which model do you like best?
- Do you think we can make ourselves holy through all of our actions? Can we extend these ideas outside of our kitchens? What is it about food in particular that so often grabs people's attention?
- How can we apply these values to our day-to-day eating?
- Do you think there's a real connection between kashrut and ethics, or has it been created by modern thinkers who want believe that kashrut is more ethical than is actually is?