

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Ekev

The Earth is the Lord's

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ:

And you will eat and be satisfied and give thanks to God for the good land that God has given to you.

[Deuteronomy 8:10]

AVODAH Commentary: The word translated in the verse above as “give thanks” is *berakhta*, which literally means “bless.” In fact, it is because of this verse that Jews traditionally recite *birkat ha-mazon*, a series of blessings after a meal that express our gratitude to God for sustenance.

That explains the custom of grace after meals – it follows from the order of the verse (eat, be satisfied, then bless). But why do we also recite blessings before we eat? The talmudic passage below provides an answer, and a glimpse at Jewish notions of private property.

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: כל הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה -
כאילו נהנה מקדשי שמים, וכתוב: "לה' הארץ ומלואה."

רבי לוי רמי: כתיב לה' הארץ ומלואה, וכתוב: השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם;
לא קשיא, כאן - קודם ברכה, כאן - לאחר ברכה.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: “Anyone who enjoys something in the world without [first saying] a blessing is like someone who takes from food that belongs to God, as it says, *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it...* (Psalms 124:2)

Rabbi Levi pointed out a contradiction between two verses in Scripture: It says *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it*, but it also says *The heavens belong to God but the earth was given to humanity...* (Psalms 115:16). That's not a contradiction. Rather, the first verse refers to the moment before a blessing has been said, and the second verse refers to the moment after a blessing has been said.

[*Berakhot* 35a-b]

QUESTION: You go to the store and buy a banana. You think you own the banana now and you can eat it. But according to the teachings above, you don't own the banana, and if you do eat it, you've stolen from God. What are the implications for how we think about property rights? About the connections between the spiritual and the material parts of life?

Is the view expressed by this teaching different than the notion of “stewardship,” according to which we do not own anything, but we are permitted by God to use the earth's resources in a way that preserves and protects them? If it is different, how so?