

Nourishing the Soul

*Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, p. 221
by Rabbi Chanan Morrison (ravkooktorah.org)*

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the famed Kabbalist of 16th century Tzfat, posed the following question: How can the soul, which is purely spiritual, be nourished from physical food? How is it possible that food enables the soul to remain bound to the body?

He explained that all created matter in the universe - whether human, animal, plant, or mineral - exists only through the power of God's Ten Sayings with which He created the world. This power of Divine 'speech' also exists in food; and that is the spiritual nourishment which the soul is able to absorb when the body eats.

When we recite a b'racha before eating a piece of fruit, we acknowledge that God is the 'Ruler of the universe, Who creates the fruit of trees'. This recognition awakens the fruit's inner spiritual forces, providing spiritual sustenance for the soul.

Blessing over Torah Study

The obligation to recite a blessing over food is explicitly stated in the Torah:

"When you eat and are satisfied, you must bless HaShem your God for the good land that He has given you." (D'varim 8:10)

But what about Torah? What is the source for reciting a b'racha before studying Torah? According to Rabbi Yishmael, this blessing is derived a fortiori:

"If one makes a blessing for that which sustains life in this transient world, then certainly one should make a blessing for that which enables eternal life in the World to Come." (B'rachot 48b)

Why should the blessing over Torah study be based on the blessing for food? Why does it not have its own source?

Appreciating the Torah

Rav Kook explained that we are incapable of truly grasping the greatness of the Torah, a gift from God of immeasurable value. It is easier for us to appreciate material gifts. Only in the World to Come will we properly appreciate the Torah's essential worth.

Intellectually we may recognize the Torah's importance for the world, but this is beyond our emotional faculties. And yet it is possible to deepen our emotional appreciation for the Torah by contemplating the connection that Rabbi Yishmael made between Torah and physical sustenance. If we are filled with strong feelings of gratitude for that which keeps us alive in this temporal world, all the more we should be thankful for that which provides us with eternal life.

This contemplative exercise, Rav Kook noted, is one way we may realize Rabbi Luria's teaching of

how to elevate physical pleasures. By deepening our appreciation for all of God's gifts, we gain spiritually from the inner essence of food. As the Ari z"l wrote:

"Not by bread alone does man live, but by all that comes from God" (D'varim 8:3). This implies that the soul also lives by bread. 📖✍️