

Reading and Fragmentation: Deut 8:8



Wheat has many therapeutic properties. It strengthens the body, improves digestion, increases blood volume, and improves circulation. It is an effective treatment for dissolving kidney stones and promotes lactation.

Bread cleanses and purifies the blood and raises body temperature. Wheat bread strengthens the brain and sharpens mental acuity (Horayos). Our Sages tell us that "bread is the food of the heart" (Midrash Rabba 48)¹

¹ from Shirat Devorah blogspot

Deut: 88: A land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey.

These attributes of the fruit of the Holy Land have already been mentioned (Numbers 20:5 : Ex 13:5; Num 13:23-27; Dt 8:8;) most darkly in the people's complaint : "Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It's not a place of grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates, and there is no water to drink!" The combination of grain, figs vine and pomegranates seem to portray the richness and fecundity of the Holy Land as an archetype of productivity and exotic produce.

The land flowing with milk and honey is another archetype.² The notion of the land bearing fruit, being fruitful as a sign of God's blessing is carried over into the oral interpretation, for instance in the following passage from the Talmud:

ואמר רבי אבא: אין לך קץ מגולה מזה, שנאמר (יחזקאל ל"ו) ואתם הרי ישראל ענפכם תתנו ופריכם תשאו לעמי ישראל וגו'. רבי (אליעזר) (מסורת הש"ס: אלעזר) אומר: אף מזה, שנאמר (זכריה ח') כי לפני הימים (האלה) [ההם] שכר האדם לא נהיה ושכר הבהמה איננה וליוצא ולבא אין שלום מן הצר. מאי ליוצא ולבא אין שלום מן הצר? רב אמר: אף תלמידי חכמים, שכתוב בהם שלום, דכתיב (תהלים קי"ט) שלום רב לאהבי תורתך אין שלום מפני צר. ושמואל אמר: עד שיהיו כל השערים כולן שקולין. אמר רבי חנינא: אין בן דוד בא עד שיתבקש דג לחולה ולא ימצא, שנאמר (יחזקאל ל"ב) אז אשקיע מימיהם ונהרותם כשמן אוליך וכתב (בתריה) (יחזקאל כ"ט) ביום ההוא אצמיח קרן לבית ישראל.

R. Abba also said: **There can be no more manifest [sign of] redemption than this: viz., what is said, But ye, O mountains of Israel, ye shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people of Israel, for they are at hand to come.**(Ezek. XXXVI, 8) R. Eleazar said: Than this too, as it is written, For before these days there was no hire for man, nor any hire for beast; neither was there any peace to him that went out or came in because of the affliction.(Zech. VIII, 10;) What is meant by, 'neither was there any peace to him that went out or came in because of the affliction?' — Rab said: Even for scholars, who are promised peace, as it is written, Great peace have they which love thy law,(Ps. CXIX, 165.) 'There [shall] be no peace on account of the affliction.' Samuel said, 'Until all prices are equal.'³

² 15 such references in the Torah: 4 in Exodus, 1 in Lev., 4 in Numbers, and 6 in Deuteronomy.

³ Rashi explains it as meaning either that the prices of all commodities, e.g., wheat, wine, oil etc. shall be alike, or that all commodities shall be equally dear. But it is difficult to see how this explains 'neither was there any peace etc. Maharsha therefore connects this verse 'to him that went out or came in' with Ezek. XLVI, 9: But when the people of the land shall come before the Lord in the solemn feasts, he that entereth in by the way of the north gate to worship shall go out by the way of the south gate; and he that entereth by the way of the south gate shall go forth by the way of the north gate . . . Accordingly he interprets: until all gates are alike, i.e., all people, whether entering or leaving the Temple-an idiom denoting 'without exception' — will suffer.

(Sanhedrin 98a)

The time for the Messiah himself is heralded with the sign of the land yielding its fruit following millennia of fallowness. The positing of bareness vs fruitfulness as a sign of God's pleasure vs displeasure and maintaining the exile is seen as a typos in midrash as well. The physical agricultural productivity as a sign of God's pleasure and heralding the messiah finds its roots here in Moses' speech and promises of the land in contrast to the spies:

23 When they came to the Valley of Eshkol, they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men. [They] also [took] some pomegranates and figs. **24** That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster [of grapes] the Israelites cut there. **25** At the end of 40 days they returned from scouting out the land.

26 The men went back to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back a report for them and the whole community, and they showed them the fruit of the land. **27** They reported to Moses: **"We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit.**

(Numbers 13:23-27)

The spies themselves report accurately about the land's fecundity and the huge fruit sizes, however this very fact is used to represent their fear that it would be impossible to actually conquer the land. The connection between "flowing with milk and honey" is connected with "fruit".

Later in the talmud the ordering of the fruits in the verse and the comparative sequences are taken literally to reflect a hierarchical value placed upon each one relative to the other in terms of blessings. Rav Kook in his unique approach to the integration of aggadah and halachah as well his love of the land of Israel and the feeling that the messianic era was at hand sees the following passage in his own unique way:

The Blessings of Torah Scholars⁴

The Talmud gives a litmus test to determine if an individual is truly a Torah scholar: listen to how he recites *berachot* (blessings). Clearly, when *berachot* are recited sincerely, they reflect a proper outlook on life and help instill important traits such as gratitude to God. What is less obvious is that even the detailed laws for blessings reflect fundamental concepts of the Torah. For this reason, Torah scholars are punctilious in their blessings.

⁴ [[Gold from the Land of Israel](#), pp. 304-306. Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. II, pp. 186-187; *Olat Re'iyah* vol. I, pp. 374-377.] trans. Chanan Morrisson

Loving the Land of Israel

The following story gives one example of such an exacting approach towards blessings. It also contains an important lesson about love for the Land of Israel.

"Rabbi Hisda and Rabbi Hamenuna were seated at a meal, and were served dates and pomegranates. Rabbi Hamenuna made the blessing over the dates. Rabbi Hisda told him, 'Do you not agree that those fruit mentioned earlier in the verse take precedence when reciting the blessing?' Rabbi Hamenuna responded, 'Dates are mentioned second after the word *land*, while pomegranates are only mentioned fifth.' Rabbi Hisda exclaimed, *"If only we had legs of iron to always follow you and learn from you!"* [Berachot 41b]

The two scholars referred to the verse that praises the Land of Israel for seven grains and fruits:

"It is a land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs and pomegranates; a land of oil-olives and honey-dates." [Deut. 8:8]

(T.B. Berachot 50a)

Rabbi Hisda felt that the blessing should reflect the order of the produce mentioned in the verse. Thus, pomegranates should come first.

Rabbi Hamenuna explained that while the order in the verse is indeed important, there is an even more important factor: how close is the fruit to the word *land* in the verse? Pomegranates are the fifth produce mentioned after the first time *land* appears in the verse; dates, however, are the second fruit mentioned after *land* appears a second time in the verse. In other words, the position of dates in the verse indicates a greater closeness to the Land of Israel; therefore, this fruit deserves to come first.

The thought and care that Rabbi Hamenuna gave to his blessing demonstrates the importance he placed on loving *Eretz Yisrael*. This great love stems from recognizing the unique qualities of the Land - qualities that enable the Jewish people and all of humanity to attain spiritual goals. One who is closer to the Land of Israel, and demonstrates a greater connection to it, comes first for blessing. Such an individual is closer to the perfection that is attained through this special land.

Two Types of Love

Yet, we may ask: why is the word *land* mentioned twice in the verse? Why does the verse divide up the produce of *Eretz Yisrael* into two categories?

There are in fact two types of love for the Land of Israel. One's appreciation for the Land is a function of his spiritual level and awareness. Some value *Eretz Yisrael* because of its unique spiritual qualities. They long "to take pleasure in her stones and love her dust" [Psalms 102:15] in order to fulfill the *mitzvot* that are connected to the Land. They recognize the blessings that *Eretz Yisrael* provides for the spiritual elevation of the Jewish people and the entire world.

Then there are those who appreciate the land for its material benefits. They recognize its value as a homeland for the Jewish people, and work towards settling and rebuilding the land. This form of devotion to the Land of Israel, even though it does not take into account its special spiritual qualities, is nonetheless a good and positive trait.

The verse mentions the word *land* twice, each time followed by a list of produce. This corresponds to the two forms of devotion to the Land of Israel. The first list of produce represents those who love the Land for its elevated, spiritual properties. This group consists of five fruits and grains, corresponding to the Five Books of Moses. This devotion to *Eretz Yisrael* stems from the world of Torah, from an awareness of the spiritual goals of the Jewish people and the entire world.

The second list contains oil-olive, symbolizing knowledge, and the honey-date, representing material contentment. These fruits represent those who appreciate the Land as a place where the Jewish people can be successful in the material spheres of life, whether academic, cultural, or economic.

Rabbi Hamenuna taught us an important lesson: how great is the love for the Land of Israel, even when this love is limited to its physical benefits. When they are connected to the community, all material matters become spiritual ones; the elevated goals will automatically be realized through the bonds of God's people to His Land.

The Pomegranate and the Date

Why does the date take precedence before the pomegranate? Even though the pomegranate belongs to the first group, it is the last fruit in the list. The pomegranate represents those who are aware of the holy qualities of *Eretz Yisrael*, yet in practice remain distant from the Land. These individuals unfortunately take few practical measures to express their love for the Land.

The date, on the other hand, is near the top of the second group. It represents those who only recognize the material benefits of the Land of Israel. Through their efforts, however, they are much closer to the Land, taking practical steps in settling and rebuilding it. Such a person, Rabbi Hamenuna taught, should be strengthened and presented first for a blessing. Devotion to the Land, when promoted in practical, concrete efforts, is a wonderful thing. Thus we find the Talmud [*Sanhedrin* 102b] states that Omri merited to be king in reward for establishing a city in the Land of Israel, even though his intentions were certainly pragmatic.

Legs of Iron

Now we can understand Rabbi Hisda's fervent response, "*If only we had legs of iron to always follow you and learn from you!*" Rav Hisda understood the inner message of Rabbi Hamenuna's teaching. One needs "*legs of iron*" - courage and fortitude like iron - in order to be able to receive this remarkable message, and appreciate the importance of the material strength of Israel.

Similarly, on the national level, we need "*legs of iron*," powerful means to build up the physical aspects of the nation. Then we will have the spiritual strength to create a courageous national spirit. "*And we will learn from you*" - we will follow your path of Torah, and merit inheriting the Land through love and wholeness and inner strength.

Brisker Torah⁵

With the exchange between the two Rabbis in the talmud in mind, a student once approached the famed talmudist, the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzhak Ze'ev Soloveitchik (1886-1959, Brest-Litovsk - Jerusalem) and asked him: How can a proof be brought from this biblical passage regarding precedence in blessings; even if all the items had equal standing, they would have to be written in some order?" The Brisker Rav was visibly angered by such a question: "There is no 'have to' in our holy Torah. Everything has a divine reason!" And then he continued with an answer: "The Midrash notes that at times Aaron's name appears before Moses's name (e.g. Exodus 6:26) and on other occasions the order is reversed (e.g. Exodus 6:27), even within the same biblical story. Our sages conclude that Moses and Aaron were of equal standing and therefore the Torah purposefully alternates the order."

The Brisker Rav concluded: "Where items have no particular order, they are written in the Torah once in one order and later in a different order. The produce, however, appears only in this sequence - perforce, the order has significance!"

The Brisker Rav was not the first authority to tackle this problem. Before him, Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (1713-1793, Poland-Prague) asked this same question and offered a different answer. The seemingly unnecessary repetition of the word *eretz* in the biblical verse indicates that there is an internal hierarchy within the seven - those that are closer to the land take precedence.

Divine blessings, however, may not be limited to the enumerated agricultural species. Rabbi Simha Bunem Alter of Gur (1898-1992, Gora Kalwaria - Jerusalem) was once sitting at a joyous gathering with his hassidim. With a bottle of brandy in his hand, the rebbe was generously doling out a *l'haim* to everyone present. With so many followers present, the liquor was soon finished and those who had not received a *l'haim* heaved a sigh of disappointment. The rebbe looked down at the table and saw that all that remained was orange juice.

⁵ This Torah from [Rabbi Levi Cooper](#) is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes

The Lev Simha, as he was later known, picked up the bottle of orange juice and began to distribute it instead of the brandy. Pouring the juice, he explained: "In the Land of Israel, even on water alone you can say l'haim! Our sages tell us: In the verse describing the seven species of produce with which the Land of Israel is blessed, whatever is mentioned first takes precedence when reciting blessings. The biblical verse that precedes this list says it is a land of water courses, of springs and of depths that come forth in the valley and in the mountain (Deuteronomy 8:7). The water of the Land of Israel was also granted as a blessing, l'haim!"

8: A land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey:

Talmud Berachot 41 b

7

רב חסדא ורב המנונא הוו יתבי בסעודתא, אייתו לקמייהו תמרי ורמוני, שקל רב המנונא בריך אתמרי ברישא. אמר ליה רב חסדא: לא סבירא ליה מר להא דאמר רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי יצחק: כל המוקדם בפסוק זה קודם לברכה? אמר ליה: זה שני לארץ, וזה חמישי לארץ. אמר ליה: מאן יהיב לן נגרי דפרזלא ונשמעינך. איתמר: הביאו לפניהם תאנים וענבים בתוך הסעודה אמר רב הונא: טעונים ברכה לפניהם ואין טעונים ברכה לאחריהם. וכן אמר רב נחמן: טעונים ברכה לפניהם ואין טעונים ברכה לאחריהם ורב ששת אמר: טעונין ברכה בין לפניהם בין לאחריהם, שאין לך דבר שטעון ברכה לפניו ואין טעון ברכה לאחריו אלא פת הבאה בכסנין בלבד.

R. Hisda and R. Hamnuna were seated at a meal, and dates and pomegranates were set before them. R. Hamnuna took some dates and said a blessing over them. Said R. Hisda to him: Does not the Master agree with what R. Joseph, or as some say R. Isaac, said: Whatever is mentioned earlier in this verse has precedence in the matter of benediction? — He replied: This [the date] comes second after the word 'land', and this [the pomegranate] comes fifth.⁵ He replied: Would that we had feet of iron so that we could always [run and] listen to you!

The verse referred to is Deut. VIII, 8, where two lists are given of the products of the Land of Israel, each introduced with the word 'land', and in the first pomegranates are mentioned fifth, while in the second honey (i.e., date honey) is mentioned second.

Possibilities

I believe the difference between Rav Hisda and Rav Hamenuma is more than homiletics or even halachic derivatives but the actual outer limits of discourse, the aliquote of unit midrashic analysis. For Rav Hisda the verse itself was the outer limits and could not be broken down any further into components. It has a unique and discrete unit of analysis so that everything within the verse could only be analyzed sequentially which maintained the integrity of the unit itself.

For Rav Hemenuma the reverse had no such power so all was up for grabs analytically speaking. The repetition of the word “land” is open for analysis and may act as a cue for new hierarchical scales of value.

This discussion as to the final smallest unit of arbitration whether the macro verse or the micro verse point to more profound theologies as depicted by Rav Kook. For me, however, the message is encoded within the textuality of the verse so that the repeating word “land” is used as a signifier for Rav Hamenuma, more than the meaning or semantics of the word. The fact of repetition gives it a status within the microcosm of the verse so much so that the following items and fruits take on a hierarchical scale of values depending upon proximity to the word itself.

ח ארץ חטה ושעורה, וגפן ותאנה ורמון; ארץ-זית שמון, ודבש

Kabbalah and the Seven Species

Rabbi Ginzberg teaches the seven species represent the seven lower sefirot according to kabbalah as follows:

For Havayah your God brings you into a good land, a land of water courses, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey.¹

might גבורה

barley

loving-kindness חסד

wheat

beauty תפארת

grape

acknowledgment הוד

pomegranate

victory נִצָּח
fig

foundation יְסוּד
olive

kingdom מְלֻכּוּת
date palm

If we are to assume these sefirot represent spiritual architectural interactions then the argument between the rabbis in the talmud takes on a different meaning.

The dates represented by Malchut and the pomegranates are represented by HOD or acknowledgement.

They might have then been arguing about what to bless first i.e. what is the single priority in the inner work a person needs to do on his path to spiritual perfection.

Rabbi Hisda says the pomegranate meaning HOD, first to acknowledge, confess and thank the Lord before anything else.

Rav Hamenuma disagrees and says Malchut, the date comes first. Malchut has no light of its own, like the moon, it is merely reflective of whatever shines upon it. Thus the first step in the process must be to become a reflecting mirror to the teachers and the received tradition before anything else.

Rabbi Hisda then concedes, malchut must come first in the ladder of the sefirot gently working one's way up refining the 7 emotional faculties.

Finally the word "land" eretz also implies *artzius* the need to see God even in the lowest level of "land" or the physical world or in mochin dekatnus the small-mindedness. It is precisely the relationship to artzius that defines the hierarchy so that Malchut is closer than Hod thus takes on priority.

This reading allows us the possibility for inner work and a de-literalizing of the land per se, although keeping the structural debate alive and the semantic structure of the verse.