

A PARADOX OF HUMAN RIGHTS

A commentary on *Parashat Eikev*

By Sam Alston

In our reading of the Torah, we are currently in the middle of Moses' grand speech to the people before he dies - reminding them of where they have come from, what has been achieved, and passing on some final wisdom.



* Rabbi Heschel marching alongside Martin Luther King Jr at the Selma march in 1965 quoted as saying "When I marched in Selma, my legs were praying"

One of the bits of wisdom found in *Parashat Eikev* covers an important part of Moses' speech to the people from the mountain and includes the commandment in *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing after meals, that 'When you have eaten and are satisfied, then praise the Eternal One', a mitzvah Jews around the world practice daily.

For many of our Christian fellows, this may seem odd. Christians say grace before meals - when they are at their most hungry and are most likely to appreciate the thought of the food and desire it the most.

Why do we do it the other way around?

Throughout *Parashat Eikev*, Moses reminds us that once we have entered the land we should praise G-d for our victory and remember to follow G-d's

commandments - that even after we have got what we want and are satisfied we should continue to listen to G-d and follow *mitzvot*.

The reasoning for this emphasis becomes clearer once we consider it in the context of human rights. Human rights each build on each other to preserve what we need to be free. If you are hungry then, for example, this limits your ability to exercise your right to vote. You may not have the time to study the candidates' positions, the concentration to participate in the process, and it probably is not top of your priority list. Similarly, if you have no right to freedom of assembly, you may struggle to organise to protect your right to privacy.

The point when we are most capable of guaranteeing our human rights is the point when we are in full possession of our human rights. It is also the point where we are most able to join with others and fight for them to enjoy the same rights as us. However, paradoxically this is the point when we are most likely to feel comfortable and stop valuing our human rights. It is the time when we feel that the government is on our side and thus we do not mind it extending its power into our lives – just as after we have eaten we are likely to be least thankful for another bite of food.

Looked at this way, it is not only our moral and religious obligation to continue to thank G-d and pursue justice once we have been satisfied but it is also the best way to ensure that we still have our human rights and enough to eat.

So next time you fulfill the commandment of *Birkat Hamazon*, think also about how you can pray with your feet and work for human rights for all.

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