

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

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Parashat Ki Tetze: “Lessons for Fruit Pickers”

How Does the Vineyard Allude to Both Physical and Spiritual Nourishment?

Why Does the Torah Allow Fruit Pickers to Eat While They Work?

Usually – during the lengthy, fruit-filled summer season here in Israel – I’m busy picking fruit and preserving the abundance in my bulging freezer as bottles of juice, ice cream, applesauce, compotes, and cakes. Since I have more fruit than I could possibly pick myself, I’m always happy to share the produce, as long as we can also share the work. I invite students to help pick fruit for themselves while also gathering some for our family. Whenever I don’t have enough volunteers, I need to hire someone to help me pick so that the precious produce won’t go to waste.

I always make an effort to carefully explain to hired fruit pickers the Torah laws that apply to them. Even while being paid to harvest fruit, a worker is permitted to eat from the produce while working, but may not gather fruit into pockets, bags, or containers to take away.

I find this to be a beautiful law that takes the feelings and natural desires of the hired worker into consideration. When you are spending hours picking succulent grapes, juicy plums, or bright red cherries, it is only natural to desire to taste a few – or perhaps more than a few. The Torah does not demand a worker remain surrounded by enticing fruit while being forbidden to taste it. Rather, it recognizes the worker’s human needs and permits eating freely from the produce while harvesting it. At the same time, the Torah establishes a clear boundary: the permission is to eat and become satisfied while working, not to collect produce to bring home.

Thus this mitzvah protects the worker from unnecessary temptation. Instead of placing a person in a situation where the delicious fruit constantly passes through her hands while she must resist tasting even a tiny bite, the Torah provides a permissible way to satisfy her natural desire. Thus, the mitzvah teaches us not only to respect another person’s property, but also to be considerate of those who labor on our behalf.

I like to extend the sensitivity behind this Torah law to anyone who helps me cook for Shabbat. When students or others assist me in preparing our Shabbat meals, I always offer them a taste of some of the delicacies we are making and encourage them to feel perfectly free to enjoy them. Food preparation should not create a division between the person who owns the food and the person whose hands are laboring to prepare it. Allowing those who work with our food to partake of its goodness transforms nourishment into an expression of generosity, dignity, and appreciation.

What are the Boundaries of What a Fruit Picker May Eat While Working?

The sensitivity I experience when inviting those who help me prepare food to partake of it is actually embedded in the Torah’s laws governing hired workers. Yet from the plain meaning of the verse, the Torah seems to grant a much broader permission:

ספר דברים פרק כג פסוק כה כִּי תָבֹא בְכֶרֶם רֵעֶךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ עֲנָבִים כְּנֹפֶשֶׁךָ שְׂבֻעָךָ וְאֵל כְּלִיֶּךָ לֹא תִתֵּן:

“When you come into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you feel like until satisfaction; but you shall not put any in your container” (*Devarim* 23:25).

Could this mean that anyone is allowed to simply walk onto another person’s property and eat to their hearts’ content? Rashi clarifies that “the verse is speaking about a worker” – specifically someone laboring with the produce. Thus, the Torah does not merely recommend that an employer generously offer a fruit picker a taste. It grants the worker the right to eat from the produce she is harvesting. Furthermore, this

permission applies specifically while the worker is harvesting for the owner. The words “but you shall not put any into your vessel” teach that the Torah is referring to the time of harvest, when the worker is gathering the fruit into the owner’s vessels. Someone hired for other work in the vineyard, such as digging or tending the soil, does not have the same permission to eat from the fruit (Rashi, *Devarim* 23:25).

The following verse extends the principle from the vineyard to standing grain:

ספר דברים פרק כג פסוק כו כִּי תָבֹא בְקִמַּת רֶעֶךָ וְקִטְפָה מְלִילַת בִּידְךָ וְחִרְמַשׁ לֹא תִנִּיף עַל קִמַּת רֶעֶךָ:

“When you enter your fellow’s standing grain, you may pluck ears with your hand, but you shall not lift a sickle against your fellow’s standing grain” (*Devarim* 23:26).

Our Sages derive from the vineyard and standing grain that the mitzvah is not limited to grapes and grain. Rather, under the conditions defined by halacha, a worker may eat from any produce that grows from the ground while engaged in its harvest (*Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia* 87b).

The Torah’s choice of words reveals the remarkable extent of its consideration for the worker. Rashi explains **כְּנַפְשֶׁךָ**/k’nafshecha – “according to your desire” – to mean “as much as you desire.” Yet the following word, **שְׂבִיעֶךָ**/sov’echa – “until you are satisfied” – establishes a boundary: the worker may eat to satisfaction but not indulge in excessive eating. Thus, the Torah neither demands self-denial nor sanctions gluttony. It allows the worker to respond naturally to her appetite and enjoy the fruit until she is satisfied.

Our Sages extend this generosity even further. They derive from **שְׂבִיעֶךָ**/sov’echa: a worker’s right to eat is not limited by the monetary value of her wages. Even if the value of the produce she eats exceeds what she earns for that period of work, she is permitted to eat until she is satisfied (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 23:925). Her right to eat is determined by her satisfaction, not by the value of her wages. At the same time, this permission is carefully defined. A worker harvesting grapes may eat grapes, but not figs growing nearby; one harvesting figs may eat figs, but not grapes. Yet she may refrain from eating until reaching particularly beautiful fruit and then enjoy it (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 23:925). These detailed laws reveal a delicate balance between generosity and boundaries. The Torah recognizes the natural desire awakened by working closely with enticing food, while teaching us that true nourishment is not about taking whatever we can. We are invited to enjoy Hashem’s abundance within the boundaries that transform desire into satisfaction.

How Do the Hidden Secrets of Torah Nourish Our Souls?

Beyond ensuring that those who harvest our physical food are themselves nourished, the Torah’s description of eating grapes in our fellow’s vineyard also alludes to a deeper kind of nourishment. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov interprets the vineyard as an allusion to entering the inner dimensions of Torah and nourishing the soul with its hidden wisdom.

He explains that **כֶּרֶם**/kerem – “vineyard” – alludes to the vineyard of Hashem, the concealed wisdom of Kabbalah. Wine occupies a unique place in Jewish life, accompanying our holiest moments, from kiddush and *havdalah* to weddings and *brit milah*. The grapes represent the profound secrets of Torah because, just as wine is concealed within the grape, the inner dimensions of Torah are concealed within its revealed teachings. This connection is further reflected in the numerical value of **יין**/yayin – “wine,” which equals seventy, the same numerical value as **סוד**/sod – “secret.”

The continuation of the verse, **כְּנַפְשֶׁךָ שְׂבִיעֶךָ**/k’nafshecha sov’echa – “according to your soul, until you are satisfied” – teaches that our souls become satiated from the secrets of Torah according to the root of our individual souls. Not every person receives Torah in precisely the same way, nor does everyone necessarily connect to the same teacher. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech explains that a person merits receiving the deepest Torah from teachers with whom her soul is intrinsically connected (*Agra D’Kalla, Parashat Ki Tetze*).

I find this interpretation especially meaningful. Just as our bodies do not all thrive on exactly the same foods

our souls also require individualized nourishment. One person may be deeply nourished by the precise analysis of halacha, another by the stories and teachings of Chassidut, while someone else's heart may open through the inner dimensions of Torah without a Chassidic garment. We need to discover the Torah teachings and teachers that truly nourish the unique root of our soul.

Yet entering the vineyard of Torah's secrets also requires humility. The *Agra D'Kalla* interprets וְאֵל כְּלִיךָ לֹא תִתֵּן /v'el kelyecha lo titen – “but you shall not put any into your vessel” – as a warning not to place these profound teachings merely into the vessel of our own reasoning. Especially regarding the secrets of Torah, we cannot rely exclusively on our personal interpretations. Our learning must be firmly rooted in the teachings we have received from our Torah teachers.

The fruit picker therefore teaches us not only how to nourish the body while working, but also how to nourish the soul while learning. We are invited to enter Hashem's vineyard, taste the grapes, discover the wine concealed within them, and partake of the Torah that speaks to the deepest root of our soul – until we are truly satisfied.

How Can We Become an Overflowing Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment for Others?

After learning how the hidden wine within the grapes can nourish our individual souls, we may ask: Is our own spiritual satisfaction the ultimate goal? Rabbi Meir of Apta offers another inner interpretation of our verse, transforming personal nourishment into a channel for nourishing others. He interprets the vineyard as an allusion to tefilah. When we enter deeply into prayer, withdrawing our attention from physical distractions and attaching ourselves to Hashem, we can draw down Divine שְׂפָעַ /shefa – “abundance.” He interprets וְאֵכַלְתָּ עֲנָבִים /v'achalta anavim – “you shall eat grapes” – as receiving this spiritual abundance; כְּנַפְשְׁךָ /k'nafshecha – “according to your soul” – as rectifying our soul; and שֹׂבְעָךָ /sov'echa – “your satisfaction” – as ultimately bringing satiation and abundance into this world (*Or LaShamayim, Parashat Ki Tetze*).

Yet this abundance is not meant to remain with us alone. Rabbi Meir of Apta gives a surprising interpretation of וְאֵל כְּלִיךָ לֹא תִתֵּן /v'el kelyecha lo titen – “but you shall not put any into your vessel.” The tzaddik who draws down Divine abundance should not direct it only toward “his own vessels” – those whom he considers worthy of receiving it. Rather, he should draw down blessing generously for all Israel, without scrutinizing who deserves it (*Or LaShamayim, Parashat Ki Tetze*).

This teaching brings me back to my overflowing fruit trees. When Hashem blesses us with more fruit than we can possibly pick or preserve for ourselves, the abundance naturally invites us to share. Perhaps spiritual nourishment works in much the same way. The Torah we learn, the tefilot we pray, and the blessings we receive are not meant to remain stored within our own vessels. The more deeply we are nourished, the more we can allow that nourishment to overflow to everyone around us.

The fruit picker's mitzvah thus teaches us a much broader lesson about abundance. We may eat and become satisfied, but we are not meant to hoard or grab the abundance for ourselves. Whether Hashem blesses us with fruit, Torah wisdom, spiritual inspiration, or Divine abundance, true nourishment reaches its highest purpose when the blessing we receive becomes a source of blessing for others.

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