

BIRKAT HAMAZON TO AROUSE OUR SPIRIT

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The Birkat Hamazon (blessing of the food), known in Yiddish as *benching* (from the Latin *benedicere*—“bless”), is the three- to five-minute prayer service that we commonly refer to in English as the Grace after Meals.

It’s probably true that most Jews, possibly even a majority of those who would describe themselves as religious, would *not* describe the Birkat Hamazon as a “prayer service.” This wouldn’t be surprising, because it’s common during the Birkat prayers and blessings in some synagogues for individuals to engage in loud talk, to walk about visiting with other people in the room, or to help themselves to more food in the buffet line. But nonetheless, the Birkat is unmistakably a prayer service.

The fact that the Grace after Meals is recited separately from other synagogue services, or recited in the home, makes it no less of a prayer service. A prayer service may be conducted any time or almost anywhere (except in places where idolatry or sexual lewdness is practiced, where there are foul odors, or where excrement can be seen). In fact, the home is the preferred place for Jewish prayer outside of the synagogue. And, of course, many prayers and blessings are said at home, with none prescribed more frequently than those connected with eating, whenever that occurs.

“Among the many blessings that we recite in the fulfillment of our religious duties, the only ones that Scripture explicitly required us to say are those that we say *after* we eat. . . . And though the specific wording of the Grace after Meals did not begin to take shape until the time of Ezra, the Scribe, and was not totally crystallized even by the Talmudic period, to say blessings of thanksgiving after eating was prescribed by the Torah: ‘When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless Adonai your God for the good land that He has given you’ (Deuteronomy 8:10).” (Donin)

But what, precisely, does it mean here to bless God?

The *Sefer haHinnuch*, dating from the 13th century, notes: “. . . when we say continually, ‘Blessed are You, Adonai’ . . . the meaning is evidently not to add blessing to One who has no need of any addition, perish the thought.” Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch teaches that to bless God means instead “to further God’s purposes and wishes for which the free-willed acts of human beings are responsible, or to vow, to promise to do so.”

So “blessing” God by reciting the Birkat is the way in which we proclaim our intention—“a reminder to arouse our spirit with the words of our

mouth” (*Sefer haHinnuch*)—to actually *do* the will of God.

In effect, because we have used the sustenance from God to strengthen ourselves, we are in God’s debt for the restoration of our strength; and, since we are indebted to God for our continued existence, a decent consideration in return demands that we dedicate ourselves to *practical action* that will fulfill and realize God’s will on earth. Therefore, the recitation of the Birkat without action that serves God in our daily life is nothing more than “lip service.” So we are to prime ourselves consciously for such action when we recite the Birkat.

The Birkat Hamazon incorporates four foundational blessings: The Talmud teaches us that Moses first made a blessing for food in thanks for the manna that the Israelites received in the desert; that Joshua added a blessing for the land after the Israelites had entered into Eretz Yisrael; that King David introduced the blessing for Jerusalem after he established it as the capital of the country, and that his son, Solomon, the builder of the First Temple, expanded upon the blessing by expressing his thanks to God for the “great and holy house.” Soon after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the survival of the Jewish people was in doubt, the Sages added a fourth blessing to emphasize the eternal quality of God’s goodness.

But what have these blessings from our history got to do with us—here and now?

First, we are ultimately as dependent on God for our sustenance today as were the Israelites in the desert who, according to the Torah, survived on the manna from heaven. When we wipe away the scales of self-importance from our eyes, we can see that our bread doesn’t come from the supermarket or the bakery or the farmer—the *seeds* of life are gifts from the Creator.

Second, that we were promised a land, Eretz Yisrael, one we could sanctify, and thereby become a light to the nations, has throughout the ages been a spur to our moral vision and action.

Third, we were blessed as a people with the inheritance of Jerusalem as our capital, always holding out before us the ideal of *shalom*—not peace per se, but constant striving for unity with the Holy One—and we were blessed in the city with the Temple, a place of assembly for the people to strengthen themselves in their holy purposes and pursuits as a community.

And fourth, we have been blessed—witness our historic survival and success as a nation—by God’s compassion and mercy toward us.

Why would we *not* be grateful for these blessings, even today?

Over the centuries, thanksgiving prayers for many other blessings were integrated into the first three benedictions. These additional blessings encompass the Torah, the covenant of Abraham (*brit milah*, i.e., ritual circumcision), and David's dynasty, from which the Messiah is to descend.

Would any of us trade the Torah for some other vision and path to a good life? With what would we replace the available power of *brit milah* to foster responsibility among families and communities for the moral careers of our children? And what vision of the future would we prefer to Days of *Mashiach*?

At the end of the Grace, we make several petitions, each beginning with the word "*Harakhaman*" ("May the Merciful One. . .") These are not a part of the obligatory Birkat Hamazon but were added over the centuries, and other petitions may be added now for special occasions.

Why should the obligation to thank God for these blessings be greater *after* we eat than before? Possibly because after eating we are more likely to forget our dependence on God's goodness and, instead, to delude ourselves that we are entirely in control of our own fate. This self-delusion, not acknowledging the goodness God creates and sets to work in the world, leaves us vulnerable to experiences that shatter our morale—we fail to see and rely on the goodness implanted all around us by the Creator.

The Sages decreed, "since bread is the accepted basis of a meal, the full grace must be said only if bread is eaten," but in an amount as small as an egg or even an olive, notwithstanding the Scriptural commandment to say Birkat Hamazon only when one is *sated* from eating. (Berakhot 45a)

Rabbi Avira taught that because of this self-imposed stringency, God showed favoritism to the Jewish people: "The ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, it is written in Your Torah that 'You show no favor or take bribes' (Deuteronomy 10:17). Aren't You showing favor to Israel, for it says, 'God bestows favor upon you'? (Numbers 6:26). Replied God: Why shouldn't I show favor to Israel! Look, I wrote in the Torah, 'When you eat and are satisfied, you must bless God your Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:10)

but they are so stringent that even when they eat as little as the size of an olive or an egg [they say Grace]." (Berakhot 20b)

The naturalistic lesson of the story is that, constantly reminding ourselves to do the will of God—following the Torah's vision and path—is likely to bring down greater blessings upon ourselves.

Here are some basic guidelines:

When three or more males over the age of 13 eat together at the same table, traditionally they are obligated to recite the Birkat as a unit in which one leads and the others respond (Berakhot 49b).

The convening of all who are present to recite the Birkat is called *zimun* (invite). The leader of the service extends an invitation to *bench* with the words "*rabotai nevareikh*" ("gentlemen, let us bless"). But the salutation *khaverai* (i.e., friends) may be substituted for *rabotai*. Those present respond, "Let the name of Adonai be blessed from now and for ever more." The formula of *zimun* may also be used when three or more women are dining together (Berakhot 45b). *Rabotai* (gentlemen) would be replaced by *g'vivotai* (ladies) or *khaverotai*.

The Talmud also teaches us that the honor of leading should be offered to a guest, to ensure that the guest may bless the host through the *harakhaman* to ". . . bless the host and hostess and all who are seated around the table. . . ."

Withal, we are called to *act as a community*. The Chofetz Chayim (Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan, 1838-1933) teaches that when many of us unite to serve God, each of us reaches higher than if acting alone. The effect of the *mitzvah* performed by many of us is much greater than one performed by a few. With many more of us investing in the *mitzvah's* power, we can mutually inspire one another to far more significant action.

We have much to gain by sharing our table, reciting the Birkat together and, when doing so, sharing our day-to-day hopes and pressures. It can be a first step to make the *Shekhina* more palpable in our day-to-day lives. The next step is to *do* something together about the threats to our families and our community that we uncover in that sharing.

Let's arouse our spirit for this service to the Creator by singing the Birkat "in a voice of a great noise, mighty and powerful!"

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