

GETTING ONE'S FILL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

You will eat and be filled, and you will bless Hashem...

Meshech Chochmah: As is so often the case, the gemara in several places^[2] attempts to extract a maximum of halachic conclusions based on our *pasuk*. If we are obligated to bless Hashem when we are sated, all the more so should we bless Him before eating, while we are still hungry! And if we are to bless and thank Hashem for what sustains us in this world, certainly we ought to bless Him for the gift of Torah, which nurtures us for the eternal world.

The gemara concludes, however, that the only *berachah* that we can firmly consider obligatory by Torah (i.e. not rabbinic) law is the *bentching* after a meal of food. The gemara's attempted extrapolation to *berachos* before eating, as well as *berachos* before and after Torah study, fails. Why should this be?

The case for building upon *birkas ha-mazon* and obligating other *berachos* is undoubtedly sound – but predicated on the assumption that the Torah wishes us to express our thanks to Hashem commensurate with the benefit we receive. We feel more enhanced by food when we are hungry than when we are sated; we can appreciate that *olam habo* is of greater importance than this world.

Apparently, the gemara rejects this reason as inadequate to understand the obligation of *birkas ha-mazon*. Gratitude may be part of it, but there is more. *Bentching* is intended to be a corrective for Man's tendency to move further away from G-d after he has satisfied himself, rather than move closer. Man becomes self-assured, confident in his own powers, even haughty, once his needs are filled. As the Torah says a bit further on,^[3] "Lest you eat and be sated...and forget Hashem your G-d." *Bentching* brings us back to reality. It reminds us that it is "He who gave you strength to make wealth."^[4] This reasoning applies only when a person is physically sated – not when he is hungry and in need! The argument that the Torah must obligate us in *berachos* before eating therefore fails.

The very opposite holds true for Torah study. Before immersing oneself in it, a person can easily approach it for selfish reasons, such as to gain honor and recognition. It is too easy for a person to forget that Torah is our lifeblood; that Hashem graced us with Divine wisdom through it. He can abuse its holiness by using Torah as a tool for self-aggrandizement. Worse yet, when Torah is studied for the wrong reasons, it becomes a death-potion, rather than a life-giving elixir.^[5] The Torah therefore commands,^[6] "I will call the Name of Hashem! Praise the greatness of our G-d." We remind

ourselves of the supernal greatness of Torah, and its identity with Hashem's wisdom. We avoid the mistake of the generation that saw the destruction of the Second Temple because they did not make a *berachah* before Torah study.^[7] Correctly understood, they did not sufficiently connect in their minds the great gift of Torah with its Source.

We only need a reminder to be anchored to Torah's Author before we set out to learn. No such need attends to leaving a session of Torah study. Torah is uplifting and edifying; within the study session, a person is protected from retribution and from succumbing to the *yetzer hora*. The Torah can be seen as a string of Names of Hashem;^[8] by clinging to Torah, a person attaches himself to the Name of Hashem. The *neshamah* of every Jew is sourced in the Torah. When Jews connect to it, they become as one entity through it.

In other words, the aftermath of a session of Torah is the polar opposite of a full meal. A person naturally moves closer to Hashem through it, rather than subconsciously moving away.

The gemara^[9] entertains the possibility that *kohanim* do not have to *bentsch* – at least after a meal of offerings in the *beis hamikdash*. Why would we ever think that *kohanim* are spared the requirement of the law? If *birkas ha-mazon* were just a matter of expressing gratitude for calming our hunger, this would make no sense. If our thesis is correct, however, it is quite reasonable to think that eating *kodashim* is a special case. Unlike a typical meal, a mitzvah meal should not, we would think, inflate Man's ego as surely as it fills his belly. There would be no need for a reminder to put Man in his place. (The gemara's conclusion, however, is that even in an elevated mitzvah meal, the physical sensations of eating play a role, and create an opportunity for Man to stumble. Thus, even the *kohen* must *bentsch*.)

Having come so far in understanding the Torah's reason for mandating *birkas ha-mazon*, let us try to comprehend the rabbinic addition to the mitzvah: the fourth *berachah* of *hatov ve-ha-meitiv*/ the One who is good, and who does good. The academy of Yavneh established this *berachah* for the victims of the slaughter at Beitar.^[10] It seems strange that a single incident in our history should be significant enough to warrant a permanent addition to the *birkas ha-mazon*. Moreover, the addition just happens to be thematically similar to the one recited for a plentitude of wine at a meal. And why, for that matter, should a *berachah* for luxurious bounty be limited to wine?

A single thread unites the first three *berachos* – the ones that are *d'orayso*. They add up to the slow, stepwise creation of a Jewish nation. Hashem took us out of Egypt and stood us at Sinai. He sustained and nurtured us with *mohn* for forty years. He led us into the Land, and to the city of Yerushalayim, where we achieved our full stature as a people of the Torah.

The fourth *berachah* celebrates the extraordinary survival in exile of that same nation, determined to go its own separate way. In the wake of the destruction of Yerushalayim it seemed that the survival of the people was an impossibility. At best, they were destined to live semi-civilized lives as eternal

wanderers. The failure at Beitar of the Bar Kochba rebellion – supported by some of the greatest Torah luminaries – was the nadir of long process of destruction of Yerushalayim and the Jewish state.

Inexplicably, however, a ruler allowed the victims of the slaughter to be buried. The Jews correctly saw in this Divine Providence sending a message about the Jewish future. As bleak as things looked after the loss of the war, Hashem would guarantee their survival, even in the worst of times. He would fill the hearts of individuals with a gracious spirit towards the Jews that would save them when waves of destruction would be poised to inundate them. Jews would survive, even as the single sheep among seventy wolves.^[11] This guarantee of Divine assistance through the exile also vindicated the message of all the prophets and leaders who had guided the nation to Yerushalayim. The Beitar reprieve was not about Beitar, but a statement about the rest of the long exile, until the arrival of Moshiach. So is the fourth *berachah*!

The *hatov ve-ha-meitiv berachah* on wine has a similar rationale. Chazal chose a prohibition against non-Jewish wine to create a barrier against intermarriage. The practical implications of this ban are remarkable. Burdened as it was with many disadvantages and disabilities in navigating *galus*, Jews would show their rejection of their neighbors and hosts by treating their wine as something repugnant. Wine would therefore seem to place an impossible burden upon Jewish survival, rather than assure our continuity!

Survive, however, we do. We recite *hatov ve-ha-meitiv* specifically over wine. It, too, serves as a powerful symbol of Hashem's behind-the-scenes leveraging of history to shepherd His children to the verdant pastures at the end of history.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Ekev 8:10
2. Berachos 48B and 21A
3. Devarim 8:12-14
4. Devarim 8:18
5. Shabbos 88B
6. Devarim 33:3
7. Nedarim 81A
8. Ramban, Commentary to Torah, Introduction
9. Arachin 4A
10. Berachos 48B
11. Esther Rabbah 10:11