

# THE COMPOSITION OF BIRKAT HAMAZON

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

## I THE TEXTUAL ASSOCIATION

***When you have eaten your fill, you shall bless YHVH your God for the good land that He has given you. (Devarim 8:10)***

These words are the explicit source for the commandment of **Birkat haMazon** - blessing God after eating a meal. There are several blessings in the **Birkat haMazon**:

1. **HaZan** - praise for God, who sustains the world;
2. **Birkat Ha'Aretz** - thanks to God for everything, focusing on the Land of Israel;
3. **Boneh Yerushalayim** - petition to protect and rebuild Jerusalem;
4. **HaTov vехаMeitiv** - general praise and thanks for God.

In addition, when three or more men eat together, the **Birkat haMazon** is prefaced by the invitation known as **Zimun**. The Gemara (Berakhot 48b) expounds:

*When you have eaten your fill, you shall bless - **Birkat haZimun**;*

*the LORD your God - **Birkat haZan**;*

*for the...land - **Birkat haAretz**;*

*...the good (land)... - **Boneh Yerushalayim**;*

*that He has given you - **HaTov vехаMeitiv**.*

From this piece, it seems clear that all five of these blessings are sourced in the Torah. Although differing opinions are presented regarding **HaTov vехаMeitiv** and **Zimun**, the basic formula of the first three blessings is, according to all opinions, mandated by the Torah - **D'Orayta**.

## II

### THE HISTORIC ASSOCIATION

Earlier on that same page in the Gemara, we are told that Moshe composed the **Birkat haZan** when the Manna fell, Joshua composed **Birkat ha'Aretz** when the people entered the Land of Israel, David and Solomon composed **Boneh Yerushalayim** at different stages of the building of the city, and the Rabbis at Yavneh composed **HaTov vехаMeitiv** in response to the burial of the martyrs of Beitar.

These two statements are apparently in conflict: From the first, it seems that at least three of the blessings are mandated by the Torah; from the second, it seems that these blessings were created at different point in history; such that at most, the first one was "in operation" at the time of the Torah, and the rest must be Rabbinic obligations.

One possible approach depends upon an understanding of form and text within the context of prayer. According to many Rishonim (see Rambam, Ch. 1 of Hilkhhot Tefilla, Ramban's comments on Sefer haMitzvot, Shores 1 etc.), there are several Mitzvot in the Torah which are presented in a most general way - and later generations (prophets, sages, custom) create form and, eventually, specific texts through which these Mitzvot are fulfilled. For instance, according to several Rishonim (Rabbenu Yonah, Tosafot, Raavan), the Mitzvah of reading the Shema is essentially a Mitzvah of reading words of Torah - and the rabbis decided upon this particular text. According to Rambam, daily prayer - as mandated by the Torah - has only the most general form - praise, request and thanks. It was later rabbis (Ezra and his court) who formulated the specific blessings. (Other examples include Kiddush, Hallel (according to Ramban), teaching the Exodus to our children on Pesach night, confession on Yom Kippur etc.)

We can posit the same here. The Torah commands us to bless God after eating by praising, thanking and beseeching Him. The Torah itself not only provides no text for this blessing, it also provides no area of content.

When the Manna fell, Moshe composed **HaZan**, praising God for His kindness in sustaining the world. He not only composed this blessing, he also ordained that it be recited after every meal.

When the Torah was given, that blessing, along with the general blessings of (atopical and contentless) thanks and request, were the proper way to fulfill the command of **Birkat haMazon**.

When Joshua led the people into the Land of Israel, he "fixed" the "thanking" component to revolve around the Land. Clearly, the content of his blessing was different than ours, insofar as his likely included mention of the unfought battles for the Land. The third blessing was still a generic request.

When David build Jerusalem - and when Solomon constructed the Temple - they each "pinned down" a component of request (at that time it involved "protecting the city" - not "rebuilding it" as we request).

In summary, there were three stages in the development of Birkat haMazon:

1. The Torah's command, to praise, thank and beseech God after eating;
2. The historical targeting of specific content areas for each blessing; (Moshe - *praise* for God's sustenance; Joshua - *thanks* for the Land; David/Solomon - *request* for protection of Jerusalem and the Temple)
3. The evolution of a (more or less) fixed text, after the destruction of the Temple.

As we praise, thank and beseech God after a meal, we also understand that by doing so we not only strengthen our connection with the Holy One, who is Blessed - but also with our history and our Land.

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