

# *Birkat Ha-Mazon: Strengthening the Physical and Arousing the Spiritual*

## I.

Common wisdom has it that *Birkat Ha-Mazon*'s main function is to thank God for the meal we have just eaten. A closer analysis of the content of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, however, reveals that this understanding is overly simplistic.

*Birkat Ha-Mazon* is comprised of four *berakhot* – *Birkat Ha-Zan*, *Birkat Ha-Aretz*, *Birkat Yerushalayim*, and *Birkat Ha-Tov Ve-Ha-Meitiv*. Of these *berakhot*, only the first deals with thanking God for sustaining the world by providing food. The second *berakhah* thanks God for the gift of the Land of Israel (the Talmud notes that, in addition, it is critical that this *berakhah* make some reference to *berit milah* and the Torah itself). The third *berakhah* deals with Jerusalem and the Temple, referencing, as well, the Davidic monarchy. The fourth *berakhah* – identified by the Talmud as rabbinic in origin – uses a multitude of terms to describe God's redemptive relationship with the Jewish people and expresses confidence that He will continue to provide for us. The Talmud states<sup>714</sup> that this fourth *berakhah* was added to *Birkat Ha-Mazon* following the burial of the Jews killed when Bar Kokhba's rebellion was crushed at Beitar.

Clearly, the emphasis in *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is not on simply thanking God for the meal. *Birkat Ha-Mazon* – particularly the second and third *berakhot* – seems to focus in much greater detail on the core values of Judaism: the commitment to *berit milah*, Torah, *Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem, the Temple, and the commitment to the Davidic monarchy, particularly *Mashi'ach*. What role do all these themes play in *Birkat Ha-Mazon*?

There is a well-known chasidic tale of a *chasid* who was at a loss to understand the difference between his renowned *rebbe* and himself. After all, both recited the *berakhah* of *Borei Pri Ha-Eitz* and consumed an apple! Sensing the *chasid's* confusion, the *rebbe* explained that he would attempt to capture the spiritual gulf between the two of them. "You see," explained the *rebbe*, "you make the *berakhah* in order to eat the apple; I eat the apple in order to make the *berakhah*."<sup>715</sup>

The *rebbe's* pithy statement may offer us some insight into the multiple themes of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. We are accustomed to viewing *Birkat Ha-Mazon* as something we need to do because we ate. Perhaps we would be better served by viewing eating as a necessary prerequisite to *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, which is an end in its own right.

Let's elaborate a little. Commenting on Yitzchak's request that his son prepare a meal for him before receiving Yitzchak's blessing, Rabbenu Bechaye writes:

Yitzchak's intent in asking for the delicacies was not simply to indulge the body, but in order that his soul be joyous. For as the physical forces are strengthened, so too the spiritual forces are aroused, and *ru'ach ha-kodesh* would devolve upon him through his physical pleasure.<sup>716</sup>

It is curious that, according to many medieval authorities, *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is the only biblically ordained regular prayer. Why would the Torah not provide a system of prayer to be recited daily and instead focus exclusively on a grace after meals? Doesn't a system of prayer seem more basic to a religious lifestyle?

Perhaps we can apply the insight of Rabbenu Bechaye to help us understand the intent behind the *mitzvah* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. The Torah wants us to take out time on a regular basis to focus on Judaism's core values. The best way in which to do that is to have us eat, thus "strengthening the physical forces" of the body, and be satisfied. (According to biblical law, the obligation of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* only applies when one is satisfied after having

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<sup>714</sup>. *Berakhot* 48b.

<sup>715</sup>. R. Paysach Krohn, *The Maggid Speaks*, identifies the *rebbe* as R. Aharon Karliner (pp. 163–164).

<sup>716</sup>. Commentary to *Bereishit* 27:4.

eaten.) With the strengthening of the physical forces, the “spiritual forces are aroused,” and one is able to focus those strengths on appreciating the Jewish mission and its basic values.

This approach fits with the Talmud’s teaching<sup>717</sup> that the first *berakhah* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* was composed by *Moshe Rabbenu* to enable the Jews in the desert to thank God for the gift of the *man*. Ramban writes, based on talmudic sources, that the *man* was an unusual spiritual food, one that the Jewish people only merited being able to eat after the spiritual awakening they experienced at the Red Sea.<sup>718</sup> The *man* was particularly suited, then, to be a physical vehicle through which the Jewish people would be able to achieve spiritual heights. As such, a *berakhah* on *man* acknowledges not only physical bounty but spiritual blessings bestowed as well.

According to this analysis, even the first *berakhah* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* speaks to a focus on the spiritual as a by-product of physical sustenance.

## II.

One of the unique elements of the *mitzvah* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is the concept of *zimun*. In its original form, *zimun* dictated that when at least three men ate together, one of them would invite the others to join him in -praising God.<sup>719</sup> The leader would then recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* out loud in its entirety; the others would listen and fulfill their obligation in that fashion.<sup>720</sup>

How are we to understand this unique phenomenon of *zimun*, something which has no parallel in any other area of *Halakhah*?

R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explains<sup>721</sup> that the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* recited as part of a *zimun* is conceptually different than *Birkat Ha-Mazon* recited by an individual. It is not simply three individuals each reciting *Birkat Ha-Mazon*; when there is a *zimun*, *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is transformed into a *birkat ha-chaburah*, a *berakhah* which is espoused by the group as a whole, not simply the individuals who comprise it. It is for that reason, the Rav explains, that the Talmud considers the possibility that three men who ate together and mistakenly recited *Birkat Ha-Mazon* individually might still be able to repeat *Birkat Ha-Mazon* as a *zimun*. They are not simply repeating that which has already been done; they are expressing an entirely new dimension of the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, one which can only be expressed as a group.

Why would the *Halakhah* create a fundamentally different form of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for a group?

If we are correct that the aim of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is not simply to express thanks for the food, but to use the nourishment as an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to Judaism’s core values, the creation of a unique dimension of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* for the *chaburah* – the group of three – is readily understandable. After all, while an individual can certainly actualize these core values in his own life to an extent, these values will be much more fully realized in a group setting. Three is the minimum number one needs to create a sense of a group, rather than an individual (one person) or a pair (two people).<sup>722</sup>

The notion that the *zimun* represents the collective focusing on Judaism’s core values helps us understand the *Halakhah*’s insistence<sup>723</sup> that “*gadol mevareikh*,” that the most prominent member of the group lead the *zimun*; the mini-community espousing the basic Jewish value system created by the *zimun* needs a prominent leader. We can also understand why the Talmud considers the notion that in the absence of a *gadol* in the group that *zimun* is eliminated.<sup>724</sup> How can a community of like-minded adherents be created in the absence of someone to lead that community?

We can also make more sense of the unique opinion of R. Yose Ha-Gelili, who posits different – and increasingly elaborate – forms of *zimun* for three, for ten, for one hundred, for one thousand, and ultimately for ten thousand

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<sup>717</sup>. *Berakhot* 48b.

<sup>718</sup>. Commentary to *Shemot* 16:7.

<sup>719</sup>. For three or more men, the *zimun* is obligatory. Some authorities hold that three or more women who eat together are equally obligated in a *zimun*; most hold that they have the option to do so but not an obligation. See *Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 192:7 and *Bei’ur Ha-Gra* ad loc.

<sup>720</sup>. As time went on, the practice changed such that each of the participants would recite *Birkat Ha-Mazon* himself. See *Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 183:7.

<sup>721</sup>. *Shi’urim Le-Zekher Abba Mari* vol. 2, pp. 81–104.

<sup>722</sup>. Perhaps this is what the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) means when it praises God for having given the Torah in a way in which the number three is a recurring theme. Torah was given to us as a group, to be observed as a collective, not simply as individuals.

<sup>723</sup>. *Berakhot* 47a.

<sup>724</sup>. *Berakhot* 45b.

people gathered together. With each incremental increase in the numbers gathered, the community created becomes not only quantitatively but also qualitatively different. Each type of *zimun* represents a different level of community, each one more readily poised to espouse and actualize the basic tenets of Torah.<sup>725</sup>

### III.

As mentioned, the fourth *berakhah* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* is rabbinic in origin. The Talmud explains<sup>726</sup> that after the Roman Emperor Hadrian crushed the Bar Kokhba rebellion at Beitar, he refused to allow the bodies of the slain to be buried. Miraculously, the bodies did not decompose for two years until the Roman authorities finally permitted their burial. In gratitude for both the bodies' preservation as well as their ultimate burial, the rabbis composed the *Birkat Ha-Tov Ve-Ha-Meitiv* as a fourth *berakhah* for *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

On the surface, the choice of *Birkat Ha-Mazon* as a venue to express gratitude for the burial is odd. What does this event in Jewish history have to do with thanking God for the food we have eaten?

The approach we have outlined – that *Birkat Ha-Mazon* serves to express the core aspirations of Judaism – can help us understand why the Rabbis saw the fourth *berakhah* as meaningfully connected to *Birkat Ha-Mazon*.

As mentioned above, among the ideas that *Birkat Ha-Mazon* speaks of are the commitment to *Eretz Yisrael*, *berit milah*, Torah, Jerusalem, the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, and the Davidic dynasty. All of these ideas seemed to have suffered in the aftermath of the defeat of Bar Kokhba. The Jews had seen in Bar Kokhba the possibility of a Messianic redemption from Roman rule, a restoration of Jewish sovereignty over *Eretz Yisrael* under a descendant of King David, and a rebuilding of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. Not only were all these dreams cruelly crushed, but the post-rebellion Hadrianic decrees outlawed the practice of *berit milah* and Torah study in particular. It seemed as if it was pointless to yearn for the actualization of all the values spoken of in the first three *berakhot* of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*!

By creating the *berakhah* of *Ha-Tov Ve-Ha-Meitiv*, the Rabbis were directly responding to these pessimistic thoughts. Although the Jews had lost much with the defeat of Bar Kokhba, the loss was not a death knell. The miraculous preservation and burial of the bodies was a sign that God was still watching over the Jewish people, that the fulfillment of all the values described in *Birkat Ha-Mazon* was deferred, not destroyed. The fourth *berakhah* is an affirmation that the hopes expressed in the first three *berakhot* are still relevant even when times seem bleak.<sup>727</sup>

This affirmation can be seen in the text of *Ha-Tov Ve-Ha-Meitiv*. *Halakhah* dictates<sup>728</sup> that the text speak of God's benevolence in the past, present, and future tenses: "He has been good to us, He is good to us, He will be good to us." The idea conveyed is that God's benevolence, clearly manifest in early times, has not ceased despite the difficulties of the present, and will once again appear in its full glory in the future.

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<sup>725</sup>. *Berakhot* 49b. See the comments of *Tiferet Yisrael* to this *mishnah*.

<sup>726</sup>. *Ta'anit* 31a.

<sup>727</sup>. A similar idea is developed by R. Meir Simcha Ha-Kohen of Dvinsk (*Meshech Chokhmah* to *Devarim* 8:10) and R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook (*Siddur Olat Re'iyah*).

<sup>728</sup>. *Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 189:1.