

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ekev

Bircas Hamazon, Beitar and the Jewish People

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ

You will eat and you will be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem, your God, for the good Land that He gave you. (8:10)

THE FOUR BERACHOS OF BIRCAS HAMAZON

Of the four berachos which comprise bircas hamazon, the first three are de'Oraisa, expounded by the Gemara¹ from the phrases in our pasuk; while the fourth berachah, Hatov veHameitiv, is de'Rabbanan. The Gemara² explains that this berachah was instituted as an expression of gratitude over something which occurred following the fall of Beitar. The Gemara relates that the Romans did not initially allow those fallen in Beitar to be buried and they lay exposed for seven years. Subsequently, a new Roman leader took over and permitted them to be buried. Although seven years had passed, the bodies were miraculously still completely intact and had not decomposed in the interim period. In recognition of this kindness, the berachah of Hatov veHameitiv was added to bircas hamazon.

The obvious question is, notwithstanding the great kindness which was manifest in this event, why should an episode so specific to that time and place find expression in an ongoing berachah as part of bircas hamazon?

Additionally, Rishonim have raised the question that this very same berachah of Hatov veHameitiv exists in another context altogether, namely, when one goes from drinking one type of wine to a superior type. Why is this berachah shared between these two entirely unconnected things?³

THE FIRST THREE BERACHOS – AM YISRAEL IN THEIR LAND

As a preface to his explanation of the fourth berachah of bircas hamazon, the Meshech

1 Berachos 48b.

2 Berachos ibid.

3 See Tosafos, Pesachim 101a s.v. *shinui and Rosh, Berachos, perek 9 siman 15.*

Chochmah begins by discussing the first three. After all, we may ask, given that this berachah is recited after one has eaten bread, why does it not simply focus on our gratitude for our food, branching out instead to discuss matters of Eretz Yisrael, Yerushalayim and the Beis Hamikdash?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, is that our response to receiving physical sustenance is given full meaning by placing it within the context of our basic development as Hashem's nation in this world.

- ▶ The first berachah was composed by Moshe Rabbeinu upon Bnei Yisrael receiving the manna. Through eating manna in the midbar, we developed a sense of Hashem's direct supervision over us. Additionally, the spiritual nature of the manna allowed us to connect fundamentally with the spiritual contents of the Torah, as the Mechilta states:⁴ "The Torah was given only to those who ate the manna."
- ▶ The second berachah thanks Hashem for giving us Eretz Yisrael, the land which is most conducive to developing our connection with Hashem.
- ▶ This connection attains a higher level still with the existence of the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim, as mentioned in the third berachah.

THE FOURTH BERACHAH – AM YISRAEL IN EXILE

All the above pertains to the Jewish people when they are in their land with their Beis Hamikdash. However, what happens when the Beis Hamikdash has been destroyed and they are no longer in their land, having been sent in to *galus*? This critical question was most acutely felt at the time following the defeat of Beitar, signaling the end of the Bar Kochba revolt, upon which so many had pinned their hopes. Is the connection between Hashem and the Jewish people, of which bircas hamazon speaks, now a thing of the past?

At this crucial juncture, and in this very bleak period in their history, the Jewish people were granted a special kindness by Hashem: the bodies that were finally returned for burial were miraculously intact. This gesture contained a message that was intended to go far beyond that particular episode. It was a message that was meant to accompany the Jewish people throughout the entire duration of their *galus*, that in spite of everything, Hashem would guide them and protect them, keeping His people intact, inclining the hearts of rulers benevolently toward them when their survival warranted it. The berachah of Hatov veHameitiv is a blessing over the miraculous survival of the Jewish people in *galus*.

THE SYNERGY OF THE FOUR BERACHOS

This idea will give us deeper insight into a statement of the Gemara⁵ regarding the berachah of Hatov veHameitiv, namely, that the three expressions of *malchus* (kingship) contained within this berachah⁶ correspond to the first three berachos of bircas hamazon. What is most unusual about this situation is that, since the first three

4 Beginning of Parshas Beshalach.

5 Berachos 49a.

6 These are: "ברוך אתה... מלך העולם, ה-א-ל אבינו מלכנו... המלך הטוב והמטיב"

berachos are linked to each other to form a group,⁷ neither the second nor the third berachos themselves have expressions of *malchus*! This means that the fourth berachah contains a “corresponding element” – which is then absent from the berachos to which it corresponds! How are we to understand this reversed situation?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, is that the fourth berachah does not *echo* the idea of *malchus* within the first three berachos, it *provides* it! Contemplating the idea of our miraculous survival in *galus* contained within Hatov veHameitiv provides us with an *experiential link* toward Hashem’s hashgachah over us. This in turn strengthens our identification with the full level of hashgachah which we enjoyed in Eretz Yisrael in days past – and look forward to enjoying again in the future! Since our connection with the special relationship described in the first three berachos comes through the fourth one, the expressions of *malchus* for those three berachos, representing that relationship, are likewise found in the fourth berachah.

Stunning!

A BLESSING SHARED

As mentioned above, the berachah of Hatov veHameitiv is also recited in another context, namely, when partaking of wine. The reason for this, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that wine accentuates the miracle expressed by this berachah in Bircas Hamazon. Any other nation that is uprooted from their original setting optimizes their chances for continued survival by naturalizing within their new surroundings, blending in with the host population. Not so with the Jewish people. They remain fundamentally distinct in a way which would seem to mitigate against their continued survival, and nevertheless, Hashem sees to it that they endure. The entity which most pointedly represents the distinctness which the Jewish people maintain vis a vis their gentile neighbors is wine, with all the accompanying strictures enacted by Chazal to ensure that certain social barriers are maintained. For this reason, the berachah over Jewish survival in *galus* is shared between the episode following Beitar – which first demonstrated it, and the medium of wine – which continues to highlight it.

7 A concept known as “*berachah semucha lechavertah*”.