

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Ekev

Birkas Hamazon

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

*You will eat and you will be satisfied and you will bless Hashem, your God, for the good land that He has given you.*¹

INTRODUCTION

Our verse is the source for the mitzvah of Birkas Hamazon, the blessing recited after eating bread. This is the only blessing explicitly obligated by the Torah.² [All the other blessings we recite were instituted by the *Anshei Knesses Hagedolah* (Men of the Great Assembly) in the beginning of the Second Commonwealth soon after returning from the Babylonian exile.] It is noteworthy that the Torah mandates that a blessing be recited after one has eaten bread, and not before. Recognition of Hashem as the Source of our sustenance is of critical importance, yet never more so than after the person has eaten and been satiated. It is characteristic of this stage that it can induce a person to a state that is accompanied by an over-inflated sense of complacency and self-importance, allowing his awareness of Hashem to become jaded and slip away. To this end, the Torah says “Remember Hashem – even after you have eaten and become satisfied!”³

THE MAKE-UP OF BIRKAS HAMAZON

Birkas Hamazon comprises four blessings, the first three of which are from the Torah, with the fourth – *Hatov ve’Hameitiv* – being added by the Sages at a later stage. The basis of the three Torah blessings is expounded by the Gemara⁴ from the words in our verse as follows:

וּבֵרַכְתָּ – זוֹ בֵרַכְתָּ הַזֶּה
עַל הָאָרֶץ – זֶה הֵרַכְתָּ הָאָרֶץ

1 Devarim 8:10.

2 The only other blessing that is referred to in the Talmud as a Torah obligation is *birkas haTorah* – the blessing before learning Torah, see Berachos 21a and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 47, with comments of Mishnah Berurah ibid. sec. 1.

3 Meshech Chochmah Devarim loc. cit.

4 Berachos 48b.

“And you shall bless Hashem” – this is the [opening] blessing of “Hazan” (He Who sustains).

“For the land” – this is the blessing over the land.

“The good [land]” – this is the blessing over Jerusalem.

This exposition, however, needs to be considered in light of another comment which the Gemara makes on that very same page just a few lines further up regarding the origins of these blessings:

תנו רבנן, משה תיקן לישראל ברכת הזון בשעה שירד להם מן. יהושע תיקן להם ברכת הארץ בשעה שנכנסו לארץ. דוד ושלמה תיקנו בונה ירושלים.

The Rabbis taught:

- Moshe instituted the blessing of “hazan” at the time the manna fell for the [Jewish people].
- Yehoshua instituted the blessing over the land when they entered the land.
- David and Shlomo instituted the blessing of Yerushalayim and the Beis Hamikdash.

How can the Gemara state that these blessings were instituted by Moshe and Yehoshua etc. if their recitation is, in fact, a Torah obligation?

The Rashba⁵ explains that, on a Torah level, there is no set text for the blessing. A person could simply say, “Thank you, Hashem for the food, the land of Israel and Jerusalem” and with this fulfill his obligation. The specific formulae for these blessings, with which we are familiar and through which we fulfill the mitzvah, were instituted by the various prophets as outlined by the Gemara.

It is fascinating to consider in this light, that the text of the first blessing of *Birkas Hamazon* – which we all recite after meals – is a “Moshe Rabbeinu original”!

WAS THERE AN OBLIGATION OF BIRKAS HAMAZON OVER THE MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS?

The above comment of the Gemara raises a most interesting question. As we know, the mitzvah of reciting *Birkas Hamazon* only applies after eating a bread meal from one of the five species of grain. During the years we were in the wilderness, we were sustained by the manna, which does not come from the five species! Why, then, did Moshe compose the formula for a blessing that did not apply to the food that they ate?

R’ Yosef Engel⁶ suggests that this tradition is aligned with the view that the manna assumed, not only the taste of whatever the person wanted it to taste like, but also its physical form.⁷ This means that if a person wanted their manna to taste like bread, it actually became bread and hence, was subject to the mitzvah of *Birkas Hamazon*.

However, it is possible to understand this Gemara in a different way. Let us preface by raising another question: As we mentioned, the Gemara states that Moshe composed the blessing of “hazan” at the time the manna began to fall for the Jewish people. The Torah informs us that the

5 Berachos ibid.

6 Gilyonei Hashas Berachos ibid.

7 See Yoma 75a.

manna began to fall on the fifteenth of Iyar – a month after leaving Egypt.⁸ This was *three weeks prior to the Torah being given*. This means that not only did the mitzvah of *Birkas Hamazon* not apply to the manna, it did not even exist as a mitzvah at that time!

In light of this, the Tzlach⁹ explains that when the Gemara states that Moshe instituted the blessing of “*hazan*” over the manna, this was not as a fulfillment of the Torah obligation of *Birkas Hamazon*. Rather, it was simply an expression of gratitude to Hashem for providing them with sustenance in the wilderness. Later on, when reciting *Birkas Hamazon* after eating bread was received as a mitzvah, the Sages incorporated Moshe’s original “*manna blessing*” as the formula for the first of the three blessings of *Birkas Hamazon* – the blessing over sustenance.¹⁰

Indeed, this may a simple answer to the question of why *Birkas Hamazon* is not mentioned until Chumash Devarim, even though its fulfillment is not exclusive to the land of Israel. Rather, the people simply did not have the basis for being obligated in this mitzvah until they entered the land and partook of actual bread.

A VERSE FROM TEHILLIM IN A BLESSING OF MOSHE?

Awareness of the blessing of “*Hazan*” as a composition of Moshe Rabbeinu led to a most interesting discussion among the early commentators. There is a version of the blessing which includes the following words just before its conclusion:

כאמור, פותח את ידיך ומשביע לכל חי רצון

As it says, “You open Your hands and satisfy the desire of every living being.”

One of the Rishonim, the Kol Bo,¹¹ maintained that this section should be omitted, as it is clearly not part of the blessing. After all, the verse “*You open Your hands etc.*” is from the Book of Tehillim,¹² authored by David Hamelech. As such, a blessing that was composed by Moshe would surely not be quoting from a verse written by someone hundreds of years before they were born!

A fascinating response to this argument comes from the Mabit in his sefer *Beis Elokim*.¹³ The Gemara informs us that while David Hamelech compiled and redacted Tehillim, as well authoring most of its chapters, there were in fact ten individuals whose words form part of the sefer.¹⁴

8 Shemos 16:1.

9 Berachos 20a.

10 This idea has potential halachic implications. The Chayei Adam (51:17) rules regarding bread that is grown on a surface detached from the ground, that even though one would not recite *hamotzi* beforehand – since it did not grow directly from the ground – nevertheless, one would recite *Birkas Hamazon* afterwards. Among his sources for the idea that these two blessings are not mutually dependent, he cites the case of the Manna, which clearly did not have the blessing of “*hamotzi*” recited beforehand – as it came down from the heavens – yet required *Birkas Hamazon* afterwards, as mentioned our Gemara (Nishmas Adam 152:1). According to the Tzlach, however, who says that the blessing of “*hazan*” was not instituted at that time in fulfillment of *Birkas Hamazon*, but simply as an expression of gratitude for the manna, there is no proof from there regarding this question (R’ Meir Dan Plotzki, *Chemdas Yisrael*, vol 2 sec. 14.)

11 Cited by *Beis Yosef*, Orach Chaim 187.

12 145:16.

13 *Shaar Hayesodos* chap. 61. The Mabit (R’ Moshe ben Yosef mi’Trani) was a fellow member of R’ Yosef Karo’s *beis din* in Tzfat. His sefer *Beis Elokim* is a treatise on fundamentals in Jewish thought.

14 *Bava Basra* 14b.

Some of these are mentioned in the verses by name, such as the sons of Korach – as well as Moshe Rabbeinu.¹⁵ In light of this, we will appreciate that one cannot reject the idea that a verse was composed by Moshe Rabbeinu based on the fact that it is in Sefer Tehillim – for that sefer draws on and incorporates Moshe Rabbeinu’s words! According to this, it turns out that the entire situation regarding this verse is actually reversed: When it comes to the verse “You open Your hands etc.,” Moshe was not “pre-quoting” from David. Rather, it was Moshe who originally said these words, which were then quoted by David in Tehillim!

Indeed, the Mabit points out that there is another sentence in the first blessing of Birkas Hamazon which is also a verse in Tehillim, and which somehow went entirely unnoticed in this discussion. Toward the beginning of the blessing it says:

הוא נותן לחם לכל בשר כי לעולם חסדו

He gives food to all flesh, for His Kindness is forever.

If one consults chapter 136 of sefer Tehillim, one will find the above words, “נותן לחם – He gives food etc.” verbatim!¹⁶ The explanation here is exactly the same: words originally said by Moshe were subsequently included by David Hamelech in Sefer Tehillim.¹⁷ The Mabit does concede, however, that the introductory word “כאמור – as it says,” is certainly a later addition. As the original author of these words, Moshe would not be quoting them (“as it says”) from a verse that was actually quoting him! Rather, after these words were recorded in Sefer Tehillim, the word “כאמור” was added to the blessing of “hazan”.

BIRKAS HAMAZON AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Moving back to our verse, which is the source of the mitzvah of birkas hamazon, let us ask a deceptively simple question: What are we blessing Hashem for? The simple reading of the verse implies that when we eat bread, we are to bless Hashem for the land that He has given us. Yet this is a little puzzling. Why should we not bless him also – if not primarily – for the bread itself? Indeed, in light of the fact that birkas hamazon is an obligation that is not restricted to the land of Israel, why is the land mentioned in the blessing at all?

- ▷ The Ramban¹⁸ explains that we are to read the verse as if there is a letter vav denoting “and” before the words “for the land,” so that the verse reads “you shall bless Hashem [for the food], and for the good land that He has given you.” Thus, we first mention the sustenance that we have just now received, and then we extend the blessing to mention the land that Hashem has given us our homeland, and whose goodness we will ultimately enjoy.
- ▷ Others explain that the blessing over food indeed focusses primarily on the land of Israel. This is based on a statement of the Zohar Hakadosh¹⁹ that the Land of Israel is the conduit into which Divine sustenance flows and through which the entire world is sustained – even when the Jewish people are in exile. Therefore, after having enjoyed Hashem’s sustenance, wherever we are, we bless Him for having given us the land of Israel from which that sustenance issued forth.²⁰

15 Tehillim chap. 90, “תפילה למשה – a prayer of Moshe.”

16 Verse 25.

17 Perhaps the Kol Bo’s position is that although Sefer Tehillim undoubtedly contains chapters and verses from Moshe Rabbeinu, nevertheless, a chapter that begins with the words “תהלה לדוד – a psalm of praise by David,” as is the case with chapter 145, is assumed to be entirely from David Hamelech.

18 Devarim loc. cit.

19 Parashas Terumah 157a.

20 Shaarei Aharon, Devarim ibid..

BIRKAS HAMAZON AND THE BEIS HAMIKDASH

This idea leads us to consider the third of the blessing in Birkas Hamazon – the blessing over Jerusalem and the Beis Hamikdash. It is interesting to observe that, roughly half way through this blessing, we turn to Hashem and say:

אלקינו אבינו רענו זוננו פרנסנו וכלכלנו

Our God, our Father! Provide for us, nourish us, sustain us, support us.

Given that the subject of this blessing is the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, how is it relevant or appropriate to depart from that theme midway through to ask for sustenance and support?

In truth, however, while we are asking this question, we might well take a step back and ask the reverse question: What is a blessing over the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple doing in Birkas Hamazon, a blessing we make after eating bread? Of course, we understand how there is room for this blessing in our prayers which encompass all of our wishes and aspirations, but what does it have to do with the meal that we just ate?

The Gemara²¹ tells us that “the mizbeyach (altar) nourishes.” The meaning of these words is that in the merit of the offerings brought upon the mizbeyach in the Beis Hamikdash, the world is nourished. The offerings come from different types of food, and bringing them as offerings to the Beis Hamikdash brings about blessing and bounty in our food.²² Indeed, in this vein the Gemara further states:²³ “From the day the Temple was destroyed... dew has not fallen with a blessing, and the taste of fruits has been removed.”

It thus emerges that while the land of Israel is the conduit for Divine blessing on a basic level, the Beis Hamikdash is a conduit for that blessing on an optimal level. Thus, as we thank Hashem for the meal which we just had, and the land through which that blessing flowed, we are mindful of the fact that the conduit for maximal blessing is not with us. We therefore ask Hashem to sustain us in its absence, and we look forward to the reinstating of the Temple when we will enjoy the full measure of Divine blessing in our physical sustenance as in all spheres.²⁴

May we merit to witness and experience this soon!

21 Kesuvos 10b.

22 Rashi ibid. s.v. *maizin*.

23 Sotah 48a.

24 *HaSeder he'Aruch*.