



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

Parshat Ekev תשפד

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

***Partners in Torah
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

This week's portion contains, the only Torah-mandated ברכה - *blessing*, according to all opinions, namely, ברכת המזון - *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after meals, which is derived from the verse in (Deuteronomy 8:10):

י) וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ
10) *And you shall eat, and you shall be satiated, and you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land that He has given you.*

Although the Torah requires a blessing only after eating to satiety (“*and you shall be satiated*”), the Sages have instituted that if a person eats even one ounce of bread, he is obligated to recite *Birkat Hamazon* despite his not feeling “full.”

Interestingly, the Torah does not provide a specific text for the blessing; it says only that after eating to satiety, one must bless Hashem for the food that he ate. Therefore, as long as one has expressed thanks even in his own words, he has fulfilled the commandment. The Talmud in Tractate Brachot (40b) tells of Binyamin the shepherd who, to get to work quicker and take as little time as possible from his shepherding responsibilities, said a very short version of the *Birkat Hamazon*:

בנימין רעיא כרך ריפתא ואמר בריך רחמנא מריה דהאי פיתא
“*Blessed is the Merciful One, the master of my bread.*”

(This sounds a little like what we used to say in Yeshiva for a joke. “Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub, yeah God!”) Indeed, Binyamin the shepherd's shortened blessing after meals is the first *Birkat Hamazon* that we teach our children once they have learned to speak. It is short and sweet, and provides an invaluable lesson to the child - that we need to thank Hashem for the meal that He has given us.

The Birkat Hamazon that we say today has a specific text. Where did its text come from? The Talmud in Tractate Brachot (48b) informs, us that it was a joint effort of some of the greatest Jews in our history.

אמר רב נחמן **משה** תקן לישראל ברכת הזן בשעה שירד להם מן; **יהושע** תקן להם ברכת הארץ כיון שנכנסו לארץ; דוד ושלמה תקנו בונה ירושלים: **דוד** תקן על ישראל עמך ועל ירושלים עירך ו**שלמה** תקן על הבית הגדול והקדוש

*Rav Nachman said, “**Moshe** composed the first blessing הזן, - Hashem gives food to all living creatures - the first time that manna fell from heaven. **Yehoshua** composed the second blessing about the Land of Israel after he brought the Jewish people into the land. King David and King Solomon composed the third blessing over Jerusalem; **King David** composed the part about Israel Your people and Jerusalem Your City, and **King Solomon** about the Holy Temple.*

The three topics underlined above are recommended to be incorporated into the *Birkat Hamazon*, as they were derived from the original verse quoted above. They now comprise the essence of today’s *Birkat Hamazon*. However, there had been no formal text until each blessing was formally composed by its respective author. (The first blessing, “הזן,” is derived from the word וברכת; the second blessing "על" is derived from the words הארץ; and the third blessing on Jerusalem and the Holy Temple is derived from the word הטובה.)

The first blessing deals with how Hashem provides sustenance for every living creature on Planet Earth, which is expressed in the blessing’s very first words,

הַזֵּן אֶת הָעוֹלָם בְּלוֹ - *the One who provides food for the entire world.*

Moshe composed this blessing after the first time the manna fell from heaven. The manna miraculously sustained the Jewish people during the forty years they travelled through the desert. In the wilderness, there was no doubt that one's food came from Hashem. It fell right outside the door every day with just enough for each mouth that needed feeding. When *we* say this blessing, we should also think about how it is Hashem who gives us *our* sustenance. For, although we don't see it as an open miracle, as did the Jewish people in the wilderness, the way that we earn a living to afford our food is a *hidden* miracle. Hashem is working behind the scenes giving us our jobs that serve as the conduit to give us our sustenance. By reciting the Birkat Hamazon, we acknowledge Hashem as the source of our sustenance.

Hashem is "*the One who provides food for the entire world.*" What does this comprise? Scientists tell us that the world contains up to 30 million species of creatures. This includes humans, animals, birds, fish, and insects. An educated guess as to how many individual creatures there are on our planet is 20,000,121,091,000,000,000. This is read as 20 quintillion, or 20 billion, billion – a staggering number! And they all don't eat the same type of food! Hashem provides enough of the correct type of food for each creature to sustain it! And He does so in such brilliant and out-of-the-box ways. The method through which each type of creature gets its food is an amazing study in the wonders of Hashem's world. The common spider, for example, has the inherent wisdom to craft a web so perfect that it catches its prey and keeps it from escaping. The bat uses echolocation to find and catch its prey, and the velvet worm manufactures glue that it sprays with two nozzles that look like firehoses on its prey immobilizing it so it can take its time to devour it. Another example is the eagle which flies so high, but has an "eagle eye" to see its prey up to a mile away. The vulture can smell a

rotting piece of meat from 50 miles away, and the seagull can see the fish below the surface of the water, dive in, and get a fish every time, adjusting for the refraction of the light through the water. Each creature is endowed with the necessary skill and physical attributes needed to capture its food.

How the blister beetle gets its food is mind boggling.

The mother blister beetle lays her eggs a few inches under the sand in a hot desert. There isn't much food in a sandy desert so how will the larvae survive? The mother blister beetle is careful to lay them close to a plant that has a long, tall stalk, like withered grass. Upon hatching, the beetle larvae (there are hundreds of them) climb up the stalk of grass, and huddle together in a swarm. Their goal is to attract a male digger bee, a bee that digs a borough underground and lives there. Little do they know, that to a male digger bee, they look and smell just like a female digger bee. They attract the male, because they are emitting a pheromone identical to that of the female. When a male alights to mate, he is immediately covered by as many larvae as can climb onto him. He will carry these with him until he actually mates with a real female digger bee, at which time, the larvae transfer to the female. When she returns to her borough where she has stored pollen for her young, the blister beetles hop off and consume the pollen. If there isn't enough pollen, they will even eat the bee larvae.

Every single creature on Planet Earth, large or small, exhibits Hashem's brilliance and wisdom. The prowess and, yes, wisdom, in which they procure a meal and reproduce is nothing short of miraculous. A single scientist may spend decades studying one single

species of insect to understand its cycle of life and how it gets its food. Their findings are always astounding.

Included in this blessing is that there is *enough* food to sustain each creature. Although some creatures dine on each other, the balance is perfect, all the way up and down the food chain for the 20 quintillion creatures on the planet! The predator never consumes all the prey. And the prey, who may be the predator to a smaller creature, never terminates his prey. Maintaining the correct balance is one of the most impressive displays of Hashem's design and wisdom in the world.

Sometimes, when the brilliant human beings get involved, they disturb the delicate balance in nature. Like the time they felt that there were too many snakes, so they went on a campaign to kill as many as possible. The next year, they were overrun with mice. Or the time they decided that a certain specie of animal was in danger of being exterminated, so they fenced them in, protecting them from their natural predator. Over time, they discovered that more animals were dying without the predators, than with them. An investigation revealed that the predators eat primarily the sick and weak animals which eliminates the diseased animals from the flock preventing the healthy ones from becoming sick and dying.

Hashem provides us our sustenance - **בְּחֵן בְּחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים** – *With kindness, goodness, and mercy.* (The next words of the blessing) Not only does Hashem provide food for every creature, He also makes it desirable and enjoyable to the creature eating it. Whatever type of food they eat, they seek out that food and eat it every day of their lives. Some eat plants, fruits, or vegetables. Some eat seeds and/or nuts, and some eat insects, or the flesh of other creatures. Whatever they eat,

they eat with relish and enjoyment every time. The panda bear, for example, eats only bamboo its whole life. But it loves bamboo, so it will eat it for breakfast, lunch and supper, every day of its life! What a kindness!

While most creatures eat only one type of food, when it comes to the human being, the picture is to the opposite extreme. There are so many different types of foods for us to eat and enjoy. So many types of spices to add spice and to vary the food's flavor. Of the categories of foods that we eat (vegetables, fruit, meats and poultry, fish, eggs, grains and dairy products) there are literally thousands of flavors that we can enjoy as we fuel our bodies with the sustenance it needs (and the junk that it doesn't) to function. And boy, do we enjoy! There are over 7,500 different types of apples alone, not to mention vegetables, nuts, and seeds.

Preparing food and how to present it is an entire industry. Not only are there so many different types of food, but there is also a myriad of ways to prepare each one of them. There are over a 100 different ways just to cook an egg! And how many recipes call for eggs as one of its ingredients. So many different cakes, pastries, cookies, breads and rolls can be made just from the flour of a grain of wheat. Has anybody ever counted the number of different cookbooks there are on the market? What about the many different types of cuisine there are, each with a different style and flavor! Mentally walk down the aisles of your supermarket looking at the shelves, and notice the plethora of colors, flavors, and textures beckoning to your taste buds! Do you have a favorite fruit? Doesn't your mouth water just thinking about biting into that most delicious sweet package of flavor that Hashem has created just for your pleasure? Can you describe the

delight of biting into a crisp piece of sweet, juicy watermelon on a hot summer day? Hashem didn't have to give us so many delicious fruits to eat, but He is so kind and He wants to delight us. What a kindness to have such a broad variety of yummy food to eat!

Another special kindness from Hashem is that He makes the food appetizing and tasty to those who eat it. There are people in different parts of the world who eat what to us would be the most disgusting, foul tasting thing in the world. But to them, it is a delicacy and they eat it with relish.

Once the food enters our mouths, a whole new series of miracles unfolds. The body breaks the food down into simple building blocks, and then recombines them into living human tissues. The food we eat is broken down into its smallest components, its nutrients, and they become the very blood and bone and flesh of our living bodies. These nutrients are crucial to our well-being, and we can get them only from the foods that we consume. Hashem has distributed them in the variety of foods that we eat. The nutrients divide neatly into five categories. The principal ones – carbohydrates, fats and proteins- make up the bulk of what we eat, but vitamins and minerals are also required in smaller amounts. When the body is deprived of food or the essential nutrients it needs for an extended time, it cannot function properly. The sailors on ships would get scurvy until they realized they were lacking vitamin C and took oranges with them on their journeys. The food we eat is the source of our energy and vitality allowing us to function.

This is also included in the words, אֶת הָעוֹלָם בָּלֵוּ- *the One who provides nourishment for the entire world* from the foods He created.

There is another verse in this week's portion (Deuteronomy 8:3), which deals with the consumption of our food. But it requires a bit of explanation.

(ג) וַיַּעֲנֶב וַיִּרְעֵב וַיֹּאכַלְךָ אֶת הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֶךָ כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יַחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצֵא פִי יִדּוֹד יַחְיֶה הָאָדָם

*3) He afflicted you and let you hunger, then He fed you the manna that you did not know, and that your forefathers did not know, in order to make you know that not by the bread alone does man live, **rather by everything that emanates from the mouth of Hashem does man live.***

Hashem is stating that we do not live from the bread that we eat; rather, we live from the words that leave Hashem's mouth, so to speak. What could be the meaning of this? We don't live from the food we eat?

The Mabit (Rabbi Moses ben Joseph Trani 1500-1580) provides the following explanation:

ואסר המלאכה גם כן במועדים בתחלת הקיץ ובתחלת החורף ימי הקף שבוע א', להורות לנו השגחתו יתברך עלינו, כי לא על הלחם לבדו שיאכל האדם בזעת אפו יחיה האדם כי על כל מוצא פי השם כפי מה שגוזר מראשית השנה יהיה לאחריתה, והוא זן ומפרנס לכל, ואין האומנות מוריש ומעשיר אלא חפץ ה' כפי מעשה איש ופקודתו

A person is forbidden to work on the festivals at the inception of the winter (Sukkot) and at the inception of the summer (Pesach) to show us Hashem's involvement with us, and to teach us that a person doesn't live (earn his livelihood) by the dint of the sweat of his brow, rather by the "word of Hashem" Who has decreed how much sustenance he will have for this year. Hashem is the One who provides sustenance to all, and one's vocation is not what makes him poor or

rich; rather, it is Hashem's decree for each individual based on who he is.

By foregoing the first weeks of the new seasons, and not getting started as quickly as possible, a person demonstrates that he is not depending on his efforts and abilities for his sustenance; he will come out with the same amount of food. This is because it is the goodness of Hashem and what emanates from Hashem's mouth - what Hashem has decreed that he should have - which is the source of his sustenance.

There is yet a deeper understanding to this verse.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:1) tells us:

(א) בַּעֲשָׂרָה מְאֹמְרוֹת נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם

Hashem created the world with ten statements.

These are the verses in Genesis that begin with “And Hashem said ‘Let there be ...’” describing how Hashem used speech to create the world and everything in it. Our Sages teach us that the statements that Hashem used to bring forth all that exists are still present and are crucial to keep in existence all that Hashem has created. If those statements would cease to exist, so would everything else. It is only through the constant words of Hashem being continuously spoken, so to speak, that the world and everything in it continues to exist.

This concept is expressed in the verse (Psalms 119:99)

(פט) לְעוֹלָם יִדְוֹד דְּבַרְךָ נִצָּב בְּשָׁמַיִם

99) Hashem, Your words remain standing forever in the heavens.

The words You spoke when creating the world and everything in it remain standing forever to keep everything in existence. Based on this, every creation must currently have a word of Hashem to keep it in existence, or it could not exist. This is why in Hebrew a “*thing*” or

“object” is called a דבר - *davar*. The word דבר comes from the word דיבור, which means *speech*. The connection is that every object is testimony to a word that Hashem spoke to create it that is still extant, for, without that word, this object could not be here.

A human being comprises a physical body and a spiritual soul. While we understand how the physical food nourishes the body, one can wonder how does the physical food nourish the spiritual soul. How does the spiritual soul derive the spiritual food it needs from material food? To this the verse answers, “***rather by everything that emanates from the mouth of Hashem does man live.***” The soul is nourished from Hashem’s spiritual word that keeps the food extant. In this way, it is truly the word of Hashem that keeps a person’s soul alive.

Our Sages teach us further that when we recite a blessing over the food before we eat it, and recite the proper blessing after eating, thanking Hashem for the delicious nutritious food that we just ate, it adds an additional element of spirituality to the food. Having used the food as an agent to bring us closer to Hashem, endows it with greater spiritual power to nourish our souls.

This concept gives new meaning to the words “הזן את הכל” that “*Hashem gives sustenance to the complete being.*” It comes to include both one’s body and his soul; the body is nourished through the physical food. and the soul is nourished through the food’s spiritual component.

These few ideas are but the tip of the iceberg of things we could have in mind when thanking Hashem for our food.

Unfortunately, saying the Birkat Hamazon is looked at by many to be a chore that needs to be discharged. Here is an opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah from the Torah, and we consider it a burden.

As an aside, the reason that we have all the requests from Hashem after the Birkat Hamazon in the form of the הַרְחֵמֵנוּ - *Harachamans*- which means, “*O Merciful One, please grant us ...*” is because **we have just fulfilled a biblical commandment**, and having done that, we are in a favored position to have our prayers answered. So, we take advantage of the moment to ask Hashem for all kinds of good things.

In any case, instead of this mitzvah being a chore, we should feel the deepest gratitude to Hashem for giving us our daily bread. Every second of the day there are so many other miracles that go on in our bodies in the processing of the food we eat. When we sit down to eat a meal, it would be appropriate to contemplate the number of things that we have going right for us. We have food to eat, we can see the food, we can lift it on a fork or spoon, we can put it into our mouths, we have teeth to chew it, we have taste buds to taste it, we have a tongue to push it to the back of our mouths to swallow it, we can swallow it, etc.

If we would think of these things when reciting the Birkat Hamazon, it would transform the experience of saying Birkat Hamazon into a fully spiritual one of thanksgiving Hashem instead of a chore.