

Full Stomachs, Forgetful Hearts

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It is a good day when I happen upon the elementary school students at the Schechter School of Long Island while they are singing *birkat hamazon*, the traditional Jewish blessings after a meal. The kids sing the blessings with gusto, and being with them is a sweet perk of my role as Head of School. If you have spent time in a Jewish day school or summer camp, you are probably familiar with this scene: joyous Jewish children reciting *birkat hamazon* at full voice, with occasional hand motions and claps to punctuate the words. In addition to the generally uplifting nature of the sound of kids singing, for me, teaching children the regular practice of reciting *birkat hamazon* holds a deeper and essential educational value. We can find its origins in this week's Torah portion.

As part of Moses's series of sermons that we read throughout Deuteronomy, and his persistent plea that the Israelites remain faithful to God and the covenant, here, Moses imagines a future when the Israelites will have settled in the Land of Israel. At that time, they will enjoy all the benefits of the fertile land, and in Deuteronomy 8:10, we read:

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה
אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the
ETERNAL your God for the good land given to you.

This is the verse referenced in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 21a, as the source for the commandment to recite *birkat hamazon*.

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה: מִנֵּין לְבִרְכַּת הַמָּזוֹן לְאַחֲרֵי הַמִּנְחָה —
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ."

Rav Yehuda said: From where is the mitzva by Torah law to recite Grace after Meals, derived? As it is stated: "And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:10).

While the elementary school students I mentioned above are happy to recite *birkat hamazon*, I have found that as kids get older (think of pre-adolescents approaching b'nei mitzvah at 12 or 13), they are often less inclined. Through my many years of teaching middle school students, more than one student has asked me hard and critical questions about Jewish traditions we practice in school, including, "Why do we have to say *birkat hamazon*?"

While it is developmentally appropriate for children at that age to question the adults in their lives, I think the question about *birkat hamazon* holds more than just a push back against authority. After all, in our parashah, Moses pointed to a time when the Israelites would be well fed, so isn't it natural for them to feel thankful? Why do we need a commandment to say these blessings after eating? More than that, middle schoolers really don't like being told how to feel. I understand their annoyance: Why are you commanding me to feel thankful? If I get what I need, and my tummy is full, I will feel it.

The answers to these questions can also be found in Parashat Eikev. Moses's imagined future includes a description of people whose needs are met and who become self-satisfied. We read in Deuteronomy 8:12–14:

פֶּן־תֹּאכַל וְשִׂבַּעְתָּ וּבְתִים טִבִּים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבְּתָּ:

וּבְקֹרֶךְ וּצְאֹנְךָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבֶּה־לְךָ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־לְךָ יִרְבֶּה:

וְרָם לִבְבְּךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in,

and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered,

beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the ETERNAL your God

The concern for this haughty attitude is further articulated in verse 17:

וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ כְּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיל הַזֶּה

and you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”

In other words, people who are full and satisfied are actually unlikely to feel gratitude. They might give themselves credit for the blessings that they enjoy. As Jeffrey Tigay puts it in *The JPS Torah Commentary on Deuteronomy*, “The idea that material wealth and satiety can lead to pride and arrogance and forgetting one’s dependence on God is a persistent concern in the Bible” (p. 80).

Another text from Tractate Berakhot 32a backs up Professor Tigay’s assertion and brings a list of biblical quotes, including one from Parashat Eikev (Deut. 8:14), to support the idea that being satiated can lead to trouble.

אָמַר רַב אֲחָא בְּרִיה דְּרַב הוּנָא אָמַר רַב שְׁשֶׁת: הֵיִינוּ דְּאָמְרִי אִינְשֵׁי: מְלִי כְּרִסְיָה זְרִי בִישִׁי. שְׁנָאֵמַר: “כְּמַרְעִיתָם וַיִּשְׂבְּעוּ שְׂבָעוּ וַיִּרְם לִבָּם עַל כֵּן שָׁכַחוּנִי.” רַב נְחֻמָּן אָמַר: מֵהֵכָּא: “וְרָם לִבְבְּךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת ה'.” וְרַבְּנָן אָמְרִי, מֵהֵכָּא: “וְאָכַל וְשִׂבַּע וַיִּדְשֵׁן וַיִּפְנֶה.”

On a similar note, **Rav Aḥa, son of Rav Huna, said that Rav Sheshet said: That is what people say in a popular maxim: Filling his stomach is a type of sin, as it is stated: “When they were fed and became**

full they were sated, and their hearts were lifted and they have forgotten Me” (Hosea 13:6). Rav Nahman said: This principle is derived not from the verse in Hosea, but **from here: “And your heart is lifted and you forget the Lord” (Deut.8:14). And the Rabbis say that this principle is derived from here: “And they will have eaten and been sated and fattened, and they will turn to other gods” (Deut. 31:20).**

While some people innately feel gratitude, many of us need to be commanded to be thankful, especially at times when we feel satisfied, such as after eating. The commandment to regularly recite *birkat hamazon* is a way to counter these self-aggrandizing impulses, a gratitude practice that inculcates awareness of blessings that we cannot control. That practice has the potential to help us avoid the pride and arrogance Moses describes. Moreover, psychological research shows that feeling and expressing gratitude makes for happier and more optimistic people. Being thankful is good for us.

The practice of gratitude is an important life lesson that all my students need, so *birkat hamazon* remains a part of Schechter’s daily routines. When a reluctant 12-year-old tells me that they don’t want to do it, that is an opportunity to begin a dialogue with them, to share the things I am grateful for in my life, and to ask them to reflect on what they are grateful for. Reciting *birkat hamazon* at each meal offers my students and me the ongoing and frequent opportunity for this important reflection. So, whether it is with the enthusiastic elementary students or the leery upper school students, I will be excited to sing *birkat hamazon* with them again when they come back to school this fall.