

Bentch Pressing

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In 1994, Shock Jock Howard Stern² (a name I'm sure you never expected your Rabbi to quote in a sermon) received a deadly serious phone call to his otherwise puerile and offensive radio show. The caller was contemplating taking his own life, prepared to jump off of the George Washington Bridge³. Patiently, Stern talked to him, listened to him and made him laugh, until authorities turned up on the scene and were able to provide him with the help he needed. Later on that evening, as he was interviewed on the news about his on-air triumph, Stern commented about the Jewish ethic that informed his heroic exploits, saying; "I was merely following the ancient Jewish proverb, that one who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world. Or, to quote it in the original Hebrew:

ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ

This blessing is good for a Jewy punch line (it made an appearance in The Simpsons as well when uttered by Krusty the Klown), but I do wonder whether, in 10-15 years, marginally connected Jews like Howard Stern will possess even this bit of knowledge. If they do not, it won't just be because they have drifted away from Yiddishkeit, and are even less familiar with basic Jewish rituals. It will also be because more and more of us observant Jews refrain from reciting this blessing, unless absolutely necessary. So many are on low carb diets, others have wheat allergies or gluten intolerance, and still others just don't want to wash- and the reason is that they don't want to *bentch*. To echo one of my son Avremi's common complaints when he doesn't want to do something: **"THAT'S GONNA TAKE A LONG TIME!!!"** I venture to say that, to whatever degree any Rabbi is answering questions about *berachot*, a considerable percentage of them involve whether or not one must wash on a particular

¹ Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkhBhsrSig4>

³ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-12-08-mn-6575-story.html>

food item- be it half a tuna wrap, one slice of pizza, mezonos roll (if you want to know the answer, speak to me at kiddush). And even when we choose to eat bread, necessitating a *hamotzi* and *birkat hamazon*, many of us rush through the berachos. And even if we *are* saying the berachos slowly, we are focused more on the tune composed in 1938 by Moshe Nathanson⁴ of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the flagship Reconstructionist synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, than we are on the words. I bet most of you cannot bench at all without at least *thinking* of this tune. This week's parsha contains the directive to recite the *birkat hamazon*, and I think it behooves us to reconsider our reticence to recite this blessing, as well as our less than optimal *kavanah* when we recite it.

וְאָכַלְתָּ וּשְׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

Our sages view this verse as the biblical source for *Birkat Hamazon*, and the first three words as the basis for the first three paragraphs we recite.

The first blessing deals with the sustenance we personally derive, but also the sustenance God provides the entire world, with grace, kindness and mercy. It is striking that the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah chose to expound upon the miracle of sustenance; our Sages noted that God sustains the largest and most obscure mammals as well as the countless billions of insects the world over - מקרני - רַאמִים עַד בִּיצי כִּינִים The level of knowledge and attention to detail required to provide sustenance for all these living creatures cannot even begin to be described. But reading this paragraph has caused me theological difficulties as well. Does God really sustain every creature? What about the hundreds of

⁴ <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/legends-of-jewish-music-remembered/>

millions of people all over the planet who have no homes? What about all those in the world who have no idea how they will afford the next meal or where it will come from, or many more who have access to food yet live in food deserts, with nothing available other than cheap, processed and nutritionally inadequate food- or those whose limited resources and lifestyle makes such food the most affordable, easiest option? As Yuval Noah Harari wrote in *Homo Deus*, the answer is-

“There are no longer natural famines in the world; there are only political famines. If people in Syria, Sudan or Somalia starve to death, it is because some politician wants them to”

— Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A History of Tomorrow*+

For example, in 1932-1933, Joseph Stalin, *yemach shemo*, engineered a man-made famine known as the Holodomor that led to the deaths of many millions of Ukrainians. By rejecting outside aid, confiscating household foodstuffs and limiting population movement, he ensured that countless Ukrainians would perish of starvation. When the Birkat Hamazon tells us that God provides sustenance to the entire world, it challenges us that in the same way we were afforded the opportunity to eat- and eat well- we are mandated to do whatever we can to allow others to experience the same blessing.

The second paragraph of the *bentching* begins with an expression of Thanksgiving- נודה לך, which immediately pivots to acknowledge the land of Israel, and the Torah-

ארץ חמדה טובה וברכה, ועל תורתך שלימדתנו

By juxtaposing two seemingly unrelated things, our sages are teaching us two important principles- first, that the Torah is most optimally observed in the land of Israel. We know this instinctively; there are so many mitzvot in the Torah that are practiced to this very day, yet only apply in the land of Israel- for example, *terumah* and *maaser*, tithes of produce, and, starting this Rosh Hashanah,

Shemittah. Secondly, in including these ideas in this paragraph, our sages were telling us what we should be grateful for. Our gratitude should be extend beyond our waistlines, so after we enjoy the potentially hedonistic pleasure of a meal, we must redirect our attention and our gratitude back to loftier values, like Torah, the Land of Israel, our Exodus from Egypt and our covenant with Hashem.

The theme of the Land of Israel continues into the next paragraph, םהוה, where we beseech God to have mercy on the Jewish people, on the city of Jerusalem and on the holy site of the Beit Hamikdash, before transitioning to a prayer for continued divine providence, for the continued ability to support ourselves honorably. As much as we have dwelled on themes of sustenance, we invoke them here as well in connection with Yerushalaim, because while our stomach is full, we cannot forget that the city of Yerushalayim has yet to be rebuilt.

Finally, our sages added a fourth blessing- HaTov VeHametiv, which is a string of uninterrupted praise and adulation. We may be wondering what miracle merits such over the top plaudits? The Talmud tells us that this blessing was instituted because the surviving relatives of those massacred in Beitar were, at long last, permitted to bury their loved ones, whose bodies were completely intact. Why should we, in the year 5781, care about the buried masses of Beitar and why mention them in the context of our meal? Perhaps this blessing was added to teach us of our capacity to acknowledge God and thank Him for His acts of kindness even in the midst of tragedy, or difficult episodes in our lives. It is true on a personal level, and on a national level as well. Rav Kook writes⁵-

This is a sign that even when our national condition is like the dead, when the sword of the enemy is poised against sanctity, we preserve a wondrous power of life that enables us to maintain our true identity, and we gain confidence in the higher calling of the public, which will come in good time.”

⁵ Ein Ayah Berachot 48b

We take time during bentsching to thank God for our indomitable spirit, our reverence for life, and the miracle of our continued survival. By including *haTov ve'hameitiv*, we extend our gratitude to the moments in which it is not naturally extended and perhaps difficult to express.

Lastly, we recite the *Harachamans*, whose main purpose is to beseech God for Divine assistance in all of the things we need in life and all that we hope to achieve.. As such the *harachamans* range from prayers of of spiritual yearnings:

הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִתְבַּרֵךְ בְּשָׁמַיִם
וּבָאָרֶץ. הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִשְׁתַּבַּח לְדוֹר וָדוֹר,
וַיִּתְהַדָּר בְּנוֹ
לְעֵד וּלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים. הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִפְרֹנְסֵנוּ
בְּכָבוֹד. הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִשְׁבֵּר עָלֵנוּ מֵעַל
צָוָארֵנוּ וְהוּא יוֹדִיבֵנוּ קוֹמָמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ.
הַרְחַמֵּן, הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ בְּרָכָה מְרֻבָּה בְּבֵית
הַזֶּה וְעַל שְׁלֹחַן זֶה שְׂאֵבְלֵנוּ עָלֵינוּ. הַרְחַמֵּן,
הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַנְּבִיא זְכוֹר
לְטוֹב, וַיְבַשֵּׂר לָנוּ בְּשׂוֹרֹת טוֹבוֹת יְשׁוּעוֹת
וְנִחְמוֹת.

Followed by prayers for the host, our parents, our spouses and children, and some contemporary benchers include prayers for peace, the State of Israel and the Jewish Army, with many variations depending upon your heritage and nusach.

If we were to put all of the above into one succinct message it would be that our *tefilot* need to be bigger than ourselves and that even the most mundane acts can be elevated through loft aspirations. Think beyond your satisfied stomach to those who don't have adequate food, and think beyond the comforts of your home to the land of Israel, and its capital Jerusalem. Remember that spirituality

must be rooted in our sacred institutions and the Torah we study, and do not revel in material pleasures until Jerusalem is rebuilt and *mashiach* heralds in the final era of peace.

If we can only remember this message everytime we sit down to eat, maybe we won't pass up on the opportunity to wash and make hamotzi; maybe we will spend a few more seconds concentrating on these powerful words, and most definitely we will add further meaning, purpose and holiness to our daily lives.