

Parashat Eikev 5774, 2014

*Understanding the Power of Birkat Hamazon
(The Blessing After Eating Bread)*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of the soldiers of Tzahal in their holy mission to protect the Jewish people.

The phrase “וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבָעָה” (“and you will eat and be satisfied”) is found once in our

parasha and two other times in *Sefer Devarim*:

And it will be, when the L-rd, your G-d, brings you to the land He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you, great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant, and you will eat and be satisfied. (6:10-11)

And you will eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the L-rd, your G-d, for the good land He has given you. (8:10)

And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be satisfied. (11:15, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations)

The promise of plenty is a powerful and intoxicating one. Unfortunately, when fulfilled, this very largesse can drive us away from Hashem, and lead us toward the psychological mindset that the Torah warns against of “My strength and the might of my hand have accumulated this wealth for me.” (*Sefer Devarim* 8:17) Therefore, the Torah follows each of these promises with stern warnings to remain loyal to G-d and His Torah:

Beware, lest you forget the L-rd, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (6:12)

Beware that you do not forget the L-rd, your G-d, by not keeping His commandments, His ordinances, and His statutes, which I command you this day, lest you eat and be sated, and build good houses and dwell therein, and your herds and your flocks multiply,

and your silver and gold increase, and all that you have increases, and your heart grows haughty, and you forget the L-rd, your G-d, Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (8:11-14)

Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. (11:16)

When viewed as a group, these passages contain close to identical themes that have often led to the same disastrous outcome:

- Promise of plenty
- Fulfillment of the promise and the achievement of wealth
- Forgetting Hashem coupled with rejection of His Torah
- *Avodah Zarah* (idol worship)

Unfortunately, the above steps form the cyclical pattern that constitutes the majority of *Sefer Shoftim*, the *sefer* that depicts the story of our people subsequent to Yehoshua's demise. Closer to our own time, the linkage between financial success and the rejection of Hashem and his Torah was given powerful voice by the 19th century German exegete, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) in his commentary on *Sefer Devarim* 32:15:

[The Torah has] said that G-d wished Israel to ascend the summit of the dual heights of human aims, the highest material good fortune and the highest spiritual and moral perfection. For Israel is to show the world an illuminating example of how a life devoted entirely to spiritual moral duties by no means entails a renunciation of bright earthly happiness, on the contrary, how the highest degree of morality fits very well with the highest amount of earthly happiness and all material wealth and earthly enjoyments can be turned into moral deeds and spiritual achievements. But when the destined Jeshurun-people [i.e. the Jewish people] get an abundance of all the good things on earth for the purpose of fulfilling this mission, when it has come out of the wilderness into the land of milk and honey, then it becomes "fat and kicked out." [I.e. it rejects G-d] ... In suffering, the Jewish people have mostly proved themselves splendid. But it has seldom been able to stand good fortune ... That is the history of Israel. It did not use the abundance and surplus with which it was blessed to increased spiritual and moral achievements, not to the fuller carrying out of its mission. Its moral improvement did not keep pace with its material good fortune. It [the Jewish people] did not understand how to remain master of its riches and good fortune, did not know how to use them for purposes of mitzvot, it allowed itself to be overcome by riches and good fortune, and its better, spiritual moral

self to be ruined by it. (*The Pentateuch*: Translated and Explained by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, translated from the German by Isaac Levy, Judaica Press, page 644, brackets and underlining my own)

Given the dire historical precedents that have led over and over again to the arrogance of “My strength and the might of my hand have accumulated this wealth for me,” we may well ask if there is an antidote to this soul-poisoning, egotistical construct? I believe the answer to this question lies in the verse from this week’s *parasha*: “And you will eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the L-rd, your G-d, for the good land He has given you.” For our purposes, the key to understanding this *pasuk* (verse) is the phrase “and you shall bless the L-rd, your G-d.” I believe that authentically blessing and thanking Hashem for His beneficence is the single greatest remedy to counteract the spiritual malady of self-destructive pride, which leads so often to rejection of our Creator.

One of the most compelling answers to my question, “How can we counteract the perverse mentality represented by ‘my strength and the might of my hand have accumulated this wealth for me?’” may be found in the deeply insightful words of Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843-1926) in his comment on *Sefer Devarim* 8:10, as found in his classic work, *Meshech Chachma*:

When a person eats and is satisfied, then he is primed to rebel [since his fundamental needs have been met]... Therefore, the Holy One Blessed Be He commanded that when someone will eat and be satisfied he must remember the name of *E-lokim* [G-d, the One who created and runs the world], in thanksgiving and bless Him. All of this is in order to enable one to remember that He and He alone is the One who gives you the strength to perform all these powerful actions... Therefore, the entire purpose of *Birkat Hamazon* is [now] revealed to us, it is to prevent us from hardening our hearts [and removing ourselves] from the ways of Hashem and His commandments – since, this is possible only when one is satisfied rather than when one is ravenous. (Translation, brackets, and underlining my own)

May the Almighty help us develop the strength of character and the necessary sensitivity “to prevent us from hardening our hearts from the ways of Hashem and His commandments,” and may we be His true and beloved nation for evermore. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

** Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.

*** Interested in 21st Century Jewish Education? See my blog and Scoopit.com Pages:

<http://21stcenturyjewisheducation.org>

<http://www.scoop.it/t/educational-technology-yeshiva-edition>

<http://www.scoop.it/t/great-digital-judaic-studies-resources>