

THE ORIGIN OF BIRCHAS HAMAZON

Did you even learn the history of the long chant we recite after meals?

What's Benching?

When you ask the typical Jewish kid to “bench,” he probably looks at you a little bewildered and thinks that either you’re talking about the long thing you sit on in the park or the all-star baseball player, Johnny Bench.

But, if the same Jewish kid goes to a Jewish camp or school, he knows that “benching” refers to Birchas HaMazon, one of the most well-know prayers. He or she is not likely to know its origin and its context.

In fact, this week’s Parsha is the origin of Birchas HaMazon, which, by the way, is the only bracha made obligatory by the Torah itself, whereas all other blessings are merely rabbinic in nature.

The Origin Story

What exactly is behind the long chant? Where does it come from? What does it mean?

As the Talmud observes, Birchas HaMazon is actually a chain of four Brachos , the first of which was composed by Moshe Rabbenu as the manna fell to sustain the People of Israel. This

bracha, then, is the most ancient prayer recited by the Jewish people to this very day.

The second bracha was composed by Yehoshua to thank G-d as the Jewish nation entered into Eretz Yisrael; Moshe Rabbenu makes no mention of Eretz Yisrael whatsoever in the first bracha, because they had not yet arrived there.

The third bracha, offering praise to G-d for the building of Yerushalayim, was composed by Kings Dovid and Shlomo. Once the Bais HaMikdash was destroyed, however, the bracha changed from the present tense, praising HaShem, to the future, praying hopefully that the Bais HaMikdash soon be restored.

The Great Revolt

There is another unique feature to this blessing: in all other brachos, we answer “amen” only to blessings recited by others, but in this third bracha in bentching, we all recite amen to our own blessings as well.

This special notation is to mark an especially sharp distinction between the first three brachos and the one to follow. The first three brachos, you see, are commanded by the Torah, while the fourth derives from a much later era, when it was composed by Rabban Gamliel and his Court in Yavneh, 52 years after the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash in 70 of the Common Era.

That was the time of the revolt of Bar Kochba. In his earliest days, he was a disciple of Rabbi Akiva, the greatest among his generation’s Tana’im. In fact, Rabbi Akiva argued that Bar

Kochba was the Moshiach and that the goal of his revolt was to restore the Bais HaMikdash. In those days, the disciples of Rabbi Akiva joined forces with the revolt, and so the revolt succeeded. But, it was not long before Bar Kochba went off on his own path and failed to realize that his victories were from HaShem. Instead he took all the credit for his success, and in many ways did not act as befits a G-d fearing man. At this turn in Bar Kochba's personality and leadership, the Rabbis withdrew their support. Ultimately, the Roman Emperor Hadrian stamped out the revolt and murdered thousands of Jews in Betar, then the most prominent of Jewish cities and seat of the revolt. Hadrian, in addition, refused to allow the corpses to be buried, as a final lesson to the Jewish survivors, and the corpses remained without their final dignity.

Years later, Rabban Gamliel and his Court in Yavneh prayed and fasted until he was finally able to bribe the Romans to bury his brothers and sisters. On the 15th of Av, whose anniversary is this week, Rabban Gamliel prepared to bring them to burial, only to find that a miracle happened over the years: their bodies had remained intact and none of them had decomposed!

On that very day, Rabban Gamliel and His Court composed "HaTov VihaMetiv," the fourth bracha of Birchas HaMazon, to show gratitude for the miracle of protecting the corpses and allowing them to be brought to a proper Jewish burial.

Why Celebrate?

What kind of blessing should we make over tens of thousands of martyred Jews being brought to burial? What kind of "tov,"

goodness, should we celebrate as we remember the corpses of our brothers and sisters who have perished in the most brutal and torturous ways? If we are going to praise G-d for goodness, why don't we at least pick a good occasion?

Let's try to understand it this way:

Each bracha of Birchas HaMazon relates to a specific era in the G-d-given evolution of Jewish peoplehood. The bracha of Moshe Rabbenu symbolizes the era of Dor HaMidbar, the generation of the desert. The bracha of Yehoshua symbolizes the era of entry to Eretz Yisrael. The third bracha, composed by Kings Dovid and Shlomo, point us to the most illustrious era of the Jewish people, with Yerushalayim and the Bais HaMikdash in all their glory.

The fourth bracha, on the other hand, symbolizes that which is darkest about Jewish peoplehood: Exile, an era of enormous pain and destruction.

The Sages of Yavneh wanted to teach that we need to find goodness and blessing even in the tragedies that befall us. The holy Rabban Gamliel and his Court refused to see the glass as half-empty and instead focused on the miracles even in the midst of such terrible disaster.

This is true in our generations as well. We have every reason to mourn the horrendous tragedies of the Holocaust, or to express our dismay at whatever issues are befalling the Jewish people at this very moment. But, we have even more of an obligation to look at the wonders and miracles of those who survived the holocaust and refused to surrender to the pain and hardship that they had suffered. We have an obligation to celebrate the

positive elements of Jewish life today—which are truly incredible.

Even in the midst of the most horrible of times, we must find the goodness that is, and is yet to come.