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THE ORIGIN OF BIRCHAS HAMAZON



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PARSHAS EKEV: THE ORIGIN OF BIRCHAS HAMAZON

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 “bensching” refers to Birchas Ha-Mozon,” one of the most well-know brochos. He or she is not likely to know its origin and its context.

In fact, this week’s Parsha is the origin of Birchas Ha-Mozon, (which, by the way, is the only bracha made obligatory by the Torah itself, whereas all other brachos are Derabanan) based on the passage, *”וְאָכַלְתָּ וּשְׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ.”*

First, let’s examine a bit about Birchas Ha-Mozon:

As the Talmud observes, Birchas Ha-Mozon is actually a chain of four Brachos , the first of which was composed gratefully to HaShem 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 Yisroel It’s important to note, that Moshe Rabbenu makes no mention of Eretz Yisroel whatsoever in the first bracha he composed because they had not yet arrived there.

The third bracha, offering praise to HaShem for the building of Yerushalayim, was composed by Kings Dovid and Sh’lomo, who respectfully brought forth



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Jerusalem and the Bais Ha-Mikdosh. Once the Bais Ha-Mikdosh was destroyed, however, the bracha changed from the present tense, praising HaShem, to the future, praying hopefully to HaShem that the Bais Ha-Mikdosh would soon be restored.

You should also take note that in reciting all other brachos in our davening, we answer “amen” only to each other’s brachos. This third bracha in bentching is the only one in all of Jewish worship in which the worshipper answers “amen” to his own bracha.

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 Ha-Mikdosh 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 Tanaaim (teachers). In fact, Rabbi Akiva argued that Bar Kochba was the Moshiach and that the goal of his revolt was to restore the Bais Ha-Mikdosh. 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 saying Kochee Viotzem Yadee... 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 Rabbi’s withdrew their support from him. 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,



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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, none of them had decomposed! On that very day, Rabban Gamliel and His Court composed "Ha-Tov Vi-Ha-Metiv," the fourth bracha of Birchas Ha-Mozon, to show gratitude to HaShem for the miracle of protecting the corpses and allowing them to be brought to a proper Jewish burial.

Yet, even if all this is so, what kind of a simcha or bracha is it for tens of thousands of martyred Jews to be brought to burial? What kind of "tov," goodness, should we celebrate as we look upon corpses of our beloved brothers and sisters who have perished in the most brutal and torturous ways? If we are going to praise HaShem for goodness, why don't we at least pick a good occasion?

But, let's try to understand it this way: Each bracha of Birchas Ha-Mozon relates to a specific era in the G-d-given evolution of Jewish peoplehood. The bracha of Moshe Rabbenu symbolizes the era of Dor Ha-Midbor, the generation of the desert. The bracha of Yehoshu'a symbolizes the era of entry to Eretz Yisroel. The third bracha, composed by Kings Dovid and Sh'lomo, point us to the most illustrious era of the Jewish people, with Yerushalayim and the Bais Ha-Mikdosh in all their glory.

The fourth bracha, on the other hand, symbolizes that which is darkest about Jewish people hood –Galus - an era of enormous pain and destruction. The



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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 that HaShem granted even in the midst of such terrible disaster.

And so it is also in our own generation. We have every right to look upon the horrendous tragedies of the Sho'ah, the Holocaust. But, we have even more of an obligation to look at the wonders and miracles of those men and women who survived and refused to surrender to the pain and hardship that they had suffered. They who watched their own parents and spouses and children perish but they choose to celebrate their own miracles of survival and the goodness that they have today; families, children and grandchildren alike.

This is the lesson of Hatov Vihameitiv – that even in the midst of the most horrible of times, we must find the goodness that is, and is yet to come.