



RABBI AARON Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Halachic Dining

This week's parsha contains a clear-cut obligation that is unanimously accepted as one of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot: *Birkat Hamazon*, expressing gratitude to God following a meal. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l explored this mitzvah, both for its halachic and spiritual meaning.

In order to identify the unique nature of *Birkat HaMazon* the Rav turns our attention to a distinctive element in the liturgy of *Birkat Hamazon*: *zimmun*, in which the leader calls the rest of the group to join in blessing. The Talmud (*Berachot* 45a) derives the concept of *zimmun* from the verse, "Declare with me that the Lord is great, and let us exalt His name together" (*Tehillim* 34:4).

The text of *Birkat Hamazon* does not change with *zimmun* but the character of the ritual does- the group has joined together. It is no longer a group of individuals but rather an assembly has been formed (*Birkon Mesorat HaRav*, p.17). Furthermore, the Rambam rules that the leader recites the four blessings aloud and that all those listening "respond *amen* after each blessing."

In this way there is clearly a cohesiveness of the group in blessing God. Even today, when we all read *Birkat HaMazon* quietly, the leader must recite his blessings aloud, and others must respond amen. Without this interaction, we are left with a collection of individuals simultaneously reciting the same blessings, not a unified group offering a collective blessing (*Ibid.* p.23).

Why is establishing a cohesive group critical?

The answer, suggested the Rav, can be found in the Jewish people's first communal meal: 'Seder' night in Egypt. The Israelite slaves sat down to a meal which obligated them not only in what to eat but *how* to eat. A unique requirement of the meal was, what is termed, "*chabura.*" Meaning, this meal was meant to be shared with others. "The slave suddenly realized that the little he has saved up for himself, a single lamb, is too much for him. The slave spontaneously does something which he would never have believed that he was capable of doing, namely, he knocks on the door of his neighbor whom he had never noticed, inviting him to share the lamb with him and to eat together" (*An Exalted Evening*, p.97).

A slave would be inclined to hide when he eats so that he ensures that he quenches his thirst and appetite. By sharing one's food

the slave moves from selfishness to creating a chessed-thinking community (Ibid., p. 25). A beast drags his prey back to his lair to devour it alone, man chooses to eat as part of a community. Joining others around the table expresses the sense of responsibility and sympathy one is to feel for his fellow person. “The meal pulls man out of his self-centered state of mind and creates a community of equals...” (Ibid., p. 25).

The spirit of the Seder meal is to be replicated at every meal (The Rav Thinking Aloud, Bamidbar, p.115). The institution of *zimmun* represents the Torah’s markedly different outlook; namely, it expects man to be attentive to the needs of the other.¹

“Together, as a single voice, the eaters praise God because they ate together. The original institution of *zimmun* was for a community of rich hosts and poor guests, a community of *chesed*. The halacha is based on the idea that the bread of each one be accessible to others” (Jewish Table Etiquette, Rav Bick, VBM). ■

1 An exception to this is the final meal before Tisha Be’Av. At that time we are meant to feel a sense of estrangement and loneliness. Therefore it should not be eaten in a zimmun (Orach Chayim 552:8). The Rav quoted the Vilna Gaon that this practice is based on the verse in Eicha “One should sit alone and be silent (3:28). (Mesorat HaRav Kinot, p. 766).

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