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Birkat HaOre'ach: Reviving a Lost Prayer

The Artscroll publication of *Birkat Hamazon* includes a curious note regarding one of the blessings which is recited in *Birkat Hamazon*. It states the following: “Many authorities are at a loss to explain why the prescribed text has fallen into disuse...” (“The Family Zemiros,” Artscroll, 1987, p.18).

This note appears in reference to the blessing known as the *Birkat HaOre'ach* (“The Blessing of the Guest”). This short blessing is recited by a guest when sitting at the table of a host. It is perplexing why this beautiful blessing first recorded in the Talmud fell into disuse, perhaps for many hundreds of years.

It is interesting to see, however, that

many of the newly published siddurim and *birkonim* include *Birkat HaOre'ach* as part of the standard text of *Birkat Hamazon*.

The original source for this blessing and the practice of offering a special prayer for the host is found in the Talmud *Berachot* (46a): “The guest recites the *Birkat Hamazon* so that he blesses the host. What is the text of the blessing? ‘May it be Your will that the master of this house shall not suffer shame in this world, nor humiliation in the World-to-Come.’ Rabbi Yehuda added to it the follow-



Rabbi Hershel Schachter

ing: “And may he be very successful with all his possessions, and may his possessions and our possessions be successful and near the city, and may Satan control neither his deeds nor our deeds, and may no thought of sin, iniquity, or transgression stand before him or before us from now and for evermore.”

Why specifically does the guest pray that the host be spared from enduring any embarrassment? Why do we bless the host that his work “be near the city”? And what is the intention of praying that the host overcomes the pressure of Satan?

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Rav Kook offered an exquisite explanation regarding all three aspects of the guest's prayer. First, the opening part of the prayer which is directed at the host not experiencing a feeling of embarrassment stems from the fact that the guest is expressing a feeling that he may very well be experiencing himself as a guest sitting at someone else's table. When one needs to ask assistance from others it often brings with it feelings of discomfort or possibly humiliation. The guest, therefore, chooses to confer a blessing towards the host concerning a situation which the guest himself is undergoing at that very moment. Thus this blessing is indeed a heartfelt prayer conferred on the host that he should never experience a similar situation of embarrassment or feeling any kind of degradation.

The second blessing the guest bestows on his host is in regard to his financial well being.

What is the precise intent of this blessing's phrase that "your work be near the city"?

According to Rav Kook the guest is blessing the host not only that his business location is in close proximity to his home, but also that his daily engagements should always be geared to the overall needs of the community. The more one assists and provides for others, the more a person enhances their own growth and spirituality. There is a heightened quality to a mitzvah carried out for the sake of the community. As a proof text, Rav Kook quotes the mishnah in Pirkei Avot: "Whoever brings merit to the masses will not be connected to sin" (Avot 5:21).

Thirdly, the "Prayer of the Guest" includes the notion of overcoming the negative force of *Satan*. What is the meaning behind this statement? In rabbinic literature the idea of

Satan often parallels the concept of *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Rav Kook interprets this phrase of the guest's blessing to be playing off of the previous words of the blessing in which the guest prays for the host's continued involvement in communal life. It is a most noble act to be involved in helping the community at large, and yet openness to the life of the city often presents spiritual risks to one's own religious life. A multitude of stumbling blocks present themselves when interacting with a wide variety of people and being exposed to secular settings. The guest therefore concludes his blessing with a prayer that his host be guarded from any negative influences. (*Ain Aya, Berachot* 7:10, 7:11)

EVERYONE IS A GUEST AT THE MASTER'S TABLE

Rav Kook adds a beautiful foundational thought concerning this blessing recited by the guest sitting at the table of the host. He suggests that the notion of offering thanks for sitting at the table of the host should be kept in mind every time we partake of a meal, even when we sit at our own table. Reciting *Birkat Hamazon* reminds us that the food we eat is truly a gift from the "Host" in heaven. Hashem is our provider and we simply partake of His benevolence.

Rav Kook's comment brings to mind a well-known and beloved story which is told about the esteemed sage, the Chafetz Chaim, with whom he shared a very close bond. A wealthy American businessman who was passing through the Polish town of Radin paid a visit to the home of the leader of his generation, the saintly Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen, known as the Chafetz Chaim. Upon entering the home, he was struck by how sparsely it was furnished. "Where is all

your furniture!?” the businessman asked. “And where are yours?” replied the Chafetz Chaim. Somewhat startled by the response, the businessman said, “Oh, I am only passing through.” To which the Chofetz Chaim replied, “I, too, am only passing through.”

RESTORING A PRECIOUS PRAYER

The Rambam (*Hilchot Berachot* Chapter 2) codifies the practice of reciting the “Blessing of the Guest” and shares the text of blessing as it is presented in the Talmud. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim, siman #201*) does the same. Moreover, if we look at the modern day poskim such as the *Mishne Berurah* we also find that he encouraged the practice and adds that the Talmud states that one who is offered to lead the *Birkat Hamazon* and turns it down is “punished with shortening of his life.” He is penalized because they have withheld giving a blessing to the host (*Orach Chaim, siman #201*).

It is noteworthy that the *Aruch Hashulchan* states that it is evident that in our time when the custom is that everyone recites *Birkat Hamazon* for themselves (and we no longer have the practice of one individual at the table to reciting *Birkat Hamazon* on behalf of all who are present) it is incumbent upon every person to include the *Birkat HaOreach* in their own *Birkat Hamazon* (*Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chaim siman #201*).

Do children who eat at their parents table recite this blessing? The *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim, siman #201*) says that children are also guests at their parent’s table and should therefore recite the blessing for their parents.

One final note. When Rav Hershel Schachter served as a Scholar-in-Residence in a shul in Woodmere N.Y., Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz was sitting next to him when he recited the

benching and overheard that Rav Schachter added the *Birkat HaOreach*. Apparently, explained Rabbi Leibowitz, Rabbi Schachter considered himself a guest and therefore felt obligated to direct his blessings to those who were his hosts (i.e. the rabbi, shul board). (YU Torah, Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz, 10 Minute Halacha, *Birkat HaOreach*). ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, “Torah United” on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aarong@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.



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