



RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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Jewish Dining

This week's *parashah* contains the biblical obligation of *birkat ha-mazon* (Grace after Meals), which requires every individual to express their gratitude to God following a meal (Deuteronomy 8:10). Interestingly, *birkat ha-mazon* receives an upgrade when multiple people enjoy a meal together. At the end, one calls to the others to participate in a joint blessing, in what is known as a *zimun*. This practice is derived from the verse, "Declare the Lord's greatness with me, and let us exalt His name together" (Psalms 34:4).¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik posited that the character of the ritual changes in a *zimun*, even though the text does not. In place of a group of individuals, an assembly has been formed.² This new cohesion is clear from the Rambam's ruling that the leader must recite the four blessings aloud and those listening must respond amen after each one.³ Although the practice today is for each participant to recite the blessings to themselves, the leader still recites the blessings aloud and the others answer amen. Otherwise, the group would

revert to individuals.⁴ Why is it important to create a cohesive group in the first place?

THE FIRST SUPPER

The first communal meal enjoyed by the Jewish people, the eating of the *korban pesach* (paschal lamb) in Egypt, had the Israelite slaves sit down to a feast in a *chaburah*, a fellowship of slaves who pitched in to procure a lamb:



Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l

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.⁵

This sharing of food turned the act from being self-centered to other-directed. To join others around the table expresses the sense of responsibility and sympathy one should feel for one's fellow man. The spirit of that original Seder meal is to be replicated at every meal.⁶ "The meal pulls man out of

4. *Mesorat Harav Birken*, 23.

5. Genack, *Exalted Evening*, 97.

6. Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Bamidbar*, 115. Of course, this is only when we are supposed to band together. Before Tisha be-Av, for example, we are meant to experience loneliness, so we do not make a *zimun* (Shulchan Aruch, *Orach Chayim*, 552:8). See Koren *Mesorat Harav Kinot*, 766.

1. *Berachot* 45a.

2. *Mesorat Harav Birken*, 17.

3. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Berachot*, 5:2-3.

his self-centered state of mind and creates a community of equals.... The ceremony of the *zimun* is the halakhic institution that gives expression to this philosophy.”⁷ In Egypt, God redeemed not only the Israelites but this very physical act.

CHESED-CONSCIOUSNESS

There is another call to others still practiced today that evokes this same theme of being *chesed*-conscious. At the beginning of the Seder, we begin Maggid with an open invitation: “Whoever is hungry let them come eat.” This phrase, the Rav pointed out, is not original to Pesach; it was how the Amora Rav Huna would begin every meal.⁸ We may not be on the level of Rav Huna, but we do try to emulate him on the night when the whole idea of demonstrating concern for others at mealtime began. In fact, we add of our own accord that “whoever is in need let them come make Pesach (or have the paschal sacrifice) with us,” which speaks to those looking for a welcoming atmosphere.⁹

We demonstrate this sensitivity during other Festivals as well. The Rambam ruled about the mitzvah to have meals on the holidays:

“[O]ne is obligated to feed the convert, orphan, and widow along with the rest of the abject poor. Whoever locks their courtyard doors and dines with his wife and children, without feeding the poor and the depressed, does not experience joy of the mitzvah but the joy of their belly. [...] Such joy is a disgrace.”¹⁰

7. *Mesorat Harav Birkon*, 25. See also Parashat *Terumah*, “An Alternate Altar.”

8. *Ta'anit* 20b.

9. Genack, *Exalted Evening*, 27–28. According to the Rav, we also break the matzah at *Yachatz* because the slaves would share their bread (*ibid.*, 26–27).

10. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yom Tov*, 6:18.

It is only when sharing our food with others, the Rambam exhorted, that the meal is transformed into a performance of *chesed*. Otherwise, one has technically performed the mitzvah, but is morally repugnant in the eyes of man and God.

EATING BEFORE GOD

The Greek philosophers viewed eating as a horrifying necessity to be taken care of in private, much as the beast drags his prey back to his lair to devour it alone. It was never to be done in front of God. The Torah takes a different approach: “You shall eat there before the Lord your God... and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God—you, your sons and your daughters, your slaves and your maidservants...” (Deuteronomy 12:7,12). Given the uniquely Jewish take on eating, Jews specifically eat “before the Lord” because we dine together and thank God as one. When we do so, “eating ceases to be a mechanical act and becomes a great service in which one stands in reverence and awe before his Maker.”¹¹

The Rav further showed that in halachic terms the *zimun* appears to be a kind of *davar she-bi-kedushah*, akin to the holiest sections of the liturgy recited responsively only in the

11. *Mesorat Harav Birkon*, 25.

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presence of a minyan (the Kaddish and Kedushah prominent among them). While generally ten are required, here only three are needed, as the group is more closely knit around the meal.¹² What is the significance of this?

Apparently, like a *davar she-bi-kedushah*, *birkat ha-mazon* is intended to reveal God's presence and extol his greatness. This is perhaps even more significant in the context of physical indulgence than it is within the holy walls of the synagogue. God's presence at the table can be more easily missed at the dinner table than after the gradual spiritual build-up towards the Kedushah.

FROM GUT TO GOD

Our forefather Avraham also used meals to remind, or rather inform, people of God's presence in the world. Avraham used his

12. Ibid., 17–18.

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famous hospitality to help spread monotheism. The Rav observed that Avraham had his visitors sit under a tree to enjoy their meal (Genesis 18:4). The tree obviously shielded them from the heat of the day, but it also served as a conversation piece. “Lift your eyes. Consider the organic process of growth, the mystery of life and focus beyond the treetop to the Heavens... to the stars, to the galaxies, to the nebulae, towards the vast expanse of space.”¹³

Avraham later planted an *eshel* (Genesis 21:33), which served this same goal. According to one Talmudic sage, the *eshel* was a field of delicious food. Passersby would eat and then thank him for his hospitality. At that point, he would stop them right there and inform them that in fact the food belonged to God. He would teach them about the Creator and instruct them to deliver their thanks and praise to Him. For Avraham, a square meal presented an opportunity to introduce pagans to God.¹⁴

To eat and thank God for our sustenance is to recognize the divine in the natural workings of the world. In the Rav's words: “Man has the unique ability to recognize and declare God's authority and mastery. By dispelling the mirage of nature's independence and declaring the true Creator, the influence of God's presence thereby increases in this world.”¹⁵

EXPLORING THE RAV'S INSIGHT

13. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 113–114.

14. *Sotah* 10b.

15. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 113–114. Perhaps for this reason Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach took it upon himself at his ninetieth birthday to recite *birkat ha-mazon* from a *birkon*. After nine decades things can seem to be just the way the world is. Paying attention to the text reminds one of God's role in all things.

The Talmud informs us of an exchange on high:


The ministering angels said before the Holy One, "It is written in your Torah, 'Who favors no one (לֹא יִפְגֹּחַ)' and takes no bribes' (Deuteronomy 10:17), yet You indeed favor the Jewish people, as it is written, 'May the Lord raise His countenance toward you (וְה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ)' (Numbers 6:26)!"

He answered them, "How shall I not favor the Jewish people? I have written in the Torah 'You will eat, be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 8:10), yet they are careful to bless me after consuming only an olive's or egg's volume of bread."¹⁶

The Rav explicated this odd exchange as follows. When God's face has been hidden in the darkest of time, the Jewish people have "favored" Him by acknowledging His presence. Even when tormented by poverty and hopelessness, the Jew consumed whatever crumbs he had and affirmed in *birkat ha-mazon*: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who feeds the entire world through His goodness...."¹⁷ ■

16. *Berachot* 20b.

17. Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 33–34.




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