

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ekev

Two Types of Bracha

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ

You will eat and you will be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem, your God, for the good Land that He gave you. (8:10)

This pasuk is the source for the mitzvah of *Birkas Hamazon* after eating bread. This makes *Birkas Hamazon* practically unique among berachos, for, as a rule, berachos are derabbanan. In fact, there is only one other bracha which is mentioned in the Gemara as being De'oraisa and that is making a bracha before learning Torah. The Gemara states:¹

מִנֵּין לְבִרְכַת הַתּוֹרָה מִן הַתּוֹרָה? שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי שֵׁם ה' אֱקַרְא הִבּו גְדֹל לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ

From where to we derive Birkas Hatorah in the Torah? [From the pasuk which states:]² "When I call out the Name of Hashem, ascribe greatness to our God"

KAL VACHOMERS THAT DIDN'T MAKE IT

Thus, the Torah itself obligates making a bracha in these two situations: After eating bread and prior to learning Torah. Interestingly, the Gemara³ seeks to derive a Torah obligation in the two converse cases, i.e., before eating bread and after learning Torah, from a *kal vachomer* argument, which goes as follows:

- ▶ Bracha before eating: If one is obligated to make a bracha when he is already satisfied, then *kal vachomer* he should be obligated when he is hungry!
- ▶ Bracha after learning: If one is obligated to make a bracha having been involved in temporal matters (eating bread), then *kal vachomer* he should be obligated after being involved in eternal matters (learning Torah)!

As we know, however, the bracha in these two cases is also derabbanan only. The question is: Why? What happened to the two *kal vachomers* presented by the Gemara?

1 Berachos 21b.

2 Devarim 32:3.

3 Berachos 48b.

The Meshech Chochmah explains that the reason these two *kal vachomers* do not endure is because the two brachos which the Torah requires are so different in nature as to make the any such *kal vachomer* untenable. In other words, when we contemplate the nature of these two brachos, we will understand why the Torah requires *Birkas Hamazon* specifically after eating and *Birkas HaTorah* specifically before learning:

BIRKAS HAMAZON

The purpose of *Birkas Hamazon* is not merely a matter in order to express gratitude to Hashem for one's bread. If that were the case, then the *kal vachomer* arguments presented by the Gemara would be viable. Rather, this bracha comes to address the state a person may find himself in specifically after eating. The Torah cautions that when one eats and is satisfied, it can breed an attitude of self-satisfaction which can lead to haughtiness and ultimately to the person forgetting his dependency on Hashem. As the ensuing pesukim state:⁴

פֶּן תֹּאכַל וְשָׂבַעְתָּ... וְרַם לְבָבְךָ וְשָׂבַחְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Lest you eat and be satisfied... and your heart will be haughty and you will forget Hashem, your God.

It is in order to preempt such a state of forgetfulness that the Torah requires that after a person has eaten and been satisfied, he then recognize Hashem as the Source of his livelihood and success. Since this concern exists specifically *after* one has eaten, it is only at that stage that the Torah requires him to make a bracha. Prior to eating, where no such concern exists, the bracha is derabbanan only. Any attempt to obligate one in a bracha beforehand based on *kal vachomer* will fall through once one realizes what is behind the obligation to make a bracha afterwards.

“HOLY EATING”: A CASE STUDY

This understanding of *Birkas Hamazon* will give us further insight into a discussion in the Gemara regarding who is obligated in this mitzvah. The Gemara⁵ quotes a braisa which states that “All are obligated in Birkas Hamazon: Kohanim, Leviim and Yisraelim.” The Gemara clarifies that the braisa's emphasis that Kohanim are obligated comes to include the situation where Kohanim have partaken of bread as part of the mitzvah of eating korbanos. The Gemara explains why this assertion is necessary:

I might have thought that since the Torah designates the eating of korbanos as part of the atonement for the one who brought the korban, they [the Kohanim who are partaking] would therefore be exempt. To that end, the Torah states “you will eat and you will satisfied,” and the kohanim, too, have done so, therefore they, too, are obligated in Birkas Hamazon.

The question, however, remains: Why is this assertion necessary? Why would one have thought that the kohanim are exempt from *Birkas Hamazon* simply because their eating brings atonement to someone else? The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that one might have thought that, given the mitzvah nature of their eating, it would be protected and vouchsafed from the accompanying state of haughtiness that a satisfying meal normally brings and hence there would be no requirement to address this state with

4 Pesukim 12-14.

5 Arachin 4a.

Birkas Hamazon. Therefore, the braisa emphasizes that, notwithstanding the fact that their act of eating is a mitzvah, it nevertheless remains an act of eating with the accompanying concerns and hence, they too are obligated in *Birkas Hamazon*.

BIRKAS HATORAH

With regards to the timing of making a bracha of Torah, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the exact opposite is the case – for the critical time is specifically *before* one learns. A matter of fundamental concern when it comes to learning Torah is one's attitude and orientation towards what he is learning. If his goal is to partake of Hashem's Divine Wisdom and to draw closer thereby to Him and His mitzvos, learning Torah can indeed be the means through which one attaches himself to the Shechina and causes it to rest upon him. If, however, a person learns Torah for self-serving goals, such as prestige, he can thereby fall short of reaping the spiritual benefits of Torah learning.

In light of the decisive impact one's orientation can have on one's Torah learning, we will appreciate that the critical time to make a bracha on learning is beforehand – in order to establish his intent and purpose in learning. Hence the pasuk says, "When I call out the Name of Hashem," – referring to learning Torah which is known as 'Hashem's Name'⁶ – "Ascribe greatness to our God" – see to it that you do so with recognition of Hashem's greatness, to which you wish to attach yourself; not for your own greatness, which may serve only to detach you from Hashem.

Indeed, the Gemara⁷ attributes the beginning of the downfall of the Jewish People at the time of the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash to the fact that they did not make a bracha prior to learning Torah. Although many other sins were to follow, it all began with bringing the wrong orientation to learning Torah.

Thus, unlike the case of eating, we can appreciate that the timing of the bracha which the Torah obligates is specifically *prior* to learning. If one has made a bracha before learning, then the quality of his learning itself will bring him only to greater spiritual heights, protecting him from spiritual mishap and no "follow-up" reminder in the form an after-bracha is necessary as far as the Torah is concerned. Hence, any blessing made after learning Torah (such as the bracha after Torah reading in shul) is derabban, with any attempt to derive a Torah obligation based on a *kal vachomer* from *Birkas Hamazon* being categorically inappropriate.

With this discussion, the Meshech Chochmah is pointing out that there is a great deal to learn, not only from *kal vachomers* that work, but also from those that don't! For probing the question of *why* they don't work can serve to enlighten us as to the essential difference in nature between the two cases at hand. In our situation, although there are in fact two brachos which are obligatory on a De'oraisa level, they nonetheless differ from each other regarding their role and purpose in so fundamental a manner as to categorize each of them as unique.

6 See Ramban's Introduction to his Commentary on the Torah.

7 Nedarim 81a.