

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלהיך על הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך. דברים ח:י
 ...and you eat and are satisfied
 you are to bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. Deut. 8:10
 This verse is the nucleus of



food from God, and give a blessing back to God in return). On the contrary. The recitation of a blessing is a performative act of consecration. By reciting a blessing, you consecrate the act of eating; when you recite a blessing, it is as if you transport yourself, albeit for an instant, to the sacred zone of the Temple and become a pilgrim. Your blessing is not a verbal compensation for God's gift, but a verbal act of consecration for a heretofore

Birkat Hamazon and is the basis of much of the halakha

for how to acknowledge God for our food. In 1944, the legendary Torah teacher, Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997), examined classic commentaries associated with this verse in her weekly Parasha Gilayon (sheet) and asked the question above: Here is my attempt at an answer.

מהו ערכו וטעמו של מצוות ברכת המזון וברכות הנגזרו בקלל לפי הג"ל?
 What are the underpinning values and reasons for the recitation of Birkat Hamazon and Blessings of Enjoyment according to the commentaries cited here?

banal and profane act. As Talmudic translator and commentator Abraham Cohen (England, 1887-1957) wrote: The Universe is regarded as the Divine Temple; but by virtue of

The Blessing as a Performative Act of Consecration

ברכת ל"ה.	Talmud Berakhot 35a
תנו רבנן אסור לו לאדם שיהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה וכל הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה מעל.	The Sages taught in a Tosefta: It is forbidden for a person to derive benefit from this world, which is the property of God, without reciting a blessing beforehand. And anyone who derives benefit from this world without a blessing, ma'al - it is as if he is guilty of misuse of a consecrated object.

This is a great rabbinic statement. The theological idea at the core of this statement is that we are allowed, (indeed obligated!) to derive pleasure from this world. But not without the obligation to thank. At the very least, what the rabbis are saying is that a blessing is a verbal compensation for the receipt of enjoyment. The verse, ואכלת ושבעת וברכת, you shall eat, be filled, and you shall bless, functions as a commandment: you shall perform a liturgical act to acknowledge the enjoyment and benefit that you have received from eating food. We bless before and after we eat. Likewise, it is forbidden to enjoy food without reciting a blessing. On the one hand, this is a basic moral teaching: it is wrong to derive pleasure from the world without thanking God. But when the rabbis characterize the neglect of a blessing as the specific transgression known as me'ilah - misuse of consecrated objects, they are making a very different theological statement. Background: A person cannot use an item that was consecrated for the Temple in a profane way. Example: If you dedicated a kilo of flour for a meal offering, and you kept some of it to make pancakes when you got home from your pilgrimage, that would be an act of me'ilah - misuse. You can't just take consecrated items and use them anywhere you want. It would be sacrilegious to do so. According to the rabbis then, the recitation of a blessing is much more than a liturgical quid-pro-quo (I take

the benediction, one becomes consecrated and permitted to partake of its produce. To wit the following comparison:

בית המקדש	העולם הזה
The Temple	The Universe
One can only consume or use consecrated items.	One can consume or use anything.
Any consumption or use of consecrated items, must be done in a state of purity or holiness.	Any consumption or use of ordinary items (like food) must be done in a "temporary" or "transient" state of "quasi-purity" or "quasi-holiness."
A pilgrim/worshiper undergoes a process of consecration, eg. immersion in a mikva, to gain entry to the sacred zone of the Temple, prior to partaking of anything holy there.	An ordinary individual/worshiper recites a blessing as a process of consecration, to "gain entry" into the Divine Temple of the Universe prior to partaking of, or deriving benefit from, anything in it.

At its core then, according to the rabbis, the religious experience of reciting a blessing is a momentary re-enactment of Temple pilgrimage and worship.

The Blessing as an Act of Spiritual Awakening

ספר החינוך ת"ל	Sefer HaHinukh §430 (Spain, 13th Cent.)
ענין הברכה שאנו אומרים לפניו, איננו רק הנזכרה לעורר נפשנו בדברי פינו כי הוא המברך, ומברך יכלל כל הטובות, ומתוך ההתעוררות הטוב הזה בנפשנו ויחיד מחשבוננו להודות אליו שכל הטובות קלילות בו, והוא המלך עליהם לשלחם על כל אשר תחפץ, אנו זוכים במעשה הטוב הזה להמשיך עלינו מברכותיו.	...with regard to the blessing that we say before God, its sole purpose is to awaken our souls to apprehend the words of our mouths, (the blessing) and thereby know that God is indeed the Blessed One, and that as the Blessed One, He will combine everything that is good in the world for our benefit. And from this awakening in our souls towards all of this goodness, and from concentrating our thoughts on thanking Him for all the goodness that is bundled in Him, and knowing that He

is Sovereign over all of that, and that He can dispatch his goodness to whomever He desires, when we perform this worthy act of blessing, we merit the possibility of drawing more of His blessings upon us.

Here the recitation of a **blessing** is first and foremost a spiritual act, or what *Sefer HaHinukh (SHH)* calls an act of **awakening of the soul** - התעוררות. A modern term for this would be *mindfulness*. The recitation of a **blessing** is more meditative than performative. The recitation of a **blessing** acts as a spiritual prompt to the individual to express gratitude, wonder, and humility before God, and by doing so, we generate more blessings for us.

The Blessing as an Act of Enhancement of Experience

ספר הכוזרי ג:ז | **The Kuzari 3:17 (Judah Ha-Levi, Spain 12th Cent.)**

ההזדמנות להנאה והרגשות, ושיחשב בהעדרה קדם לכן, כופל ההנאה. וזה מתועלת הברכות למי שהוא רגיל בהם בכונה והבנה, מפני שהם מצטרות מין ההנאה בנפש והשבת עליה למי שחננה וקבר הנה מזמן להעדרה, ואז תגדל השמחה בה. כמו שאמרת אומר 'שהחננו וקמנו', וקבר היית מזמן למות ותודה על שהחיינו, ותראה זה רוח,

The opportunity to experience enjoyment, and to actually feel that enjoyment, and to experience the possibility of losing that enjoyment, doubles that experience of enjoyment. This is what people who regularly recite blessings with intention and understanding, experience. Because in that moment of reciting a blessing, they create a species of spiritual delight and satisfaction and gratitude towards the One Who bestowed that gift upon them, and even though they may have felt that it was fleeting, because of that, their enjoyment of that experience is even that much greater. Just as you feel when you say the Shecheyanu blessing with emotion, and you are intensely aware of your mortality at that moment, and you are thankful to God for having sustained you, and you immediately notice the difference in yourself when you say it.

Grab your glass of wine over lunch when you re-read this passage. It's absolutely spellbinding. What is Yehuda Halevi (*YHL*) saying here? He's saying that the purpose of reciting a **blessing** is *to enhance the experience of whatever it is that you are partaking of*. Reciting *Hamotzi* enhances the experience of eating of bread; reciting *Borei Pri Ha'etz* enhances the experience of biting into a crisp, tart Honey-crisp apple. Saying the *Shecheyanu* at an important mile-stone makes you cry. It shouldn't surprise us that the great poet *YHL* sees **the blessing as poetry**. The same way poetry shapes and enhances human experience, so does the act of reciting a **blessing**. Imagine you are drinking a glass of red wine. It's one thing to sip it, another to savor it after reading a poetic review like this, from the great wine critic, Robert Parker: *With mouth-watering black and blue fruits distinctly tinged by fruit pits, smoked-meat, chalk, and a medicinal iodine note, this formidably concentrated wine never forgets its duty to refresh*. A **blessing** is really a compact poem.

The Blessing as Antidote to Forgetting It won't surprise us that there are yet other ways to interpret this verse. Let's go to the Italians:

ספורנו | **Ovadia Sforno (Italy, 1475-1549)**

וברכת את ה' אלהיך. למען תזכר כי מאתו היו אלה לך:

And you shall bless the Lord your God: In order to remember that all of this comes to you from him.

שד"ל | **Samuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865)**

וברכת: לפי הפשט אין זה צווי, רק הודעה שקל כף תהיה טובתך והצלחתך עד כי מעצמה תכיר חסד הבורא ותתעורר לברכו: ואח"כ הזהיר שישמרו לבלתי שכוח כי מה' היתה זאת להם, כי כן טבע האדם.

According to the plain sense of the text, this is not a commandment, only an acknowledgement that your prosperity and success in the land will be so great that you will instinctively recognize the grace of the Creator and be prompted to bless him. And after this verse, it warns that you should beware, lest you forget that everything comes to you from God, because it is human nature to forget.

Sforno and Shadal make the same point (albeit 300 years apart). For them the recitation of a blessing is a preventative measure against forgetting. Underlying this interpretation is not the religious anthropology of the rabbis, or the spiritual edification of *SHH*, or the exquisite poetics of *YHL*, but a very close reading of the biblical text. Invariably, wherever we find the phrase *you shall eat and be satisfied* - ואכלת ושבעת, in one form or another, we always find a statement relating to the possibility that people will **forget** or **turn away** from God. The most familiar example is found in the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* (which occurs later in our parasha):

ונתתי עשב בשדה לבהמתך ואכלת ושבעת. השמרו לכם פן יפתה לבבכם וסרתם ועבדתם אלהים אחרים והשתחויתם להם. דב"א: טו-טז

I will give forth herbage in your field, for your animals, and you will eat and you will be satisfied. Take you care, lest your heart be seduced, so that you turn aside and serve other gods and bow down to them. Deut. 11:15-16

Deuteronomy seems highly concerned with the human propensity of taking total credit for the production of food. Of course, agriculture requires a great deal of work, but without the earth, the sun, and rain, in other words, without God, nothing would grow. We are all hobbled by hubris and arrogated by arrogance. The recitation of a **blessing** is an antidote against antipathy and a remedy for dis-en-mindment. So to answer Morah Nehama's question, *the underpinning values and reasons for the recitation of Birkat Hamazon and Blessings in general* are as follows:

Rabbis	To re-enact Temple pilgrimage and worship.
SHH	To awaken the spirit to God in gratitude.
YHL	To enhance the experience. Blessing as poem.
Italians	To remember God.

Which one works for you? Perhaps...all of the above!

Shabbat Shalom!