

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WHEN GLUTEN-FREE BREAD RAINS FROM HEAVEN

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

In the first moment of mannahfall, Mosheh Rabbeinu was thinking liturgically: “There must be a *berakhab acharonah* (=afterblessing) for this”. So says the Babylonian sage Rav Nachman in his history of the components of *Birkat HaMazon*: (Berakhot 48b)

משה תקן לישראל ברכת הזן בשעה שירד להם מן;
 יהושע תקן להם ברכת הארץ כיון שנכנסו לארץ;
 דוד ושלמה תקנו בונה ירושלים

Mosheh Rabbeinu established for Israel the berakhah of *HaZan* at the time the mannah fell;

Yehoshua established for them the berakhah of *HaAretz* once they entered the land;

Dovid and Shlomoh established *Boneh Yerushalayim*.

By contrast, Yehoshua waited an unknown while after entering Israel to compose his blessing, while Dovid waited at least until Shlomoh had become his official heir, and more likely Shlomoh completed a poem and/or legislative process that his father had begun years earlier but left unfinished.

The extreme version of this reading yields Mosheh establishing *Hazan* before anyone eats the mannah. This fits well with the text of the blessing, which focuses on G-d’s beneficence in providing sustenance and says nothing at all about the experience of eating. Contrast this with *HaAretz*, which praises the land of Israel extensively.

Moreover, *HaAretz* does mention the experience of eating. That’s because it wraps up by citing Devarim 8:10:

ואכלתם ושבעתם
 וברכתם את יי' אלהיכם א-להיך
 על-הארץ הטובה אשר נתן לך:
 You will/may/must eat and be sated
 and (then) you will/must bless Hashem your G-d
 regarding the good land that He has given you.

A reader of this verse might reasonably conclude that the mitzvah to express gratitude for food exists only in the context of expressing gratitude for land.

According to Rav Yehudah on Berakhot 21a, the Biblical obligation of *Birkat HaMazon* is derived from Devarim 8:10. It follows reasonably that *HaAretz* is the central blessing of *Birkat HaMazon* conceptually as well as structurally. If so, why did Mosheh Rabbeinu establish *HaZan* independently? The answer presumably is connected to Mosheh establishing *HaZan* in an environment incapable of naturally providing human sustenance. It

suggest that it is also connected to Mosheh establishing *HaZan* in reaction to mannahfall before having eaten it. *HaZan* is not a blessing on food, but rather on having food.

This approach may resolve a “classical halakhah” difficulty raised in this week’s parshah.

Classical halakhah difficulties occur when a contemporary ruling makes it seem that a past Jewish religious exemplar did not act in accordance with the Law. The most famous examples relate to the Avot, such as Avraham serving meat-and-milk to the angels, and Yaakov marrying sisters. These can be resolved, albeit inelegantly and sometimes controversially, by denying that the Law was in full force prior to Sinai. We’ll discuss whether that solution works for the following difficulty.

Devarim 29:4-5 reads:

ואולף אתכם ארבעים שנה במדבר
 לא בלו שלמתיכם מעליכם
 ונעלף לא בלתי מעל רגלך.
 להם לא אכלתם
 ויין ושקר לא שתיתם
 למען תדעו כי אני א-ת'קונק א-להיכם.

I led you about for forty years in the wilderness
 your clothes did not wear out from on you,
 and your shoe did not wear out from on your foot
 bread you did not eat
 and *yayin veshekhar* you did not drink
 so that you would know that I am Hashem your G-d.

G-d tells the Jews that their clothing and footwear has stayed intact throughout the 40 year wilderness trek. This seems a simple statement of fact made to people with direct personal knowledge of its truth. The problem is that He then asserts that over the same period, they have neither eaten bread nor drunk *yayin veshekhar*. This seems to be a fictional claim made to people with direct personal knowledge of its falseness. Presumably a misunderstanding has crept in somewhere.

We might try to naturalize both sides of the equation, so that e.g. the first phrase implies regular wardrobe refills rather than remarkably durable fabrics. Or consider the imho astonishingly tone-deaf approach of Hoil Moshe:

הלכתם הדרך לאט לאט באופן שמחמתה לא בלו
 You traveled so very slowly that as a result your clothes did not wear out.

Most commuters would not accept this as a fair trade for having a projected 11-day journey take 40 years! Regardless, this sort of approach fails to explain the claim that “you did not eat bread”, which I can’t find a way to make mean merely “you did not lack for bread”.

The straightforward alternative is to lean into the miraculous and assert that the Jews did not eat “human bread”, but rather mannah, also known via Tehillim 78:25 as *lechem abirim* = angel bread. It’s a little awkward that the Torah itself refers to mannah simply as *lechem* – see Shemot 16:4: “Behold I am causing *lechem* to rain for you from the heavens” – but that difficulty is not insurmountable. On this reading G-d supplied us with both food and clothing, and yet we did not eat bread.

This approach runs into difficulty when we consider the verse’s assertion that the Jews did not drink *yayin veshekehar* in the wilderness. One can claim that G-d supplied water miraculously, at least when it was otherwise lacking, but we have no record of G-d supplying wine, or for that matter any intoxicating beverage. (*Yayin veshekehar* can be translated “intoxicating wine”, or as referring to two different kinds of wine, or as referring to wine and a specific nonwine intoxicant, or to wine and any other intoxicant, and different translations may be correct in different contexts.) It seems a stretch to contend that G-d supplied miraculous water which could taste like any desired wine and vintage.

Moreover, *yayin veshekehar* seem out of place in this list. Clothing, shoes, and bread count as staples; surely almost everyone would add water rather than wine to the series if asked in the abstract. Maharil Diskin therefore suggests that the point is that no digestive aids were needed, since the mannah was perfectly absorbed by the body, and Hoil Mosheh suggests that they needed no medicines. But IMHO these suggestions are deeply implausible reasons to substitute *yayin veshekehar* for water in a list of essentials.

Finally: if the Jews didn’t drink wine all forty years, what did they make kiddush on?

Considering that question brings us full circle. If mannah is not considered *lechem*, how could Mosheh Rabbeinu establish a blessing of *Birkat HaMazon* over it? The obvious answer is that the blessing applies to whatever serves as sustenance for a specific people and culture. Mannah was *lechem* while the Jews were in the wilderness. This fits well with my argument above that the blessing is fundamentally unrelated to the experience of eating, but rather to the fact of being provided with sustenance.

By the same logic, can water become wine for the purpose of kiddush? This question was asked to R. Avraham ben HaRambam (Responsum #84) by a Yemenite Jewish community whose staple grain was not one of the five one makes *hamotzi* on, and in a place where grapes were not grown.

R. Avraham rejects that community’s custom of saying Birkat HaMazon after non-5-grain staples. He offers two grounds for

distinguishing their case from that of Mosheh Rabbeinu. The first is that mannah was then the staple of the entire Jewish people, rather than of a specific geographic community; the second, which he prefers, is that at Sinai, Devarim 8:10 superseded Mosheh’s legislation, and from then on the blessing could only be said over bread. He utterly rejects the notion that one could make kiddush over water in any circumstances. (He nonetheless encourages the community to recite both Kiddush and Birkat HaMazon over their own staple breads, but without using G-d’s Name, so their children, and culture, will remain familiar with these texts/rituals.)

A weakness of R. Avraham’s second approach is that it leaves the Jews not saying Birkat HaMazon throughout the mannah period, and most likely therefore not fulfilling the obligation of matzah on Pesach, and probably also of *Seudot Shabbat*. To resolve this difficulty, many commentators point out that Devarim 2:28-29 imply that the Jews purchased bread and water from the children of Esav and some Moabites during the mannah period, and various midrashim suggest that they purchased foodstuffs from other vendors as well. Perhaps they purchased wine for kiddush as well, or perhaps they made kiddush over bread.

These approaches cannot fit well with any straightforward translation of “you did not drink *yayin veshekehar*”

Many years ago, I asked Rav Shear Yashuv Cohen z”l what his father the Nazir drank at the seder for the Four Cups. The answer was apple juice, presumably meaning that at the Seder, apple juice worked for Kiddush as well (but that water would not).

What if there were a nezirut from grains – would such nezirim say Birkat HaMazon on rice bread? R. Avraham ben HaRambam rejected the idea of changing the standard for a single geographic community; to reconcile the Nazir’s actions with that responsum we must say that lack of access is not the same as being unable to eat/drink something even when it is accessible. If that is so, people with celiac disease might be the equivalent of nezirim.

This sort of argument is advanced tentatively by R. Azaraya Ariel at <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/ask/91721> (I thank R. Jonathan Ziring for the reference). R. Ariel reports that he did not receive enough support from colleagues to justify ruling in practice that people with celiac could say Birkat HaMazon over other grains, and he raises several cogent practical questions that must be resolved even if the argument is accepted in theory. I’m citing it here because I think that the issue warrants further halakhic conversation, and I hope someone will send me the fuller treatment Rav Ariel promised to publish.

I also wonder, even more tentatively, if an argument could be made for allowing people unable to eat 5-grain bread to say HaZan alone, even if they cannot say the other blessings of Birkat HaMazon.

Shabbat shalom!