



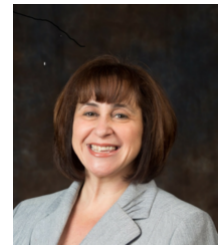
## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

# Today's Torah

*Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.*

**Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh/Parashat Ekev**  
**August 4, 2018 – 23 Av 5778**



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## REPRINT

### Dear God: Thanks for the Grub

Torah Reading: [Deuteronomy 7:12 - 11:25](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Isaiah 49:14 - 51:30](#)

What's for dinner? What's the best restaurant? Going from store to store to find the right ingredient... How is it that when we travel and when we are home, food is a central component of our conversation, of our thinking, of our planning, of our action? For better or worse, for us as Jews, food is certainly central to our consciousness. How is it, that something that can be so mundane captured the imagination and spirit of our people?

Preparing our ancestors for entry into the land of Israel, Moses says to the Israelites:

"For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper..... V'achalta v'savata oovayrachta et Adonai El-hecha al ha'aretz hatovah asher natan lach. When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless the Lord your God for the good land which God has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:7-10)

This last verse, declared the elders of the Great Assembly, is the biblical/Toraitic foundation for reciting Birkat Hamazon, the blessing after meals.

Yet, in looking closely at Birkat hamazon, it is unlike most other blessings. For most actions, we are used to reciting one line blessings that follow the specific formula Baruch Atah Adonai - Blessed are You, Adonai.... Birkat Hamazon, however, does not follow this formula; rather, the blessing after meals is not just one blessing, but four different blessings whose words and prose extend far beyond the theme of food: A blessing for God who sustains the world with food and nourishment; a blessing focusing on the land of Israel; a petition to God for protection and rebuilding of Jerusalem; and general praise to God. In fact, if you look closely at the words of Birkat Hamazon, it sometimes seems as if each time we eat bread, we take a quick journey through the millennia of Jewish history.

According to Rabbi Ishmael in the Jerusalem Talmud, each paragraph of the Birkat Hamazon is itself of biblical original, derived from one word or phrase of the verse: Rabbi Yishmael says: " oovayrachta - And you shall bless" -- Birkat Hamazon (the whole idea); " et Adonai El-hecha - Adonai your God" -- for food; " al ha'aretz - for the land" -- for the land, " hatovah - good" -- for Jerusalem; and " asher natan lach - which He has given you" -- for God's goodness. [Jerusalem Talmud, 'Blessings', Chapter 7, 5:1]

So, why all these blessings? And, why recite the Hamotzi blessing before we eat and the Birkat Hamazon after we eat? In most other acts of Jewish life, we recite blessings before the act, but not afterwards.

Ramban (Nachmanides) teaches that Birkat Hamazon is actually the answer to haughtiness. In fact, just verses after this one, Moses warns against the eating of the land and partaking of the earth's abundance without recognition of from where it is that we get our wealth, urging us to remember our history. In a land as good and full as the one described in the Torah passage, it is too easy to enjoy the prosperity and to forget the source of our blessing. Consequently, the blessing after the meals is our shield to help avoid the hollow emptiness that results from self-satisfaction and arrogance.

In his book *Entering Jewish Prayer*, Reuven Hammer says the sages encouraged thanksgiving prayers after meals as well as before in order to emphasize the origins of the gifts received. Think about what it is like when you walk into a huge buffet - the abundance of food and choices for entrees, side dishes, salads, desserts, vegetables, appetizers. In the excitement of all the wonderful food, it is easy to give thanks; but, once we have eaten our fill and are sated (and perhaps even reach the food coma stage), it is also easy to relax, to become complacent, and/or to begin thinking how well we have provided for ourselves. It is easy to take credit for all that we have and to think: "I am wealthy, therefore I deserve my wealth." That is the exact moment when our tradition tells us we most need to direct ourselves towards God, towards remembering that all that we have ultimately comes from God.

In the end, the lesson is as simple as that which our mothers drilled into us as children - don't forget to say thank you. Or, in the words of the birkat hamazon itself: "We thank You God for the gift of life, for the food we have eaten, for the nourishment You provide us all of our days, whatever the season, whatever the time."

Shabbat Shalom

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