

Chazal teach us that *Bentching*, Grace after meals, is a *mitzvah min haTorah*, Biblical command. Veritably, it is obvious that one should offer his gratitude upon deriving benefit from another. When we take into consideration that food sustains us and that Hashem is the Source of all food, it does not take a deep thinker to understand the obligation of *u'beirachta* – “and you shall bless.” If we eat and are satisfied, the natural consequence should be blessing Hashem. Indeed, before the Torah was given to *Klal Yisrael*, our Patriarch, Avraham Avinu, taught the world about the greatness of Hashem by using the medium of *Bentching* as part of his lesson plan. Upon serving nourishing food to wayfarers who made their way to his desert oasis, he would say, “Now, it is time for you to pay gratitude to the One Who brought the world into being. After all, whatever you have eaten is the result of His kindness.” If the traveler listened and blessed Hashem, Avraham would bid him farewell, considering the blessing as full payment for his meal. If, however, the guest refused to pay gratitude, Avraham presented him with a hefty bill, claiming that a desert oasis that serves food has the right to charge a premium price for its provisions. This, in and of itself, was a lesson to the traveler as to how much he owed the Creator of the world.

Bentching has become a staple in Jewish tradition as the precursor of blessing: financial success; good health; marital harmony; *Yiddishe nachas* from one's children, etc. The reason is simple: one who understands the obligation to pay gratitude deserves to be granted more and greater benefit. One who takes everything in life for granted and does not demonstrate his appreciation deserves nothing. The **Chafetz Chaim** was wont to say, “People search all over for *segulos*, merit, and good omen to secure blessing from Hashem. All they have to do is recite *Bircas HaMazon*, *Bentching*, from a *siddur*, word for word, to be protected from all *tzaros*, troubles.” This idea is underscored by many of the early commentators who view *Bircas HaMazon* as the *mitzvah* which guarantees Hashem's blessing. *Eliyahu Rabbah* writes that *Bircas HaMazon* has included therein every letter of the Hebrew alphabet except for *fay sofis/ende' fay*. He explains that every meal after which the beneficiary recites *bentching* aloud, clear and with joyful intention, his words drive away/expel the *Malach ra*, angel who carries out evil decrees against man. The last letter of this angel's given name is *fay sofis* as in: *Af* (anger); *shetzef* (slight anger); *ketzef* (wrath), three words representing varied degrees of rage.

There is an incredible story concerning the recitation of *Bircas HaMazon* which I cannot resist sharing. An elderly Jew by the name of *Reb Shimon* was a regular *mispallel*, worshipper, in the *Bais Haknesses Har Tzvi* in Yerushalayim. An individual who was staunchly meticulous in his *mitzvah* observance, he went out of his way to observe the *mitzvah* of *Bentching* ritually. One could say that it had become “his” *mitzvah*. When he would *bentch*, he enunciated every word with clarity. One could almost derive the meaning of each word from *Reb Shimon's* animated expression during *bentching*. One *Succos*, after a group of neighbors heard his melodious rendering of *Bentching*, they asked *Reb Shimon* why *Bentching* played such a critical role in his *avodas hakodesh*, sacred service, to Hashem. He related the following story.

“When I was a young boy of eleven years old, prior to World War II, I was a student in a small *cheder* in Poland. One day, the illustrious **Horav Meir Shapiro, zl**, *Rav* of Lublin and its *Rosh Yeshivah*, visited our school and tested its students. As a prize for excellence (apparently, they all did well on the *bechinah*, test), he said he would reveal to us a secret which is, in effect, a *matnas chaim*, gift of life. He then reviewed with us the *Eliyahu Rabbah* (cited by *Beer Heitev* or *HaChaim* 185.1) that for the individual who recites *Bircas Hamazon* properly, with deep intention/concentration, sustenance will always be plentiful and provided honorably. Also, he will not be the subject of *af*, *ketzef* or *shetzef*. *Rav* Meir Shapiro concluded his “gift,” reiterating the words of the *Beer Heitev*, that one should read the words from a book – *bentcher* or *siddur* – to insure proper concentration.

“At that moment I was *mekabel*, accepted upon myself, to carry out this *mitzvah* with deep devotion, concentrating on every word. Little did I realize at the time how much *mesiras nefesh*, sacrifice, this would involve. I was always the last one to complete *Bentching*. All the boys had long run out to enjoy their break. I was late for everything. At one point, I was nicknamed, ‘the *bentching* boy’.

“My youthful reverie came to a nightmarish ending with the outbreak of World War II. The Nazis made a tragic end to my idyllic life, as I, with millions of my Polish brothers and sisters, were herded into cattle cars for transport to labor and death camps. As always, every arrival at camp was accompanied by a *selektzia*, which divided the workers from those who were unable to work due to age, old/young, frail health, etc. Because I was tall for my age, I was able to move toward the healthy adults, and, thus, sent to work in the camp. I had no skills, but the man behind me whispered, ‘Say that you are a butcher; I will help you.’ We were both sent to work in the camp’s kitchen. Right then, I saw how the blessing of ‘plentiful sustenance’ was materializing. There was no shortage of food in the kitchen. Regardless of the situation, I continued in my commitment to *bentch* properly, as I had always done from the day that the *Lubliner Rav* gave us the *matnas chaim*. There were times when *Bentching* properly was fraught with grave danger, but ‘somehow’ I survived.

“One day, the commandant walked into the kitchen and noticed that I did not appear as emaciated as the majority of the internees in camp. Assuming that it was due to my having access to the food in the kitchen, he screamed, ‘A Jewish youth should fatten himself on our food! This is not a spa!’ He signaled for me to come over and follow him. We walked outside to the back of the kitchen where the ground was rock solid. He gave me a small hammer and said, ‘I am giving you four hours to dig a bunker two meters by two meters, large enough for our soldiers to hide in, in case of an attack. Your return to the kitchen job is based upon your success. Do you hear what I am saying, you accursed Jew?’ It was his way of saying that I had no chance for success, and I would probably be shot because of the insolence of my appearing healthy, satisfying my hunger with precious food reserved for the SS and other soldiers occupying the camp.

“When I heard this, my eyes dimmed, as my heart broke. I had just been given a death sentence.

How can a young teenager with a small hammer break ground as hard as stone – let alone dig a bunker two meters by two meters? I lifted my eyes Heavenward and prayed, ‘Hashem, was I not promised that plentiful sustenance would be provided to me with honor? This blessing was to last a lifetime. Has my lifetime come to a short end?’

“As I was sitting on the ground, depressed and dejected, an army truck filled with Nazis came by and stopped. Seeking to satisfy their innate anti-Semitic character, the Nazis felt that they should add pain to my embarrassment. They began throwing vegetables, especially potatoes, at me. In a few moments, I was practically buried in a mound of potatoes. As they drove away, I began to weep bitterly. Was this supposed to be my lot? Humiliation, pain, and a profound sense of failure overcame me, as I waited for the arrival of my tormentor and, possibly, executioner, the commandant. He knew I could not possibly dig the bunker. I was a dead man. On the other hand, however, the blessing of plentiful sustenance was in full force. I was literally buried in vegetables. What good would it do me if I were dead?

“About an hour later, another truckload of soldiers came by. This time, however, they were Polish soldiers. When they saw my apron and the mound of vegetables which enveloped me, they offered me an enormous sum of money for my vegetables, which they thought belonged to the Nazis. I agreed to exchange all of my vegetables for no money – as long as they would dig a bunker of two meters by two meters. They readily agreed, and, within no time, the soldiers had literally saved my life.

“I returned to the kitchen to be greeted by the commandant who was poised and ready to carry out my execution for failure to execute his orders. How shocked he was to discover a perfectly dug bunker exactly where, hours earlier, he had ordered me to break ground. He had no alternative other than to return me to my position – which I kept until the end of the war. Now you understand why *Bentching* is so important to me. The blessings that accompany this wonderful prayer of gratitude have literally kept me alive!”