

Torah Insights

The Custom Of Adding Verses In The "Bentching"

by Rabbi Bennett M. Rackman

Jewish law prescribes that following the eating of a meal in which one has eaten bread, one must recite the Grace after Meals - ברכת המזון. The source for this commandment is derived from the verse in Deuteronomy VIII, 10, where the Torah states: and you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord thy God - ואכלת ושבעת וברכת -

According to tradition, it was Moses who instituted the first of the four blessings thanking God for the manna in the Wilderness. Joshua who brought the people in the holy land instituted the second blessing thanking God for the food and the land. King David and King Solomon instituted the third blessing beseeching God to build Zion and Jerusalem. And it was the men of the great Assembly - אנשי כנסת הגדולה, who added on the fourth blessing after permission was granted to the Jews to bury the Dead of Betar - חורבן ביתר.

There is a custom to recite Psalm 137 (על נהרות בבל) on weekdays prior to the saying of the "bentching," and a more prevalent custom to sing Psalm 126 (שיר המעלות) on the Sabbath and Festivals. A custom arose among the German Jews to recite four verses from the Psalms prior to saying the Grace after Meals. WHY?

הודו לה' כי טוב כי תהלת ה' ידבר פי ויברך כל בשר שם קדשו לעולם ועד. ואנחנו נברך קה מעתה ועד עולם הללוקה לעולם חסדו. מי ימלל גבורות ה' ישמיע כל תהלתו.

According to Rabbi Binyamin Hamburger, of Bnei Brak in Israel, and a scholar who has researched the customs of German Jewry (מנהגי אשכנז) and published articles and a book on the subject, it provides an opportunity to recite some holy thoughts prior to saying the Grace after Meals. The sages advise that this is a requirement in order that the meal not be considered gluttony (זבחי מהים).

If this were so, then why was it not adequate for those who partake of a meal to recite Psalm 137 (על נהרות בבל - By the rivers of Babylon) on weekdays, and sing Psalm 126 (שיר המעלות - A song of Ascents) on the Sabbath and holy days, which is the custom and is printed in many prayer books? Rather, there must be a reason for the additional verses from the Psalms. What is significant about these four verses that it became customary to include them before the Grace after Meals? Is it not just more Psalms?

Perhaps, the significance can be found in the number (four) of verses that are selected.

The first two sentences are taken from Psalms 145:21 and 115:18. They both have a linguistic or language connection to the first two blessings. In the first, we find the words כל בשר - *all flesh*. The words לכל בשר - *for all flesh*, are found in the first blessing. The second sentence has the word נברך - we will bless. This word parallels ומברכים אותך - *and we will bless you*, which is found in the second blessing of the Grace after the Meal.

The third verse, הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו - *O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good*, is found in many, many places in the Psalms. However, it appears in Psalm 107 several times. That particular Psalm makes reference to the God's redemption of His people. They will return to the Land of Israel from many directions. God will bring them out of darkness and the shadow of death. They will establish a city of habitation. They will sow fields and plant vineyards. "Let them give thanks unto the Lord for His mercy." We have here a conceptual connection to the third blessing in that God redeems the People and they return to rebuild the Land of Israel. This refers to the building of Zion and Jerusalem which is the main theme of the third blessing.

And, the fourth verse that is recited according to the German Jewish custom also has a thematic connection to the fourth blessing. As cited above, the fourth blessing of the Grace after Meals, was instituted in gratitude for permission to bury the dead in Betar. The Jews recognized God's wondrous works in that there was no decomposition or decay. This amazing miraculous event is hinted at by the theme in the fourth verse found in Psalm 106, 2: מי ימלל גבורות ה' ישמיע כל תהילתו - Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord or make all His praise be heard?

Whether it is a linguistic or conceptual connection, each of the four verses from the Psalms is related to, indeed, foretells the contents of the Grace after Meals. Such is the wisdom of our Sages!

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