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WHEN GLUTEN-FREE BREAD RAINS FROM HEAVEN

(Revised and Updated from 5784)

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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 הזון 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 the blessing *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 the second blessing, *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:

ואכלת ושבעת
וברכת את יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ
על־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתְּ לָךְ:

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. I 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 read:

ואולך אַתְּכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר
לֹא בָלוּ שְׁלֹמֹתֵיכֶם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם
וְנַעֲלָה לֹא בָלְתָה מֵעַל רַגְלְךָ.
לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם
וַיַּיִן וְשִׁכָּר לֹא שְׁתִּיתֶם
לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

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 veshekh* 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 veshekh*. 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 any “human bread”, but rather exclusively mannah, also known as *lechem abirim* = “angel bread” (Tehillim 78:25). 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. In 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 vesbekhar* 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 vesbekhar* 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.)

In 2024, I wrote that here that “It seems a stretch to contend that G-d supplied miraculous water which could taste like any desired wine and vintage”. But in 2025, I have found that Gilyonei HaShas (R. Akiva Eiger) to Berakhot 48b quotes Midrash Talpiyot as saying that according to the position that Nadav and Avihu died because they were drunk, what actually happened was that they drank the waters of the well (presumably Miriam’s well) and intended it to taste like wine, so it did. (I have not yet found this in Midrash Talpiyot (which, to avoid confusion, is not actually a midrash, but rather an anthology whose author lived 1659-1729.))

Gilyonei HaShas then points out that the mere taste of alcohol can’t make you drunk – that requires chemistry. He concludes therefore that the water must actually have become wine. If so, of course, they could make kiddush on it.

On this basis, he rejects the sort of suggestion I began with, that Mosheh Rabbeinu’s establishing the blessing of Hazan over the *mannah* was not parallel to what later became Birkat Hamazon. Instead, he concludes that the *mannah* too could become bread in substance as well as taste.

However, this approach runs headlong into Ritva Kiddushin 37b, who states that obviously they could not use *mannah* for matzah, because it was not made of the Five grains. It also seems to run into Tosafot Menachot 45b, who says that the Sacrifice of the Two Breads was not brought in the Wilderness; but he cleverly evades that by suggesting that the *mannah* only became bread at the moment of tasting, while the Sacrifice must be bread at points in the ritual preparation. He does not offer a solution for Ritva, but it seems to me that one might argue that matzah needs to be baked, or something along those lines.

Other halakhists argue that the *mannah* became bread, and therefore required Birkat Hamazon, but still did not come from the Five Grains. This generates the elaborate claim that the Five Grains are only a requirement for earthly bread, and not Heavenly bread; but that matzah and the Sacrifice of the Two Breads require earthly bread.

Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam (Responsum #84) was asked by a Yemenite community about their custom of saying Birkat HaMazon over bread made from a local staple grain that was not one of the Five Grains. They argued that they should be like the Jews in the desert, because they too had no access to bread made from the Five Grains. His response was that Mosheh Rabbeinu’s decree is defunct, and our Birkat HaMazon relates only to the grains that the Land of Israel is praised for.

In 2024, I raised a trial balloon – recognizing that it was against R. Avraham ben HaRambam - as to whether the *mannah* could serve as a precedent for people with celiac. That obviously requires that *mannah* remain its own kind of bread requiring Birkat Hamazon, and not that it simply be assimilated into the Five Grains as a chameleon. I thought that the parallel between bread and *yayin vesbekhar* leaned strongly against the assimilation approach. But having found the Rabbi Akiva Eiger, I must acknowledge this year that the argument has a very long way to go.

Shabbat shalom!

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