Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum: Blessings & Gratitude

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning. This unit will focus on the trait of gratitude and its expression in birkat hamazon (grace after meals). The Talmudic text is from Berakhot 20b but our discussion begins with the biblical source for birkat hamazon.

Think of the last time you expressed gratitude to someone. When was it? What was it for? When do we say thank you?

Challenge your students to come up with a list of five experiences for which they consistently express gratitude (e.g., health, employment, family etc.). You may want to put that list up on a board to reference throughout the class.

Part 1: The Biblical Source (15 minutes)

Jewish traditional practice includes many blessings, including blessings before we eat, but only one, the grace after meals, has a clear biblical source. The verse reads as follows:

Text #1: Deuteronomy 8:10

And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.

Discuss:

1. Are you a foodie? Do you know someone who is? How does she or he approach food?
2. How does a poor person approach food?
3. What is the difference between the way an urbanite thinks about food versus a person who picks zucchini fresh from the field?

Should our blessing consist solely of simple thanks for our sustenance or does the verse imply the incorporation of other themes as well?

The verse’s focus on the land of Israel is unmistakable. In fact, Ramban (Nahmanides, 13th century, Spain) feels the need to emphasize that this commandment applies even to Jews living outside the land of Israel. For Jews in any location, gratitude for the food that sustains us creates an association with the land God granted to our ancestors. Thus, each recital of birkat hamazon begins with a thank you for our food, and turns in the next paragraph to gratitude for the land.
Text #2: Ramban Devarim 8:10


The meaning of “on the good land” is “and on the good land.” This verse commands us that whenever we are satiated, we should bless God for the food and for the land. This obligation applies in every location.

While one may think that the blessing is limited to food eaten within the land of Israel, Ramban makes it clear that wherever you are eating you need to appreciate the land that has produced your food.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz points out how awareness of one debt of gratitude often leads to another. People often struggle to express gratitude, perhaps because they do not like feeling beholden. Finding the wherewithal to say thank you for one thing helps us realize our need to give thanks for other things. In that sense, thanking God for sustenance brings us to acknowledge other debts towards our Creator. Therefore, in addition to mentioning the land of Israel, we also mention the giving of the Torah and the covenant of circumcision (both mentioned in the second paragraph of birkat hamazon).

Part 2: The Timing of this Blessing (15 minutes)

How does this mitzvah differ from the grace recited in other religions?

It is quite striking that many religious traditions encourage reciting grace before the meal, whereas this mitzvah requires a recital after the meal. While the rabbis did create blessings to be said before eating, the biblical commandment is situated specifically after the meal. We do bless both before and after a meal, but it is the blessing after the meal that has been mandated through a biblical commandment.

What would motivate such placement?

R. Meir Simcha Hakohen from Dvinsk (1843–1926, Rabbi and scholar from Eastern Europe) notes the constant possibility that material comfort can create a sense of complacency and arrogance. It is often easier to turn to God when hungry than after finishing a lavish meal. The Torah addresses this potential pitfall by placing the grace after the meal. In many ways, people have a much greater need for a reminder about God and our religious commitments after eating than before.
Gratitude and Birkat Hamazon

Text #3: R. Meir Simcha Hakohen from Dvinsk, Deuteronomy 8:10

When a person eats and is satisfied, he is liable to reject God as the verse says: lest you eat and become satiated and forget the Lord, your God (Deuteronomy 8:12-14). Therefore, God commanded that when one eats and is satisfied, he should mention God with thanks and remember that “He is the one who gives you strength for accomplishments” (Deuteronomy 8:18).

Part 3: The Amount of Food Requiring a Blessing (12 minutes)

Let us consider another aspect of the question—when are we obligated to bless God for our food?

The verse in Deuteronomy speaks of being “satisfied,” implying that we only need to say birkat hamazon following a full meal. If so, a quick snack or even a sandwich would not create an obligation to say grace. Indeed, one gemara agrees with this reading:

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 20b

After citing the halakha that one who eats a quantity of food that does not satisfy his hunger is obligated by rabbinic law to recite Grace after Meals, the Gemara cites a related homiletic interpretation. Rav Avira taught, sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Ami, and sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Asi: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, in Your Torah it is written: “The great, mighty and awesome God who favors no one and takes no bribe” (Deuteronomy 10:17), yet You, nevertheless, show favor to Israel, as it is written: “The Lord shall show favor to you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26). He replied to them: And how can I not show favor to Israel, as I wrote for them in the Torah: “And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:10), meaning that there is no obligation to bless the Lord until one is satiated; yet they are exacting with themselves to recite Grace after Meals even if they have eaten as much as an olive-bulk or an egg-bulk. Since they go beyond the requirements of the law, they are worthy of favor.
In this gemara, the angels point out two contradictory biblical verses. One states that God does not show favoritism; he is not “yissa panim.” The other, part of the priestly blessing, says that God is “yissa panim.” God explains to the angels that the Jewish people deserve special treatment because they chose to recite grace even when they just eat a smaller amount and are not fully satisfied. *(Please note, in addition to the grace after meals, there are shorter blessings to be said after eating smaller portions or meals without bread).*

**Ask:**

1. What is great about expressing gratitude even for a smaller gift and what does it say about our relationship with God?

The Hasidic thinker, R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (1765–1827, Poland), offers a profound explanation of this gemara. People express significant gratitude for one of two reasons, either due to the magnitude of the gift or due to admiration for the giver. When we receive a fantastic present, we want to express our thanks irrespective of who gave it to us. However, when we have reverential feelings towards someone, we are thrilled to receive any gift from that person since the gift establishes that we have a relationship with an individual we admire. Imagine receiving a present from our favorite athlete or musician or from an internationally renowned professor. The nature of the gift would be almost irrelevant.

The biblical commandment only demands that we thank God for food of sufficient quantity to create satisfaction. In other words, it emphasizes the magnitude of the gift. Over the course of Jewish history, we chose to thank God for any gift because we so value our relationship. Our response shifts the focus away from the gift to our connection with the giver.

**Ask:**

1. Can you think of examples of both types of gratitude—for the nature of the gift and for the connection to the giver—in your lives?

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**Part 4: The Connection between Gratitude and Divine Favor (12 minutes)**

We now move to a different theme emerging from this Talmudic text. Showing favor refers to a divine bestowal that does not work through the avenue of absolute justice. Indeed, we often talk about God’s governance of the world combining strict justice and compassionate mercy.

**Ask:**

1. Why is there a need for such a mixture of modes of governance?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook (1865–1935, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of pre-State Israel) suggests a different reading of this gemara.
The principle of the attribute of justice in the world is not vengeance, God forbid, but a way of guiding people to completion which is the exalted goal. Sometimes, a general positive attribute can lessen the need for justice since the individual who acquires this trait will come to completion even though he senses that God gives him more benevolence than he deserves. A person who has truly acquired the trait of gratitude...and the more that God's bounty grows for him, the more he feels a debt of gratitude...this will not lead him to lack of concern about being good, rather he will add energy towards the good path since he now has a new cause for gratitude to God.

On the one hand, mercy and compassion are ideals employed by God that we strive to emulate. On the other hand, we also understand the need for justice. Absent justice, people would feel less urgency to do the right thing since God would then be communicating that He bestows bounty irrespective of human behavior.

How can God show compassion without the recipients falling prey to this trap? R. Kook explains that only those who truly understand gratitude avoid the danger. If a person gives me beyond what I deserve, I can either celebrate my good fortune or express profound thanks to the giver. Someone who responds the first way is in danger of losing a sense of justice and obligation. Someone who responds in the second way escapes the moral danger since he or she sees the gift as a source of a new moral obligation, as opposed to as a reason to feel a sense of entitlement or ignore responsibilities. Thus, it is only because we excel at gratitude, as manifest in our saying birkat hamazon for a smaller amount of food, that God can shine His face upon us and show us favor.
Part 1: The Biblical Source

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