



# To Arouse Our Spirit: Birkat Hamazon (Grace after Meals)

The Birkat Hamazon (blessing of the food), known in Yiddish as *benching* (from the Latin *benedicere*—“bless”), is the three- to five-minute prayer service that we commonly refer to in English as the Grace after Meals.

It’s probably true that most Jews, possibly even a majority of those who would describe themselves as religious, would *not* describe the Birkat Hamazon as a “prayer service.” This wouldn’t be surprising because it’s common during the Birkat prayers and blessings for individuals to engage in loud talk, to walk about visiting with other people in the room, or to help themselves to more food in the buffet line. But nonetheless, the Birkat is unmistakably a prayer service.

The fact that the Grace after Meals is recited separately from other synagogue services, or recited in the home, makes it no less of a prayer service. A prayer service may be conducted any time or almost anywhere

(except in places where idolatry or sexual lewdness is practiced, where there are foul odors, or where excrement can be seen). In fact, the home is the preferred place for Jewish prayer outside of the synagogue. And, of course, many prayers and blessings are said at home, none prescribed more frequently than those connected with eating, whenever that occurs.

“Among the many blessings that we recite in the fulfillment of our religious duties, the only ones that Scripture explicitly required us to say are those that we say *after we eat*. . . .

And though the specific wording of the Grace after Meals did not begin to take shape until the time of Ezra, the Scribe, and was not totally crystallized even by the Talmudic period, to say blessings of thanksgiving after eating was prescribed

by the Torah: ‘When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless Adonai your God for the good land that He has given you’ (Deuteronomy 8:10).” (Donin)

But what, precisely, does it mean here to bless God?

The *Sefer haHinnuch*, dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, notes: “. . . when we say continually, ‘Blessed are You, Adonai’ . . . the meaning is evidently not to add blessing to One who has no need of any addition, perish the thought.” Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch teaches that to bless God means instead “to further God’s purposes and wishes for which the free-willed acts of human beings are responsible, or to vow, to promise to do so.”

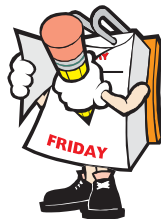
So “blessing” God by reciting the Birkat is the way in which we proclaim our intention—“a reminder to arouse our spirit with the words of our mouth” (*Sefer haHinnuch*)—to actually *do* the will of God.

(Continued on page 3)



## Mark Your Calendar: July 6 & 20—Friday Services & Shabbat Dinners

Kehillat Kharakim will offer Friday evening services and Shabbat dinners on July 6 and 20 at the home of Rabbi Moshe and Khulda.



Services begin at 7:00 p.m.

and include both English and Hebrew prayers and singing.

After services there is a blessing of the children, and a sit-down Shabbat dinner.

Dinner is followed by a readers’ theatre Torah-drama and zemirot (table songs).

Everyone who comes is

invited to bring a contribution to the tisch (table) in the form of a short story, a favorite song, or a brief reading that’s related to Shabbat generally or to the Torah portion for the week.

Call (323) 934-2925 for information, location and directions, and to hold a place.

### Inside this Issue

|  |   |
|--|---|
| For Young People: Balaam’s Donkey            | 2 |
| Torah Shmooze: Pinchas Pursues Peace         | 2 |
| To Arouse Our Spirit: Birkat Hamazon (con’t) | 3 |
| About Kehillat Kharakim                      | 4 |
| Pastoral Counseling Available                | 4 |
|  |   |
|  |   |

### Otzar—Treasure

*Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, and falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision.*  
—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

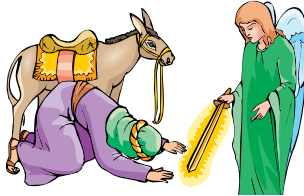
# For Young People: Balaam's Donkey

Once upon a time, the donkey was a wild animal in Africa. But then more than 4,000 years ago, people began to tame donkeys and raise them as work animals.

In the first Torah reading this month, named after King Balak of Moab, we meet Balaam and his donkey. Balaam was a prophet, but not Jewish. (A Jewish prophet is a person who knows what will happen in the future if we don't do the right thing.)

Anyway, King Balak was trying to get Balaam to come and put a curse on Israel; but on the way Balaam's donkey saw that God had put an angel in their path, so he turned off the road.

Donkeys seeing angels?! They usually do two much more practical things for us. Do you know what they are? (Hint: carrying.)



They still do these things for backpackers and hikers in the wilderness.

Although the donkey's job is to carry heavy loads, the Torah teaches us not to mistreat them or fail to care for them. We are taught not to put them in harness with an ox, for instance, because the donkey takes shorter steps and would suffer pain. And we are taught to help up a donkey that has fallen under its load, even if it belongs to someone we don't like.

Did you know that more than 2,000 years ago, princes and great leaders preferred to ride on donkeys? Why do you think they might have wanted to ride on a donkey rather than a horse? Why might *you* rather ride on a donkey? How about these reasons? A donkey is smaller and less threatening than a horse. A donkey is more sure-footed on rough trails than a horse. A donkey is less easily startled than a horse.

Okay, now it's time for the donkey quiz!

1. What's the name for a female donkey,

like Balaam's? 2. What's a "hinny"? 3. What's a mule? 4. What do female donkeys give that male donkeys don't? 5. What do donkeys do if you treat them badly?

Zechariah (9:9), a prophet of Israel, said that the messiah—a great person who will come to lead the world to a time of peace and goodwill—will arrive riding on a donkey. That sounds pretty silly, a great leader arriving on a donkey.

But according to Rashi, one of our most honored teachers, this is not really about the arrival of a man. It's to teach us about a *special time* to come in the future.

The horse has been used by warriors in battles. But the donkey is a quiet, more peaceful animal. So the Bible tells us that the donkey is the animal that shows us a picture of the future of peace and goodwill.

(Answers to the donkey quiz: 1. A jenny or jennet. 2. Offspring of a female donkey and a male horse. 3. Offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. 4. Good milk! 5. They become stubborn!)

# Torah Shmooze: Pinchas Pursues Peace

One of the children of Israel came and brought . . . a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and . . . the congregation of the children of Israel. . . . (Numbers 25:6) And when Pinchas saw . . . [he] rose up from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand . . . and thrust both of them through. . . . (Numbers 25:7-8) Therefore say: Behold, I give him My covenant of peace. And it will be for him and his seed after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the children of Israel. (Numbers 25:12-13)

The Moabite and Midianite kings had learned that they could defeat Israel by tempting the men to commit sexual sins, which would first destroy family morality but ultimately the whole people.

The Midianites had so much hatred for the Israelites that one of their kings made his own daughter act as a prostitute to lure the Israelites into sin. (Tanchuma Pinchas 2) He used his daughter, Kosbi, to entice Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon. Kosbi and others seduced thousands of Israelites to the worship of Ba'al Peor, which required the men to defecate on the idol before the women would give themselves sexually. (Rashi on Numbers 25:1-3)

Zimri, flaunting the law, had taken Kosbi into a tent in the sight of Moses and the people. According to Akeidat Yitzhak: ". . . Only a few people were guilty of indulging in immoral acts, yet the Torah treats the matter as if there had been a

wholesale collapse of morality. However, just as the act of a single individual at the right time and in the right place can redeem a whole nation. So can acts of individuals bring about national misfortune. The relationship of the individual to the community is the key to the entire matter. When one individual can disturb the equilibrium of the whole community, then another individual can also restore such equilibrium."

Pinchas knew the law from Moses—"one who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots." He presumed to point out the law to Moses who, apparently, had forgotten it—whereupon Moses said to him: "He who reads the letter, let him be the agent." (Sanhedrin 82a) The law was that "there shall be no consecrated harlot of the daughters of Israel," since heathens did not recognize the sanctity of marriage. (Sanhedrin 82a)

Pinchas killed Zimri and Kosbi, stopping the plague started by God to destroy Israel. He killed them to ensure God's love for the children of Israel, and Israel's sanctification as a holy nation. He knew that spiritual death leads to physical death.

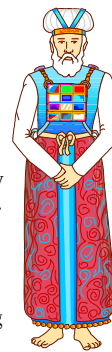
Pinchas risked his own life by killing Zimri. He might have been revenged upon for killing a prince of the people. Zimri could have killed Pinchas in an act of self-defense. And Pinchas could have been charged with the murder of Zimri if Zimri had already ceased from having sex with Kosbi when Pinchas attacked them.

Pinchas acted as a priest, sanctifying that

which Zimri and Kosbi desecrated, which was unredeemed by the immobilized people and their inert leaders. Am Yisrael had been passive in the face of radical evil that could destroy the spirit of the still fragile covenant. Thus they were estranged from God and the law: Pinchas enabled them to be at one again with God and Torah.

Pinchas earned the eternal grant of peace, elevation to the priesthood, because he restored "the peace with God and His law." (S.R. Hirsch) Like his grandfather, Aaron, Pinchas was a *pursuer of peace*, knowing that "sometimes, in order to make peace, a person must be Rodef Shalom—chase away the peace." (Chasam Sofer) In his act of atonement for the whole people, Pinchas became the precursor of all high priests.

In recognition of the cost to those who take a life for God's sake, "the Divine blessing was designed to cope with the situation and promised peace and tranquility of soul." (Z.Y. Berlin)



*Why would God start a plague to destroy Israel for widespread sexual immorality?*

*How could Pinchas atone for the sins of the children of Israel?*

*Have you ever had to "chase away the peace"—engage in conflict—to bring about real peace?*

*If many people had acted at the outset to protest the sexual immorality, how might have events worked out differently?*

# To Arouse Our Spirit: Birkat Hamazon (con't.)

In effect, because we have used the sustenance from God to strengthen ourselves, we are in God's debt for the restoration of our strength; and, since we are indebted to God for our continued existence, a decent consideration in return demands that we dedicate ourselves to *practical action* that will fulfill and realize God's will on earth. In other words, the recitation of the Birkat without action that serves God in our daily lives is just "lip service." (S.R. Hirsch) So we are to prime ourselves consciously for such action when we recite the Birkat.

The Birkat Hamazon is comprised of four blessings: The Talmud teaches that Moses first made a blessing for food in thanks for the manna that the Israelites received in the desert; that Joshua added a blessing for the land after the Israelites had entered into Eretz Yisrael; that King David introduced the blessing for Jerusalem after he established it as the capital of the country, and that his son, Solomon, the builder of the First Temple, expanded upon the blessing by expressing his thanks to God for the

by God's compassion and mercy toward us.

Why would we not be grateful for these blessings, even today?

Over the centuries, thanksgiving prayers for many other blessings were integrated into the first three benedictions. These additional blessings include the Torah, the covenant of Abraham (brit milah, i.e., ritual circumcision), and David's dynasty, from which the Messiah is to descend.

Would any of us trade the Torah for some other vision and path to a good life? With what would we replace the available power of brit milah to foster responsibility among families and communities for the moral careers of our children? And what vision of the future would we prefer to Days of Mashiach?

At the end of the Grace, we make several petitions, each of which begins with the word "Harakhaman" ("May the Merciful One. . .") These are not a part of the obligatory Birkat Hamazon but were added over the centuries, and other petitions may be added now for special occasions.

bless God your Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:10) but they are so stringent that even when they eat as little as the size of an olive or an egg [they say Grace]." (Berakhot 20b).

The naturalistic lesson of the story is this: constantly reminding ourselves to do the will of God—following the Torah's vision and path—is likely to bring down greater blessings upon ourselves.

Here are some basic Birkat guidelines:

When three or more males over the age of 13 eat together at the same table, traditionally they are obligated to recite the Birkat as a unit in which one leads and the others respond (Berakhot 49b).

The convening of all present to recite the Birkat is called *zimun* (invite). The leader extends the invitation with the words "*Rabotai nevareikh*" ("Gentlemen, let us bless"). But the salutation *Khaverai* (i.e., "friends") may be substituted for *Rabotai*. The response of those present is "Let the name of Adonai be blessed from now and for ever more." The formula of *zimun* may also be used when three or more women are



"great and holy house." Soon after the destruction of the Second Temple, when the survival of the Jewish people was in doubt, the Sages added a fourth blessing to emphasize the eternal quality of God's goodness.

But what have these blessings from our history got to do with us—here and now? First, we are ultimately as dependent upon God for our sustenance today as were the Israelites in the desert who, according to the Torah, survived on the manna from heaven. When we wipe away the scales of self-importance from our eyes, we can see that our bread doesn't come from the supermarket or the bakery or the farmer—the *seeds of life* are gifts from the Creator. Second, that we were promised a land, Eretz Yisrael, one we could sanctify, and thereby become a light to the nations, has throughout the ages been a spur to our moral vision and action. Third, we were blessed as a people with the inheritance of Jerusalem as our capital, always holding out before us the ideal of shalom—not peace per se but constant striving for unity with the Holy One—and we were blessed in the city with the Temple, a place of assembly for the people to strengthen themselves in their holy purposes and pursuits as a community. And fourth, we have been blessed—witness our historic survival and success as a nation—

Why should the obligation to thank God for these blessings be greater *after* we eat than before? Possibly because after eating we are more likely to forget our dependence on God's goodness and, instead, to delude ourselves that we are entirely in control of our own fate. This self-delusion, not acknowledging the goodness God creates and sets to work in the world, leaves us vulnerable to experiences that shatter our morale—we fail to see and rely on the goodness implanted all around us by the Creator.

The Sages decreed, "since bread is the accepted basis of a meal, the full grace must be said only if bread is eaten," but in an amount as small as an egg or even an olive, notwithstanding the Scriptural commandment to say Birkat Hamazon only when one is *sated* from eating. (Berakhot 45a).

Rabbi Avira taught that because of this self-imposed stringency, God showed favoritism to the Jewish people: "The ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, it is written in Your Torah that 'You show no favor or take bribes' (Deuteronomy 10:17). Aren't You showing favor to Israel, for it says, 'God bestows favor upon you'? (Numbers 6:26). Replied God: Why shouldn't I show favor to Israel! Look, I wrote in the Torah, 'When you eat and are satisfied, you must

dining together (Berakhot 45b). *Rabotai* (gentlemen) would be replaced by *gvirotai* ("ladies") or *[k]haverotai* ("friends").

The Talmud also teaches that the honor of leading should be given to a guest, which ensures that the guest has an opportunity to bless the host through the Harakhaman to "... bless the host and hostess and all who are seated around the table. . . ."

Withal, we are called to *act as a community*. The Chofetz Chayim teaches that when many of us unite to serve God, each of us reaches higher than if acting alone. The effect of the mitzvah performed by many of us is much greater than one performed by a few. With many more of us investing in the mitzvah's power, we can mutually inspire one another to far more significant action.

So we have much to gain by sharing our table, reciting the Birkat together and, when doing so, sharing our day-to-day hopes and pressures. It can be a first step to make the Shekhina palpable in our day-to-day lives. The next step is to *do* something together about the threats to our families and our community that we uncover in that sharing.

Let's arouse our spirit for this service to the Creator by singing the Birkat "in a voice of a great noise, mighty and powerful!"

(מן הקדושה: או בקול רעש גדול אדיר וחזק. . .)  
[A tape recording of the Birkat Hamazon as sung by Rabbi Moshe & Khulda is available from them at no charge.]

## OPENINGS

Published by  
Kehillat Kharakim

630 Hauser Blvd., #205  
Los Angeles, CA 90036  
(323) 934-2925/934-2913 (fax)

### Rabbi Team

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher  
Khulda bat Sarah

© 2001/5761 Khevera shel Kharakim

## ABOUT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM—על קהלת חרפים

- Kehillat Kharakim—a community of *openings*—is a family-centered congregation that meets twice-monthly for Shabbat services.
  - Kehillat Kharakim Friday-evening services regularly include a devar Torah (“sermon”) in the form of a readers’ theatre Torah-drama.
  - Kehillat Kharakim’s formation is being sponsored by Gather the People (GTP), a nonprofit organization founded by a Sponsor Committee of rabbis from virtually all the major branches and movements of Judaism.
  - Kehillat Kharakim’s rabbinic leadership is provided by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, formerly the “Rabbi Team” for Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California.
  - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is to create a community of *openings*, or “kharakim,” through which family members of all ages can draw upon Judaism and congregational life to increase meaning and fulfillment in their own lives.
- The goal is a congregation that, regardless of where one begins or ends in Jewish knowledge or commitment, encourages greater exploration, acquisition, and expression of Judaism—and regardless of where one fits religiously, treats each person with kindness and respect.
  - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is that, apart from our capacity as individuals, we also have a role as a *kehilla*, a congregational *community*. Following the example of Nehemiah, who gathered the people to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we assume that we too can reduce the pressures and realize the hopes that will uplift our families. By doing mitzvot *collectively*, we can bring about change for the good in our day to day lives.
  - Kehillat Kharakim is an independent congregation, not affiliated with any of the movements or branches of Judaism.
  - Kehillat Kharakim has the following kashrut policy: all food served must be dairy or parve, unless special arrangements have been made, and must be prepared according to kosher guidelines; packaged goods must be certified as kosher; fresh baked goods must be purchased from kosher bakeries; and home-baked goods must contain only vegetable shortening. Non-kosher food shall not be served.

Kehillat Kharakim is a project of  
Gather the People  
An Education & Training Resource  
for Congregational Community Development  
<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>

### PASTORAL COUNSELING AVAILABLE

Rabbi Moshe offers pastoral counseling without charge to any Kehillat Kharakim individual, couple, or family. Pastoral counseling addresses religious and spiritual as well as psychological and emotional needs. Moshe has a Ph.D. in Social Work, was a staff member of the Adirondack Samaritan Counseling Center of Glens Falls, NY, and was trained at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information or an appointment.

KEHILLAT KHARAKIM  
630 Hauser Blvd., #205  
Los Angeles, CA 90036

