

TEACHING BIRKAT HA-MAZON:
THE GRACE AFTER MEALS

by

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Abstract

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Birkat Ha-Mazon is widely known and incredibly rich text that touches upon relevant and controversial issues. Yet, no single curriculum exists for comprehensively teaching this blessing. After a brief examination of the historical development of the Grace after Meals, this paper sets out the rubrics commonly used in Jewish settings by which Birkat Ha-Mazon can be taught. This is followed by an in-depth examination of the generative topics addressed by this blessing and related rituals. The paper concludes with brief suggestions to indicate the process by which this material may be turned into concrete teaching experiences.

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I. Introduction: Why a curriculum on Birkat Ha-Mazon?

Certain Hebrew blessings are ubiquitous in the Jewish world. The Motzi, the blessing over the wine, the blessings over the Shabbat and Chanukah candles, the Shehecheyanu and perhaps several others are, one could say, inarguably basic to any conception of Jewish literacy. They are taught in the first years of Jewish education; any Jewish nursery or pre-school program would be likely to include them as part of the curriculum. Even Jews who are almost completely non-observant can often recognize these blessings and sing them by heart.

Birkat Ha-Mazon, the Grace after Meals, is not quite as universally familiar as these blessings. Nevertheless, at least some sort of abridged form of it is likely to end a communal meal, whether at a synagogue function or at a conference held by a Jewish organization. Many families will conclude their Shabbat meal with this blessing, and guests are often honored by being asked to lead it. Perhaps more to the point, any Jewish education and youth program which includes some kind of meal is likely to end that meal with, at the very least, the first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon. It is familiar to students in Hebrew day and afternoon schools, summer camps, and youth organizations from across the spectrum of Jewish denominations.

In addition to being widely known, Birkat Ha-Mazon is an incredibly rich and diverse text that touches upon relevant and controversial issues. It makes us aware of, and raises profound questions about, our role as consumers and providers of food and other resources. It also leads us to ponder the responsibilities we hold to the earth (from which all food is ultimately derived), and to the other people who share it with us. Other topical issues addressed by Birkat Ha-Mazon range from the assertion of the right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel to faith in the coming of the messiah, from the desire for global peace to the role of God in sustaining the created world.

In addition to the value of its contents, Birkat Ha-Mazon stands out as a text which is generally not spoken, but sung. It is as easily learned and remembered as any song. This musical

component, along with the interpersonal nature of its communal recitation, emphasize the value that Birkat Ha-Mazon has for a curriculum incorporating learning using multiple intelligences. Because Birkat Ha-Mazon can be studied through its use in-context (at the conclusion of a meal), it is also a perfect opportunity for experiential education.

As a Biblically commanded mitzvah (Deut. 8:10), as a potentially key component of one's spirituality, as a source-text for critical issues that affect our daily lives, or simply as a widely-sung and well-known ritual, one would think that Birkat Ha-Mazon would be among the most frequently taught blessings. Surprisingly, the opposite is the case: There is no curriculum available on the market today whose sole focus is to teach Birkat Ha-Mazon to children or teenagers. Even more surprisingly, this blessing receives scant attention, if any at all, in curricula which teach prayer or mitzvot in a general fashion. The result is that few, if any, educational institutions or programs successfully integrate teaching of the meaning of Birkat Ha-Mazon into their practice of reciting it after eating. Even in more traditionally observant communities, where saying Birkat Ha-Mazon is part of the daily routine, it is often learned by rote, at an early age, and therefore the depths of its meaning are not explored in a systematic way.

This paper will begin by briefly examining the historical development of Birkat Ha-Mazon into its present form (or, more accurately, forms). I will then turn to the text of the prayer itself, outlining first the role it can play as a component (or organizing principle) of a curriculum based upon one of the standard rubrics of Jewish education, such as prayer and Bible study. This will be followed by an in-depth examination of the core-concepts and values which are suggested by the ritual of Birkat Ha-Mazon and contained within its text. Finally, I will offer suggestions towards turning this material into concrete teaching experiences upon which to build a curriculum based upon Birkat Ha-Mazon.

II. Historical Background: The Development of Birkat Ha-Mazon

A. Overview

“The three initial benedictions [of Birkat Ha-Mazon] are among the most ancient prayers in the Jewish liturgy” (Millgram, 293). Although the fourth blessing (HaTov v’HaMeitiv) and the material following it are later additions, the general content of each of the first three blessings and possibly much of their text goes back to at least the days of the Maccabees. Millgram asserts that by the end of the ge’onic period (around the year 1000), Birkat Ha-Mazon “had not only been formulated but also fully accepted. Only minor accretions were added in the subsequent centuries” (295). It should be noted, however, that the texts of Birkat Ha-Mazon currently in use in the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities differ slightly from one another.

B. *The ancient roots of the Grace After Meals*

In the Talmud, the rabbis emphasize the antiquity of the first three blessings of Birkat Ha-Mazon by ascribing their authorship to, respectively, Moses, Joshua, and King David and King Solomon (Ber. 48b). The institution of a communal grace after eating, apart from any individual text, is considered to be even older.

Both the Talmud and the Book of Jubilees suggest that Abraham was already familiar with a grace after meals. According to Sota 10a, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheva (Gen 21:33) so that wayfarers would be tempted to stop and rest in its shade. Abraham would offer the travelers refreshment; after they had eaten, when they wished to offer their gratitude for the meal, he would ask them instead to praise God. The Book of Jubilees, written sometime towards the end of the second century BCE, describes Abraham making a blessing after eating and provides a text that follows a three-paragraph format similar to that of Birkat Ha-Mazon and includes similar language (22:6-9).¹ Although the Bible itself does not record any instances of individuals blessing their food,

¹ Although avoiding mention of Israel or Jerusalem, which would have been clear anachronisms.

the idea that Abraham had such a practice implies that, at least in the minds of the author of the book of Jubilees and the rabbis who created the Talmud, it is a basic principle of Jewish observance.

The actual commandment to bless after eating appears in Deuteronomy 8:10, where God tells Moses to tell the people “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.” This phrase, later included as part of the second blessing of Birkat Ha-Mazon, in the context of Deuteronomy appears to be no more than a general injunction to appreciate God's generosity in times of prosperity. Nevertheless, the Talmud (Ber. 48b) cites this passage not only as the scriptural basis for the institution of Birkat Ha-Mazon, but also for the wording and sequence of its blessings.² For this reason, Birkat Ha-Mazon is considered a Biblical ordinance.

C. Formalization of Birkat Ha-Mazon during the late Second Temple period

Josephus (II Wars 8:5; also referenced as 131) testifies that the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon dates back at least to the time of Simon ben Shetah, about 100 BCE, who apparently recited a parody of it before King Janneus (also recorded in T. Jer. Ber. 7:2, 11b and 48a). Based upon comparisons of early variants of the text, Louis Finkelstein hypothesizes that in its initial form, Birkat Ha-Mazon consisted of a single sentence: “Baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech haolam hazan et ha’olam kulo b’tov b’hesed uvrachamim”; “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who nourishes the whole world in goodness, mercy, and compassion” (1928-29, 227). At some point, this single sentence became linked with additional material.

Similarly, the second paragraph probably originated as a single sentence, giving thanks for the land, to which was added (Ber. 48b, 49a) covenant and Torah, at a later date (Finkelstein, 1928-

² “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks” implies the commandment of saying Grace after meals, as exemplified by its first paragraph; “to the Lord your God,” implies the Mezuman; “for the . . . land,” the second paragraph; “good,” the third paragraph (for the land receives its’ goodness from Jerusalem); and “which He has given you” implies (rather cryptically, to my mind) the fourth blessing.

29, 230).³ It is, unfortunately, impossible to say for certain whether the formulation of the second paragraph predates that of the third. The Book of Ben Sira (Ecclus. 36:12-14, 17-19) contains elements of the third paragraph; in all probability, in its initial form this blessing was very similar to the prayer for Jerusalem in the Amidah (Finkelstein 1925-26, 128-129). It is widely observed that the third blessing ends with “Amen,” which is generally cited as evidence that at one point this was the original conclusion of Birkat Ha-Mazon, and that the three paragraphs were considered a unity.

In all probability, a three paragraph version of Birkat Ha-Mazon was already in existence by the time of the destruction of the Temple. Among the early Christian prayers, as retained in the “Didache”⁴ we find a three-fold benediction with similar themes and structure to Birkat Ha-Mazon (Idelsohn 123). Similarly, in the Mishnah, Gamliel II says that the “Brachah Me’en Shalosh” [the “three-fold blessing”], the abridged form of Birkat Ha-Mazon for meals that did not contain bread, is “a summary of the three blessings” (Ber. 6:8). This implies that the standard grace after meals consisted of three blessings. The format of the three-fold prayer is not unusual: In its initial form, the Amidah may also have consisted of three blessings, and even today the morning Shema is preceded by two and followed by a single blessing .

D. Institutionalization during the Rabbinic Period

By the time of the compilation of the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), Birkat Ha-Mazon was a recognizable, although possibly not universally practiced, institution, consisting of three one-

³ Finkelstein suggests that the inclusion of the covenant of Abraham must have dated from a period of persecution when circumcision was prohibited, such as under Roman Rule. Scherman (1977, 43) quotes Vayaas Abraham, who notes that mention of the Exodus in this blessing is neither specified in the Talmud (as is circumcision, in Ber. 48b), nor found in the Siddur of Rav Amram Ga’on (which contains a version of Birkat Ha-Mazon that is quite similar to the one presently used). He conjectures that it may have been added following the talmudic period in consonance with Deut 26:5-10 where, in thanking God for the land, the Exodus is prominently mentioned. Etz Yosef suggests that the insertion was in fulfillment of the commandment to always remember the Exodus (Deut 16:13). In any event, this is a relatively minor modification to a paragraph whose content has remained largely unchanged for nearly 2000 years.

⁴ Composed in the last decade of the first century CE.

paragraph blessings (Garfiel 202). The wording of these blessings, however, may still have been fluid, with the themes established, but not the actual texts. Furthermore, the Grace after Meals may only have been a communal obligation, not individual. Although the Mishnah records the obligation of saying a blessing after eating at communal meals, it does not clearly state whether such a practice was also part of a home ritual.

Mishnah Berachot 7:1 asserts that if three or more individuals ate together, they are required to say a communal blessing, and it records wording for the Mezuman in a form nearly identical to the one in use today. The Mezuman is referred to as “Birkat Ha-Zimmun,” the “blessing of invitation,” even though it does not follow the formula for blessings, implying that it predates the establishment of a fixed formula for blessings (Heinemann, 25). Joseph Heinemann suggests that the varied formulas presented in the Mishnah for the Mezuman, for use in meals where 3, 10, 100, or 1000 ate together, are probably authentic (28). Only the versions for 3 or 10 individuals are still in use.

The custom of saying a communal grace can be traced back to the *havurah* (“community”) meals, a widespread practice in the Second Temple period among the Pharisees and certain sectarian groups such as the Essenes (EJ 840). At these meals, often held on Shabbat, learned individuals would share words of Torah; the meal would conclude with either the host or one of the guests leading all of the assembled in the invitation to say Grace. It should be noted that the Mezuman may have had an independent existence from the three-paragraph formula of Birkat Ha-Mazon. It is possible that an individual would invite all those present to say grace with the fixed formula of the “Birkat Ha-Zimmun,” and then each individual would make the blessing in their own words.

E. Addition of the fourth blessing

As with the first three paragraphs, the fourth blessing may have originated as a single sentence, “baruch ata adonai, hatov v’hameitiv” and may not have been connected with the Grace

after Meals at all (Finkelstein 233). The Talmud (Ber. 48b) records the opinion of R. Nahman, that this blessing was added by sages in Yavneh after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba rebellion (c. 145 CE). After the destruction of the final stronghold of Jewish resistance in Betar, “the remnants of the Jewish people were threatened with extinction through a pestilence caused by the many corpses strewn everywhere; when the Romans granted permission to bury the dead this benediction was instituted” (Millgram, 294). R. Huna, in the Palestinian Talmud, (Jer. Berachot 11a – 7:1) also gives this explanation for introduction of this blessing. Both R. Huna and R. Nahman were disciples of Rav, who, according to Finkelstein’s hypothesis, may be the original source for this story (1928-29, 221).

This may not, however, be the actual origin of the fourth blessing. Finkelstein points out that Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, who died before the fall of Betar, is familiar with this blessing (Ber. 48b), and that Jose the Galilean (Tosef. Ber. 1:9) and R. Ishmael (Talmud Yerushalmi, Ber. 7:1, 11a) both cite this blessing without mentioning the fall of Betar or the story of unburied corpses. Only Amoraic sources, therefore, who would not have a first-hand account of the experience, associate the origin of this blessing with Betar (1928-29, 221). Finkelstein therefore suggests that the blessing may, in fact, have originated when Hadrian gave permission for the Jews to rebuild the Temple (1928-29, 222).

How the blessing became included in the Grace after Meals, or if it was originally composed with this purpose, remain unknown. As there is no rite which does not include this section, Finkelstein asserts that its inclusion probably dates back to amoraic period, between the third and seventh centuries CE (234); Munk (221) places it in the Ge’onic period, possibly as late as the 10th century.

F. Expansion and standardization of Birkat Ha-Mazon

Perhaps because it was “the latest of the benedictions to be officially incorporated” into Birkat Ha-Mazon, the fourth blessing “really grew to giant size. . . A number of general supplications were added to this benediction, each of which starts with the word *Ha-Rahaman*” (Millgram 294). Additional prayers for Shabbat and for the festivals were included in this section, as well as a number of excerpts from the psalms and the prophetic writings (sort of a “greatest hits” collection of Jewish verse).

The number of supplications that begin with the words *Ha-Rachaman* varies greatly in different rites; there are fifteen in the Sephardi version of the prayer, but in the Ashkenazi there are only nine (Posner, Kaploun, and Cohen, 220). This is likely to be seen as indication that the petitions in this section were originally individual and were phrased to suit each person’s desires; indeed, Abudaraham sees this section as personal and private and that it is acceptable to insert any petition here (Garfiel, 204), as many people still do. The origin of this section may be in Ber. 46a, which specifically mentions a blessing for the master of the house.

By the time of the expansion of the fourth blessing (certainly no later than the Ge’onic period), the first three blessings must have had a relatively fixed structure and wording. Otherwise, if the wording of the initial three blessings was still fluid, there would not be the need to provide this opportunity specifically for one’s individual words and petitions. It could be argued, however, that even at this late date, it was not the wording of these blessings that was fixed, but the themes.

The custom of reciting Psalm 137, “By the waters of Babylon,” before saying Birkat Ha-Mazon is first mentioned in 1603 (Idelsohn 122).⁵ The apparent source for reciting this psalm, according to Idelsohn, is in Zohar Teruma: “Whoever enjoys his meal has to remember the desolation of the Holy Land and of the Temple, and express his grief and sorrow” (123). A similar

injunction is found in the Talmud (Bava Bathra 60b), which states it is forbidden to forget the destruction of the Temple even during meals.

On Shabbat and festivals, “when cheerfulness is prescribed,” Psalm 126 (“Shir Ha’ma’a lot”) is recited instead (Idelsohn 123). It is unclear when this custom emerged or why this psalm was picked. Some communities add four additional verses, beginning “T’hillat Adonai.”⁶ Ironically, despite the Talmudic support for the latter, singing of Psalm 126 on Shabbat is far more widely observed than the recitation of Psalm 137 on weekdays.

G. Development of the Short Form

Since Talmudic times, and perhaps even predating them, there is evidence of the necessity for an abbreviated grace for use by children and on occasions when time-pressures or immanent danger precludes a complete recitation of the prayer. Characteristic of these abbreviated forms is the summarization and condensing into a single paragraph of the essence of each benediction. The siddur of Rav Sa’adia Ga’on (C. 1000 CE), for example, contains such an abbreviated version.

The standard short form of Birkat Ha-Mazon in use today was written in 1603 by Rabbi Naphtali ben David Zecharaiah of Mendel of Venice.⁷ The Shulchan Aruch states that workmen who eat during working hours are required only to say the first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon and to make mention of Jerusalem (OH 191:1). In cases of extreme emergency, one is only required to say “Blessed be the Merciful One, the King, the Master of this land” (according to EJ 840).

Conservative and Reform prayerbooks have their own shortened forms, which generally include an excerpt from each of the paragraphs of the long version. The “guiding principle has been

⁵ In Sephardi and some Eastern European communities, Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”) is recited instead.

⁶ They are Psalm 145:21, 115:18, 118:1, and 106:2. I have heard a story, of which I have found no source, that these verses were added by anti-Zionists in response to the adoption of Psalm 126 as an “anthem” at one of the Zionist conferences.

⁷ It is found in Ba’aye Haytayv, in the commentary of Magen Avraham (OH, 192:1).

that the *mitzvah* of reciting *Birkat ha-Mazon* is commanded by the Torah, but the actual content has developed over the ages” (EJ 840).

H. Birkat Ha-Mazon as it is said today

In contemporary times, the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon has been modified by various communities in response to concerns that it no longer accurately reflects their values. Perhaps the most widespread modification is the addition of new petitions in the Ha-Rachaman section, asking for the liberation of a particular group (such as Soviet Jews or Ethiopians) or for solidarity between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.

In response to concerns that the prayer reflects a patriarchal system, some communities have added mention of the matriarchs and Miriam the prophetess. The expression “the covenant that has been inscribed in our flesh” has been changed to “inscribed in our hearts,” to reflect that the covenant is inclusive of women. Discussion of issues regarding women and prayer will be discussed in greater length in the next section.

Finally, the variety of abridged and alternative forms of the prayer is growing rapidly. Some communities simply chant the Biblical injunction from Deuteronomy 8:10, “You shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless.” Others sing the Talmudic phrase, in Aramaic, attributed to Benjamin the Shepherd (Ber. 40b), “Blessed be the Compassionate One, the Ruler of the world, the Master of this bread.”

III. Core-Concepts and Values of Birkat Ha-Mazon

A. General Rubrics for looking at Birkat Ha-Mazon

Curricula for Jewish education, whether in “formal” environments (such as day schools and supplementary schools) or “informal” environments (such as summer camps, youth organizations, and youth tours) are organized around certain key rubrics. Some of these rubrics, such as the teaching of Jewish holidays, can be found in nearly any educational setting, while others are more common to one or another setting. For example, teaching of Hebrew language is more commonly found in “formal” educational settings, while curricula exploring identity issues are more central to “informal” settings. While day schools may devote a large portion of the Jewish component of their day to Bible study, the study of Jewish history and the meaning of prayer generally take precedence in supplementary schools.

One of the great strengths of Birkat Ha-Mazon is that it cuts across such curricular boundaries, making it appropriate for use in both “formal” and “informal” educational settings. As the organizing principle of a curriculum, it provides the opportunity to raise and address issues ranging from the theological to the sociological. On the other hand, lessons based upon Birkat Ha-Mazon can easily be incorporated into many of the curricula already in use in Jewish education.

In this section, I will look at several of the various rubrics or organizing principles around which Jewish education curricula are currently based and the role that Birkat Ha-Mazon can play for such curricula. Because much has already been written on each of these subjects, and many popular (and excellent) curricula are based upon them, I will limit myself to general observations, recording only in outline form the elements that such curricula generally contain. I will, however, note wherever possible the connections that can be made to specific elements of Birkat Ha-Mazon.

1. As a component of a Jewish Literacy curriculum

Literacy curricula have become increasingly popular in the past two decades, especially in supplementary schools where time pressures constrain the content that may be presented.

Organized around core concepts (as in the writings of E. D. Hirsch), they attempt to identify and teach the fundamentals or essentials of Judaism -- “what every Jew should know.”

Generally, panels of experts and educators work jointly to devise the concepts upon which the curriculum should be based. Emphasis is often upon the mastery of specific, observable skills (such as knowledgeable use of ritual objects). The resulting curriculum may be topical, with each lesson integrating material from a spectrum of content areas, or may be structured to include individual lessons organized around subject areas similar to those described in the sections which follow.

There are two key reasons why Birkat Ha-Mazon is a logical choice for inclusion in such a curriculum, or even as the chief organizing principle of a literacy-based program. First, the recitation of Birkat Ha-Mazon is a concrete skill which may be used on a regular basis. As a home-ritual, family (and parents in particular) can be involved in its observance, making it a likely candidate for family education programs. On the other hand, because it is also a publicly performed ritual to which great honor or “kavod” is attached, mastery of this skill affords the opportunity for esteem-building.

Furthermore, as observed in the introduction, Birkat Ha-Mazon is a ritual which any Jewish individual is likely to encounter at some point, and in a wide range of settings. Reasonably similar versions of the text are used throughout the world, among Jews who affiliate with any of the movements. A familiarity with the text allows participation in a Jewish activity that is truly international and interdenominational.

Second, Birkat Ha-Mazon touches upon many of the fundamental concepts of Jewish thought, from the relationship between the Jews and the land of Israel to the anticipation of a messianic future. The text of Birkat Ha-Mazon incorporates a vocabulary of prayer, but also of

words that are used in secular speech (for example, “ha-aretz” for Israel). It is an excellent locus for study of issues relating to prayer and theology and of ethical action, as will be discussed in the sections which follow. The special sections included for Shabbat and for various holidays can be used as a springboard for study and discussion of their nature and meaning. And, as mentioned in the introduction, Birkat Ha-Mazon touches upon a wide range of relevant and topical issues that ask us to examine our principles as Jews in dealing with our fundamental relationships with the planet and with one another.

In short, Birkat Ha-Mazon would fit well into a literacy curriculum of the central rituals and beliefs of the Jewish people. In the sections which follow, I will examine how Birkat Ha-Mazon fits into curricula which define their scope more narrowly.

2. As a Prayer

Birkat Ha-Mazon is, first and foremost, a prayer; it is therefore obvious that it could be a component of any such curriculum. The study of Birkat Ha-Mazon on its own may also require an examination of questions and issues relating to the topic of prayer. For example, students may need to examine what prayer is and why people choose to pray before they will be interested in looking at Birkat Ha-Mazon as a specific example of a prayer.

Curiously, Birkat Ha-Mazon is often overlooked by curricula for teaching prayer, perhaps because they tend to focus upon the prayers which are said in the synagogue.⁸ Nevertheless, as a great many curricula already exist on the subject of prayer which can easily be adapted to the study of Birkat Ha-Mazon, it is not necessary to go into great detail about the role that Birkat Ha-Mazon can play in teaching the fundamental issues and concepts of Jewish prayer. Therefore, I will provide only a very general outline of the issues that a curriculum on prayer should address noting specific

⁸ A good example of such an omission is in Kadden and Kadden’s standard text on prayer, Teaching T’fillot; this was rectified by their inclusion of Birkat Ha-Mazon in their later work, Teaching Mitzvot.

connections to Birkat Ha-Mazon. Suggestions for further reading on this subject may be found in the Bibliography.

It is usually necessary to begin the study of prayer by examining the value of prayer in the first place, and the role that it plays (or can play) in one's life – in short, to ask the question “why pray?” Similarly, it is important to address the various obstacles that prevent individuals from praying or participating in communal worship. A responsible curriculum will not only raise such issues, offering students a chance to express their feelings, but will also attempt to respond to them. Jewish tradition offers many reasons different individuals may choose to pray at different times.

- Prayer can be an opportunity to speak with God.
- Prayer can be an opportunity for self-reflection.
- Prayer can be the expression of hopes, desires, and visions, both communal and individual.
- Prayer can be vehicle for awareness or mindfulness of individual moments, which may lead to an appreciation of their uniqueness.
- Prayer can be an opportunity for participation in a community.
- Prayer can be a link to tradition and to one's heritage or background.
- Prayer, if performed regularly, can be an opportunity to develop self-discipline
- Prayer can be seen as a Mitzvah, something we do because God commands it or because we are Jewish.
- Prayer can be an occasion for textual study, which may lead to intellectual growth or the aesthetic appreciation of meaningful poetry.

By substituting “Birkat Ha-Mazon” for the word “Prayer” in any of the above sentences, these ideas can be addressed as they specifically relate to the Grace after Meals.

The second component of a prayer curriculum is the examination of the language and structure of prayer. This includes an examination of the different types of prayers and ways of categorizing them, the meaning of certain key-words and phrases, comparisons of the differences between different prayers and different rites, and other analysis questions that allow for a comprehensive understanding of the prayer as a text.⁹ An examination of “God-language,” the names by which we refer to God and the different characteristics we impart to the Divine, may also be appropriate at this point.

A few examples of what an examination of the structure and language of Birkat Ha-Mazon might include:

- Noting the frequency (or infrequency) with which certain words appear in the different paragraphs of the blessing. For example, the number of times that “kol” (“all”) and the different forms of the verb “zan” (“sustains”) appear in the first paragraph as compared with those which follow
- Pointing out how the word “amen” appears twice within the prayer, but not at its conclusion.
- Observing that the fourth blessing begins with alphabetic acrostic.

The third component of a curriculum of prayer looks is to look at the implications of the words and structures of the prayers being examined – in short, “what does this prayer mean?” Steve Brown suggests that we might think of prayer language as symbolic or poetic speech, which suggest deeper truths that go beyond the literal understanding of the words. One might examine, at this point, what theological or ethical ideas the “author” of the prayer was trying to express, or simply

⁹ An excellent series of questions which may be used for prayer analysis was compiled by Saul Wachs and can be found on page 139 of Steve Brown’s classic text [Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer a Part of Us](#).

what personal experiences might be related to the prayer. In the section on core-concepts, I will address the ideas raised by Birkat Ha-Mazon in depth.

The final element in the examination of a prayer is the making of personal meaning from its words. One might find that the prayer expresses an experience or ideal that is of great personal significance, or, in other cases, that the words do not reflect one's own values or ideals. An examination of the ongoing tension between "keva" and "kavanah," "fixed" and "spontaneous" prayer, is appropriate at this point. In connection to Birkat Ha-Mazon, it could be noted that the "Ha-Rachaman" section provides for individuals to add petitions that are not traditionally a part of the text.

Two additional issues deserve mention in outlining prayer curricula. First, no prayer curriculum would be complete without an examination Abraham Joshua Heschel's conception of the role of prayer in establishing sacred time and sacred space. Generally, we think of prayer as occurring at certain set times, especially Shabbat, and in a specific place: The synagogue. Birkat Ha-Mazon, however, is a prayer which is fixed to a certain activity, eating bread, but not to any particular location or time. Saying the Grace after eating affords the opportunity to make an ordinary place and moment a holy one, symbolized effectively by the custom of banging upon the table¹⁰ at the line "Ha-Rachaman, hu yishlach lanu b'racha . . . v'al shulchan zeh she'achalnu alav" ("May the Merciful one send us blessings . . . and upon this table on which we have eaten"). Indeed, it is as if the table itself has been transformed into an altar, an idea to which I will return in greater detail.

Second, it is important to note the special attention that has been given in recent years to the gender issues that relate to prayer. Hebrew, it is often noted, is a language which every word is gendered and must of necessity be either male or female. This causes particular problems when we attempt to describe God, who is beyond gender, or wish to be inclusive of both men and women in

¹⁰ Or, I suppose, touching it gently.

our speech. Additionally, many of the structures of the prayer service (such as the determination of who may be counted in a “minyan,” the minimum number of participants for the recitation of certain communal prayers) have traditionally excluded women. Finally, the language of the prayers tends to reflect the patriarchal bias of traditional Judaism, in particular when describing the covenant between God and humanity and the ultimate redemption through a messianic redeemer.

In response to these concerns, liberal Jewish communities have, to various degrees, broken with traditional language and structures of prayer. The institution of the Bat Mitzvah service, the ordination of women as rabbis and cantors, and the modification of the language of certain prayer-texts are just a few of the major developments of the modern era. In addition, over the course of the past two decades, one can identify an increasing commitment to greater inclusion of women on the part of Jews who feel themselves bound by the halachic structures of traditional Jewish observance.

Such tensions and changes are, of course, reflected in Birkat Ha-Mazon. The question of whether or not women should be counted for the recitation of the Mezuman at the beginning of the communal Grace, for example, is one which will be answered more inclusively by liberal communities¹¹. Questions about the relationship between gender and prayer should, in my opinion, be addressed in any progressive curriculum on prayer.

Additionally, many modern texts of Birkat Ha-Mazon make alterations or additions in order to reflect a belief that women are full participants in the covenant of the Jewish people with God. For example, some communities replace the words “shechatamta b’vasarenu,” “that you inscribed in our flesh” (a commemoration of circumcision) with “shechatamta b’libenu,” “that you inscribed in our hearts.” It is also common to add a commemoration of the matriarchs in the section

¹¹ According to Mishnah, women should not be counted (Ber. 7:2); according to Talmud, however, they may be counted for a Mezuman that does not include men (Ber 45b; Ar. 3a). Most contemporary

remembering the covenant with our ancestors¹². Less frequent, but also current, is mention of Miriam the Prophetess alongside the lines about Elijah the Prophet; this modification is especially relevant in communities that do not believe in the person of a messiah, but in a messianic age. The modification of prayer-texts to reflect the values of a community, whether to be inclusive of women or for other reasons, leads to additional concerns, such as how to maintain the connection to tradition and community when prayer texts are not universal.

It should be clear at this point that many of the issues that would be addressed in a typical prayer curriculum are relevant to the study of Birkat Ha-Mazon. It should also be apparent that, just as such curricula often use the Kabbalat Shabbat or Shacharit service as their organizing principle, one might validly organize a study of the concept of prayer, around the prayer Birkat Ha-Mazon.

3. As a Blessing

Birkat Ha-Mazon, it should be noted, is more accurately described as a blessing than as a prayer. Blessings are, in effect, a sub-category of prayer. However, because of the specific role of blessings in Jewish life, there are certain unique issues common to the study of blessings that do not relate to prayer in general. Again, excellent curricula are available on blessings, both as a component of the study of prayer and in their own right¹³. Again, examples of such curricula are given in the Bibliography.

As in the study of prayer in general, the study of blessings begins with an examination of their structure and language. There are certain elements in this regard that are specific to blessings.

Orthodox Jews hold that if three or more women ate together and are reciting the Mezuman, any men present must respond to it.

¹² The phrase “Bakol mikol kol” is apparently based upon Biblical texts describing the blessings each of the patriarchs, respectively, received. In Gen 24:1, Abraham is blessed “in all things”; in Gen. 27:33, Isaac says “I have partaken from everything”; and in Gen. 33:11, Jacob says “I have everything”. Some liberal traditions add a line asking for blessings for the Matriarchs based upon similar descriptions: “Heiteev tovat tov tov.”

¹³ Particular mention should be made of Brown’s Higher and Higher, pages 83-88.

First, while prayers come in a wide variety of forms, blessings share a fixed structure. Nearly all blessings begin with the same words, called the “petichah” or “opening”: “Baruch ata Adonai, Elohenu Melech Ha’Olam,” often translated as “Blessed are You, Adonai¹⁴ our God, Ruler of the Universe.” When a blessing is recited in conjunction with the performance of a Mitzvah, the words “asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu” (“who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us”) are included in the petichah.

Many blessings consist of little more than this opening, followed by the subject of the blessing, called the “guf” or “body.” A blessing of this form is called a “bracha ktzara” or a “short blessing.” Such blessings include most of those which are said upon the fulfillment of a mitzvah, the experiencing (and especially enjoying) of an important event or a natural phenomena, or eating. An example is the blessing over bread, “Ha-Motzi.”

Other blessings conclude with the words “baruch ata adonai,” and then a repetition of the main theme of the blessing, referred to as a “chatimah” or “euology.” If a blessing includes both a peticha and a chatimah, it is called a “bracha arucha,” or “long blessing.” Because such blessings may meander from their initial theme, the purpose of the chatimah is to reiterate and emphasize the original point of the blessing. The first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon is an example of a bracha arucha.

When two or more brachot are recited consecutively, and the first is a bracha arucha, the general rule is for only this first blessing to begin with a peticha; the blessings that follow it include a chatima but no peticha. Such a blessing is called a “bracha smucha lachavarta,” a “blessing attached to his friend.” The second and third paragraphs of Birkat Ha-Mazon, which follow one after the other in rapid succession are part of the same overall structure, and therefore do not require a new peticha.

¹⁴ Or more traditionally, “Lord.”

According to Maimonides, blessings may be classified according into 3 categories. “Birchot ha-Nehenin,” or “blessings of pleasure” are said whenever one enjoys any food, drink, scent, or witnesses any natural phenomena. Such blessings include the blessings of the havdalah service and the blessings over lightning, thunder, and the rainbow. The second category is “birchot ha-mitzvot,” which are recited upon the performance of a Mitzvah (see below), such as affixing the Mezuzah to one’s doorframe or washing one’s hands before eating. The final category, “birchot ha-hoda’ah,” “blessings of gratitude,” include the majority of those said in a prayer service and offer praise and thanksgiving for God’s action in the world.

Regarding the language of blessings, it is important to note that the key words of the blessing formula, “baruch ata” or “blessed are You” are one’s which it seems difficult to understand. What does it mean, after all, for us to “bless God?” Prayerbooks often translate the phrase either “Praised are You” or “We offer thanks to You,” but neither is an accurate translation. Brad Artson has argued, convincingly, that a more appropriate understanding of the phrase might be “You are bountiful,” with a blessing being our expression of awareness of God’s infinite power and generosity.

Also problematic for some liberal Jews is the phrase “Melech Ha’Olam,” literally “King of the Universe,” which not only implies a gendered God but also a very specific image (Heinemann attributes its origin to “protestation against the worship attributed to Roman emperors,” according to Manns, 48). While some communities are content to simply translate “Melech” to a more neutral “Ruler” or “Sovereign,” others change the Hebrew, substituting the phrase “Ruach Ha’Olam,” “Spirit of the Universe.”

In addition to their language and structure, Blessings can be contrasted with prayers in terms of their meaning. While a prayer is often a petition for future favor, a blessing is an expression of appreciation or gratitude for something currently occurring (or, in certain cases, the past). The focus

of a blessing, therefore, is not on an ideal future, but rather mindfulness attention to the immediate experience of the present moment. A blessing serves as an opportunity to make distinctions from one moment to the next and to note the uniqueness of everything that occurs or exists in the world. Theologically, saying a blessing emphasizes the role of God as the ultimate source of all life experiences.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Meir emphasizes the great value that blessings can have as a structuring principle of our daily lives, in his famous statement that it is obligatory to make one hundred blessings every day (Men. 43b). One can easily see the value of finding one hundred separate moments each day at which to pause in gratitude and appreciation. R. Meir stresses that, along with the blessings said at daily prayers, the blessings one makes over food are essential if one is to reach this figure (Tosefta Berachot 6:24).

Judaism places a particular emphasis on categorizing the food that we eat, and modifying the blessing we make over the action of eating accordingly. Bread, among all foods, is singled out for special attention; Birkat Ha-Mazon is only said at the conclusion of meals which contain bread. Even if one has eaten as little as a “kazayit” of bread, an amount equal in size to an olive, one is obligated to say this prayer. Some individuals, it should be pointed out, will avoid eating bread at a meal so as to exempt themselves from saying this long blessing.

A secondary category includes the seven species of foods (the “sheva minim”) which are native to Israel according to the Deuteronomy 8:8. In this passage, Israel is described as “a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and [date-palm] honey.”¹⁵ Meals which include these foods, but not bread, are concluded with the “b’racha m’ein shalosh,” or “three-faceted-blessing,” which is an abridged version of the themes of Birkat Ha-Mazon. Finally, all other meals conclude with “borei nefashot,” “who creates spirits,” a one-paragraph blessing.

¹⁵ Rye, oats, and spelt are included in this blessing, as are pomegranates.

Similarly, the blessings said before eating vary based upon the food to be consumed, with distinctions made between bread, other grain products, food grown on trees or in the ground, wine,¹⁶ and all other edibles. One might wonder why so much attention is placed on making such distinctions about the food we eat and how these categories evolved. According to Fieldhouse, “Foods are categorized and classified in order to help people make sense of the world. Classifications may be based on pre-scientific understandings of inter-relationships between food and disease, on scientific nutrition knowledge of food composition, or on sociocultural uses of foods.” (49) In the case of the Jewish categorizations, it is often hypothesized that the special attention which bread merits is due to its central role in the diet of the ancient Israelites. Similarly, the distinction made between foods from Israel and other foods emphasizes the importance of this particular land in comparison with all other nations. In general, one can see in these distinctions the same attempt to order a chaotic world that is found in the account of the story of Creation or the precision required in the sacrificial offerings at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Arthur Waskow suggests that such categorizations may no longer speak to the contemporary Jewish individual, observing that “most Jews no longer find useful as a sacred path the Rabbinic system of blessings.” (68) Waskow offers two possible explanations, posed as a series of questions. First, he wonders if the language and structure of making a blessing have lost the connection to their function, asking if perhaps “words said in a formula no longer carry such a weight of holiness for us?” Expanding upon this dilemma, he asks, “Would we find it more authentic to say an impromptu word of thanks and blessing at the moment we face the food? Or do we live today in such a flood of words that just silence, breathing calmly, and holding the hands of our companions at the table

¹⁶ Wine is singled out from all other beverages (and from grapes), just as bread is distinguished from all grains (and baked goods, such as cakes). Although the origin of the blessing over the wine is unknown, it is clear that wine receives special attention in the Bible as compared with other intoxicants. Interestingly, as Waskow observes, “the Bible’s first description of a meal is in the story

would help us focus more deeply on the holiness of food? Or do we need to reconnect with the earth and our bodies in some new way to bring home to ourselves the meaning of food?” (68)

Second, he speculates that it may be the categorizations by which blessings attempt to classify the food we eat which has lost its meaning, and that perhaps different (or additional) categories need to be developed. He asks, “Is the distinction between what is tree-grown and what earth-grown important to us? Would we seek to distinguish foods that come from animals and from plants? Or to distinguish what comes from living animals (eggs, milk) and from dead ones (meat)?” (67) I will discuss later Waskow’s conception of “Eco-Kashrut” as a means for making meaning in a contemporary era of classifying the food that we eat; at this point, however, I wish to emphasize Waskow’s observation that while the act of blessing our food may have lost its meaning for many Jews, the intrinsic value of such activity remains meaningful and forms must be developed that heighten our awareness of the connection between food, its origin, and its impact on our bodies.

To conclude, Birkat Ha-Mazon consists of a series of blessings which focus our attention on the act of eating, the food we eat, the land in which it is grown, and the land of Israel. The study of Birkat Ha-Mazon is enriched by an understanding of the language and structure of blessings. In addition, BH can be an effective vehicle through which the generalized subject of blessings can be taught.

4. As a Mitzvah

Making a blessing after eating is one of the 613 Mitzvot or “commandments” required by the Torah (Chill, 385)¹⁷. It is therefore appropriate to include study of Birkat Ha-Mazon as part of

in which Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, himself brings out *bread and wine* to greet and bless Abraham (Gen. 14:18)” (18, italics mine).

¹⁷ As with blessings, mitzvot can be categorized in a variety of ways, such as into “positive mitzvot” (which we are required to perform, such as lighting the Chanukah candles) and “negative mitzvot” (in which our merit is from avoiding the subject of the commandment, such as not murdering or committing adultery). An awareness of such classifications can enhance our understanding of their

any study of Mitzvot, especially as it is a mitzvah that one has the opportunity to perform on a daily basis (possibly, three times each day).

As mentioned earlier, God instructs the people of Israel through Moses (in Deuteronomy 8:10), “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to [or “bless”] the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.” The first blessing of Birkat Ha-Mazon, “Hazan et-Hakol,” fulfils the first half of the commandment, by thanking God for food. Similarly, the second blessing fulfils the second half of Deut. 8:10, by thanking God for the “good land” we have been given.

In the study of prayer curriculum, I emphasized that a good prayer curriculum must respond to the question “why pray?” Similarly, a mitzvah curriculum must ask the question, “why perform mitzvot,” and include discussion of reasons people choose for observance¹⁸:

- Performance of Mitzvot leads to a heightened ethical awareness.¹⁹
- Performance of Mitzvot provides a connection to the Jewish community and to Jewish tradition.
- Regular performance of Mitzvot is a form of self-discipline.
- The act of performing a Mitzvah is a way of communicating with God (in the sense that God speaks to us through the words of Torah, but we speak to God through our actions).
- A life-style based upon the performance of Mitzvot leads to greater happiness and understanding of one’s role in the universe.

function It should also be noted that many of the positive mitzvot are accompanied by specific blessings, which call attention to the action being performed.

¹⁸ A good treatment of this subject is found in the introduction to Chill’s [The Mitzvot: The Commandments and their Rationale](#).

¹⁹ While some Mitzvot have a clear ethical or moral value, others are seemingly arbitrary and defy rational explanation. Traditionally, these mitzvot are classified into two categories: “Torah,” or “teachings” are those laws whose rationale can be understood, while “Chukim” or “Statutes” (also known as “Mishpatim”) are beyond human understanding (Eyun Tefilah in Davis 236). The second paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon offers thanks to God for both of these types of Mitzvot.

- Performance of Mitzvot is a Jewish obligation.

It is also important to recognize that Jewish communities differ in their understanding of the degree to which the observance of mitzvot is obligatory. Traditionally observant (“halachic” or “Orthodox”) communities tend to see the performance of mitzvot as mandatory for all adults (with some reserved only for males). Fundamentalist Jews allow for little deviation from “traditional” interpretation of the correct forms of observance, while Modern Orthodox communities attempt to accommodate modern sensibilities while remaining faithful to the letter of the law.

Liberal Jewish communities are also divided in their understanding of the role of mitzvot in Jewish life. Conservative Judaism sees mitzvot as an obligation of both men and women, but is lenient in its interpretation of how such obligations must be fulfilled (and of which mitzvot are still relevant in the modern era). Reform Judaism emphasizes the right of every individual to make a personal determination of the role that mitzvot will play in one’s life, placing particular importance on the ethical lessons which can be derived from their observance. Reconstructionist Judaism places priority on communal acceptance of these obligations as binding, with an individual choosing to participate in a community with an awareness of the role mitzvot will play in its life.

The observance of mitzvot, and the degree to which this observance is an obligation, is perhaps one of the most controversial subjects in the Jewish world today. The abbreviated versions of Birkat Ha-Mazon that are in use in many liberal communities would not be considered acceptable by fundamentalist Jews; it is important to make this point clear if teaching an abridged form of the Grace after Meals. On the other hand, an understanding of the laws surrounding Birkat Ha-Mazon would play a far more central role in a curriculum based upon a traditionally observant perspective.

To summarize, Birkat Ha-Mazon should be included in any general study of mitzvot, as it is one which can be observed by all Jews on a regular basis. Because the recitation of Birkat Ha-Mazon is a mitzvah, it can be used as the jumping-off point for the study of mitzvot in general, and

in particular the different understandings of their observance in liberal and traditionally observant Jewish communities.²⁰

5. As an Opportunity for Bible study

In addition to being a Mitzvah which is based upon a Biblical passage, much of the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon derives from Biblical sources, often as direct quotations. Birkat Ha-Mazon can therefore be a useful entry-point into the study of Biblical texts and the particular issues that arise around the study of Torah²¹.

Biblical passages upon which Birkat Ha-Mazon is based, or which are directly quoted, include the following:

- Birkat Ha-Mazon is introduced with Psalm 137 on weekdays and with Psalm 126 on Shabbat and holidays.
- Various phrases of the second paragraph are based upon Jeremiah 3:19, Exodus 2:2, and Deuteronomy 7:8.
- “Nimtza chen v’sechel tov...” in the “Ba-Marom” section is based upon Proverbs 3:4.
- The two alternate phrases “Migdol” and “Magdil yeshuot” are taken from II Samuel 22:51 and Psalm 18:51, respectively.
- In the concluding section, “Yeru et Adonai” is taken from Psalms 34:10-11; “Hodu L’adonai,” from Psalm 136:1; “Poteach et Yadecha,” from Psalm 145:16; “Baruch HaGever,” from Jeremiah 17:7; “Na’ar Hayiti,” from Psalm 37:25; and “Adonai Oz,” from Psalm 29:11.

²⁰ Suggestions of resources for teaching mitzvot can be found in the Bibliography.

²¹ Torah, which refers specifically to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the “five books of Moses”), may also be used more generally to describe any writing that relates to the Bible or its study.

Study of these texts in connection to Birkat Ha-Mazon involves looking at the context from which a quotation is taken and contrasting it with how the quotation is used in this prayer. A similar procedure is followed as that described above for examination of the text and meaning of prayer.

Also of interest in this regard is an examination of the chapter in which the passage upon which Birkat Ha-Mazon is based appears, Deuteronomy 8. Similarly, one might want to compare this passage with Deuteronomy 11:13-21 (in liturgy, the second paragraph of the “v’ahavta” prayer), in which the statement “and you will eat, and be satisfied” also appears.²² Finally, one might wish to examine the events which, according to the Talmud (Ber. 48b) occasioned the writing of each of the first three paragraphs of Birkat Ha-Mazon, even though the prayer is not mentioned in the Biblical texts: The falling of the manna (Moses), the entry of the Hebrews into the land of Israel (Joshua), and the foundation of the city of Jerusalem (David) and of the Temple (Solomon).

A discussion of the rationale for Torah study is a necessity in a curriculum based upon the examination of Biblical texts. Although some might argue that, as “People of the Book,” the primary role of Torah to Jews and the value of its study should be self-evident, such an assumption is simply inaccurate. For many contemporary Jews, the Bible is an archaic text which does not speak to the contemporary reader. The same process of self-exploration that was recommended for the study of prayer and of Mitzvot should be applied to Torah study:

- Torah study teaches us the defining myths of the Jewish people; it is the source of our identity as Jews.
- Torah study teaches us the origin of the laws and obligations incumbent upon Jewish people, and is the source of many of our fundamental ethical values.
- Torah study is, in itself, a Mitzvah.

²² Such a comparison is made by the Sifrei on Deuteronomy, Parshat Ekev 7.

- Torah study is an opportunity to explore, in a focused manner, ethical and moral issues.

There is a particular relevance of Torah study in regard to meals: In the Mishnah (Pirke Avot 3:3), R. Shimon ben Yochai says: “If three have eaten at one table and have not spoken over it words of the Law, it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead . . . but if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Law, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God.”²³ The sharing of a meal, concluded by the recitation of Birkat Ha-Mazon, is enhanced by the study of words of Torah – which might include a study of the words of Birkat Ha-Mazon itself!

The questions of the authorship and authority of the Torah are particularly relevant to a curriculum on Bible study from a liberal Jewish perspective. While a fundamentalist view of the Torah accepts it as having been revealed to Moses at a historical moment in the Sinai desert, most contemporary scholarship of the Torah regards the text as the compilation of a variety of sources developed over a period of several hundred years. When we say the words, “Kakatu,” “as it is written,” a liberally-based reading of the Torah necessitates our willingness to confront the question of who wrote those words, and how this affects our understanding of the text and its authority in our lives.

Also central to a liberal-perspective of Torah study is the making of personal meaning of the text, even when one’s interpretation is in direct contradiction to the understanding of the classic Rabbinic commentaries. In a traditional Yeshiva setting, it is practically unheard-of to study the Bible without continual reference to Rashi, and his interpretations are generally understood to be the “correct” and authoritative understanding of the text. Liberal Torah-study, by contrast, generally begins with a “literary critical” approach, understanding the text on its own terms. Reference may be made to classic interpretations, but their merit is generally weighed on an individual basis and

²³ Similarly, according to R. Abin the Levite, “If one enjoys a meal at which a scholar is present, it is as if he enjoyed the splendor of the Divine Presence” (Ber. 48a).

they are not viewed as having an intrinsically more clear or more accurate understanding of the meaning of the Bible.

The study of Birkat Ha-Mazon could certainly be incorporated into a Biblical curriculum that includes the study of the book of Deuteronomy or of the weekly Torah portion of Ekev. However, in comparison to its utility in the study of prayer, blessings, and Mitzvot, I would not recommend the use of Birkat Ha-Mazon as the organizing principle of a curriculum of Bible study. First, although it is based upon a Biblical passage, it is not in itself, for the most part, a Biblical text. Second, although Birkat Ha-Mazon makes mention of a variety of Biblical figures (such as the patriarchs and Elijah the Prophet), it hardly begins to do justice to an exploration of the wealth of Biblical narrative. Third, exploration of the texts which relate to Birkat Ha-Mazon would appear somewhat haphazard, as Birkat Ha-Mazon is not in itself structured according to those texts.

However, Birkat Ha-Mazon could play a role as the starting point of a curriculum looking at food, eating, or hospitality in the Bible. Furthermore, study of Birkat Ha-Mazon should not ignore the possibilities that study of the Biblical passages it includes or to which it relates may provide. A deeper understanding of the people, places, and events that it mentions can only enhance and deepen one's understanding of the text.²⁴

6. As a means for teaching Hebrew

Because of the familiarity of its text and its use of common key-words, one might be tempted to think of Birkat Ha-Mazon as a useful means for teaching Hebrew. Without undermining the importance of familiarity with, and understanding of, the Hebrew text of Birkat Ha-Mazon, there are several reasons why it may in fact not be an effective tool for teaching Hebrew language.

²⁴ Mention should also be made of the possibility of studying the detailed (and extensive) discussion of Birkat Ha-Mazon and its related issues in the Mishnah and Gemarrah (Tractate Berachot) and Shulchan Aruch. An excellent example is the forthcoming Rabbis curriculum by Jeffrey Spitzer, chapter 7, which looks at the relationship between the blessings for food and for Torah.

Dr. Adina Ofek²⁵ asserts that it is never effective to teach Hebrew language through prayers. She notes that prayers make use of non-standard and difficult (“high-level”) language and word forms which are not found in contemporary Hebrew speech. The is grammatical structures are equally complicated and non-standard. For example, prayers often consist of elliptical, incomplete phrases which do not contain all the element of a regular sentence (such as a subject, object, and action).

Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge the meaning of individual words from the context in which they appear in a prayer, as one might be able to do in a news article or narrative story. Similarly, because prayers do not include dialogue, plot, or illustrations, it is often difficult to remember the details of the text. Finally, the vocabulary of prayers is, for the most part, not particularly useful in daily conversation.

My experience has shown that even reasonably literate Hebrew-speakers have a difficult time translating Birkat Ha-Mazon directly into English. Study of this prayer, therefore, may not necessitate the comprehension of every individual word or sentence. Generally speaking, it is probably sufficient for those who are not fluent in Hebrew to understand the meaning of individual sentences, or even paragraphs. Learning to sing or say Birkat Ha-Mazon by rote should be considered a useful skill in and of itself.

It should also be clear that working with the Hebrew text, even if understood only generally, is still a valuable endeavor. Although Birkat Ha-Mazon may not be useful for teaching Hebrew language, individual key-words and key-phrases found in Birkat Ha-Mazon should be understood in Hebrew. Educators should develop a list of such units which are appropriate to the age and skill level of their students. Particular attention should be paid to those phrases which make use of

²⁵ In her class “Theory, Method and Practice in Language Instruction” offered by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

standard structures and common vocabulary (as in “Na’ar Hayiti, v’gam zakanti”) and contain concepts which are frequently found in Hebrew prayer (such as “Oseh Shalom bimromav”).

7. An historical approach

One might look at the development of Birkat Ha-Mazon historically, as was done in the second section of this paper, exploring the different eras in which the various paragraphs of Birkat Ha-Mazon was written and then using them as an entry-point into the central issues and events of each of those periods. However, as much of our understanding of the development of Birkat Ha-Mazon is still conjecture, this may not be the most fruitful approach to this material. While it might be of interest to look at the role Birkat Ha-Mazon played in the chavurah meals of the early rabbinic period, or in concentration camps during the Holocaust, I would not advocate taking an historical approach to Birkat Ha-Mazon.

8. A theological approach

Finally, it is important to make sure that a curriculum including Birkat Ha-Mazon does not ignore questions of our understanding of God and our relationship with the Divine. It is critical to note that the study of prayer, of Bible, or of Mitzvot might not include the study of theology and of the relationship between God and humanity. Such questions must, in my opinion, be addressed in any such curriculum, but this is not always the case in materials currently available.

Rabbi Kenneth Berger has observed²⁶ that prayer is our primary vehicle for understanding Jewish theology. The God that is described in the Bible is not necessarily the one who we encounter in the Siddur (prayerbook), and it is in these prayers that Jews have most clearly articulated their spiritual beliefs.

Similarly, Rabbi Steve Brown observes that each time we say a blessing we are make a theological statement which defines God. The opening words of the blessing formula are abstract,

pointing both to the transcendent and infinitely powerful Sovereign of the Universe (“Melech Ha’Olam), and our paradoxically intimate relationship with God’s immanent presence (implied by “ata” and “eloheinu”). On the other hand, the last words of the blessing which stand in opposition to the first six words, describe a concrete expression of God’s role in the universe, as, for example, the creator of a particular type of food or the source of our health or prosperity.

In this vein, one might note that it does not make sense to speak of the commandment of a Mitzvah without thinking about the Commander, or to read a passage from the Bible without wondering about its Author. An examination of Birkat Ha-Mazon, no matter what approach is taken, should therefore include an examination of the different images of God that appear in the text, and their implications for Jewish spirituality.

A detailed discussion of the components of a course of study centered around theological issues is unnecessary, as there exist numerous such curricula for all age-levels and environments. In the sections which follow, where it is applicable, I will note some of the specific images of God as presented in the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon and their theological implications for contemporary individuals.

B. Generative Concepts contained in Birkat Ha-Mazon

On what basis should one determine which of the many concepts contained in the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon, or implied by the act of saying it, are useful for developing a curriculum? David Perkins suggests that we should look at some subject-areas as more relevant for teaching than others. Calling these “generative concepts,” he writes that these are “topics that teaching for understanding easy” (92). Perkins offers several standards in determining such topics (93), including

- Centrality – the topic should be fundamental to the discipline or curriculum, and should “stand the test of time” in terms of its relevance.

²⁶ In his Introduction to Jewish Liturgy class offered by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America

- Accessibility – the topic should invite understanding, and should not be arcane or sparse.
- Richness – the topic should encourage connection-making and extrapolation to other ideas and concepts.

This section will examine specific content areas derived from the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon and from the act of performing the ritual in and of itself. These content areas may be seen as the starting point for any efforts to develop goals for lessons and curricula based on Birkat Ha-Mazon.

Unfortunately, in a paper of this nature it is impossible to be comprehensive. Emphasis and priority will be placed upon those content areas which may be described as generative. Additional suggestions for topics not directly addressed will also be provided.

1. Sanctification of the act of Eating

A concern for food appears at the very beginning of the Bible. Sustenance for human beings, and for all creatures, is viewed as an intrinsic component of the Divine plan of creation. In God's first address to humanity, in the first chapter of Genesis, God instructs the humans that they may eat from every plant on the ground and every fruit of the tree (Gen. 1:29). Shortly thereafter, this is qualified with the prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Just as babies receive nourishment while in the womb, in the "perfect" paradise of the Garden of Eden, food is provided for humans without any effort on their part.

When the humans are expelled from Eden, a new stage in their relationship with food begins. Now, God admonishes Adam, only "by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat" (Gen. 3:19). This is the first mention of bread in the Bible, which, in contrast to the fruit of the Garden of Eden, requires human labor. In the next chapter, perhaps in response to the anxiety provoked by the responsibility of providing food for oneself, Cain and Abel bring the first sacrificial offerings to God (Gen. 4:3-4). This offering can be seen as a petition, or as a thanksgiving, for successful harvests and healthy livestock.

Arthur Waskow writes of two ways by which the ancient Israelites sanctified the food they ate, which can be traced back to these first four chapters of Genesis. “One major approach they took to hallowing food was to set some aside as sacred, others as forbidden” (23). The prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge can be seen as paradigmatic of this approach, later reflected in laws of Kashrut, tithing, fasts, Sabbatical years, and so on. The “other process for hallowing food was to take the products of the land to a single place, the Temple in Jerusalem, there to bring God near to them” (24). The offerings of Cain and Abel are the prototype for sacrificial worship, evinced in stories of Noah (Gen. 8:20), Abraham (Gen. 12:7) and so on, and which ultimately reaches its peak in the unified system of regulated sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem.

These two dimensions for the sanctification of food -- that of making distinctions between food which may and may not be eaten and that of consecrating food as an offering to God -- will be discussed in great detail in the upcoming sections. First, I wish to emphasize that there is a third conception of the sanctification of food. The very act of eating, the turning of physical matter into energy, of the life-force in a plant or animal into one’s own life-force, is in itself a sacred activity.

Samuel H. Dresner contrasts the way that such basic human drives as hunger and sex are understood by Paganism and Judaism. Paganism “glorifies these powers as such,” (13) and sees the natural world as intrinsically holy. The only goal of life, consequently, is the satisfaction of one’s basic, hedonistic desires. In Jewish thought, by contrast, only God, “the Holy One,” is seen as intrinsically holy; nature, and the natural world, “is neither holy nor unholy” (14). Biblical support for this idea is found in the wording of the story of creation. As Allen Grossman points out (392), when God creates the world, and the various living things in it, God does not call it “holy,” but “good” (Gen. 1:10, 12, etc.).

However, the possibility of making the ordinary into the sacred is a constant potential, a potential that is realized when the Divine is made present through human activity. Judaism,

therefore, asserts that in every action there is a potential for holiness, and life is structured around the attempt to realize this potential in every deed. Indeed, “the duty of the Jew is to lift up all of life to God, to *hallow the everyday*, so that all of life becomes holy” (Dresner, 17, italics in the original). The hallowing of daily life is accomplished by two means: The performance of Mitzvot -- actions commanded by God -- and the saying of blessings, the purpose of which is the realization of the Divine quality of every action. Eating, as one of the most basic of daily activities, one shared with all animals (and, in some sense, plants), is an opportunity to bring holiness into one’s life on a consistent and fundamental basis.

The Jewish mystical tradition sees the sanctification of eating as “not just one among many aspects of correct action . . . [but] among the most important” (Waskow, 100). The *Sefer Yetzirah* explains that in order to create the world, God had to contract inwardly and open a space in which a finite, knowable universe could exist. God created vessels (“keylim”) within which to contain the holiness that had been contracted, but they could not hold the Divine presence and shattered into fragments. Sparks of Divine holiness (“n’tzitzot”) were scattered throughout all of creation. Through the hallowing of daily activities, one may gather these scattered sparks of holiness, thereby healing and repairing the world (“tikkun olam”).

Saying Birkat Ha-Mazon is a Mitzvah; even if said by rote, one sanctifies the act of eating. However, according to the sixteenth century mystic Isaac Luria, this is not enough to free the spark of Divine holiness that may be embedded in the food one eats. Only through intense concentration and spiritual focus (“kavanah”) can this be accomplished. In contemporary terms, one might see the act of making the blessing as an opportunity both to realize that it is miraculous that we can turn plants and animals into energy, or to become mindful of how this energy will be used to work toward the betterment of the world.

Arizal explicitly connects the sparks of holiness with the nourishment that food provides. He explains that “every physical object or being owes its existence to a holy spark buried within it. Man’s soul inhabits his body and derives nourishment from the food he eats as well as from the Torah he studies and the good deeds he performs. A person eats. His body extracts the vitamins and minerals in needs, but that does not keep him alive, for if his soul were to leave him he would be no more animate than rocks and sand. His soul extracts the spark of holiness within the food – and *that* maintains life” (Scherman, 1977, 18).

In the chapter of Deuteronomy in which we find the passage upon which Birkat Ha-Mazon is based, Moses also tells the Israelites that God gave them “manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had ever known, in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but that man may live on anything that the Lord decrees” (Deut. 8:3). Scherman, quoting from the Sifsei Tzaddik’s commentary on this verse, writes that “the great lesson of the manna [was that] man does not live by *bread* – by flour and water and leavening, its calories and vitamins and minerals – *he lives by the emanations of God that are in every slice of bread.*” (Schermann, 1977, 18, italics in the original). It is perhaps no coincidence that authorship of the first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon is attributed to Moses, when the manna first fell from the sky.

In Jewish thought, eating is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Reciting Birkat Ha-Mazon is an essential step toward experiencing the act of eating as a holy act, especially when it is said with comprehension and with intention. It is also the perfect opportunity for us to focus on the choices we make about what we put into our bodies and how we use the energy this nutrition provides.

2. Opportunity to focus on proper Nutrition

The World Health Organization defines Health as balance between physical, mental and social being (Fieldhouse ix). Birkat Ha-Mazon reminds us of the need to pay attention to, and strike

a balance between, each one of these aspects of our health. Birkat Ha-Mazon is a social activity, as it is often said as the conclusion of a communal meal. Focusing on the text can lead to heightened cognitive awareness of, and encounter with, challenging issues affecting Jews and people in general. I will discuss each of these aspects in detail in later sections. Here, I wish to look at the role that Birkat Ha-Mazon can play as a focal point in thinking about the physical impact of food on our bodies, or in other words, for nutrition education.

According to Genesis 1:26, humans are created “b’tzelem Elohim,” in the image of God. Although the interpretations of this are manifold, one generally accepted implication is that any form of self-harm violates Jewish law as it is a desecration of the Divine image. The extent to which this principle is applied varies: Some communities forbid body-piercing based on this idea, while others will not smoke cigarettes. Arguably, a concern for proper diet and exercise should be considered a Jewish obligation.²⁷

Birkat Ha-Mazon is a mandatory pause at the conclusion of a meal. We can use this time to make a connection between the food we have eaten and the nourishment it has provided us. This is also an opportunity for us to reflect upon the choices we have made with the foods we have eaten. One might ask oneself questions along the lines of: Did I waste food? Did I overeat? Was the food grown (or raised) in a manner that fits with my ethics? How did this food get from its point of origin to me? How did the choices I made affect other people’s lives?

Furthermore, Birkat Ha-Mazon can be an opportunity to focus on eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia.²⁸ Such “unhealthy eating” might be contrasted with the self-denial of the Jewish fasts. Regulated fasts are an intrinsic part of the Jewish year, and fasting is considered by

²⁷ Frankiel and Greenfield offer a list of simple rules for eating healthily (66).

²⁸ The guidance of a trained counselor should be sought before leading any discussions on this subject.

many rabbis to be an effective form of atonement. Nevertheless, health is always considered a priority, and those for whom fasting is a health concern are forbidden to do so.²⁹

One might also make the connection to the entire digestive process. Just as there are blessings to be said before and after eating, there is also a blessing to be said after elimination! The “asher yatzar” blessing, which is recited after using the bathroom, thanks God for the wondrous working of our internal organs.

In short, Birkat Ha-Mazon, as a pause after eating, can be a time to reflect upon and re-evaluate the food decisions which one makes, from the types of food to the quantity. The balance between the social, mental, and physical aspects of the blessing can help us to examine the balance between these aspects in our lives.

3. Commemoration, and Mourning for the loss, of the Temple

For hundreds of years, the manner in which Jews communicated with God, whether to show their appreciation for God’s goodness or to seek Divine favor, was through the offering of sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. There were many components involved in this ritual, including a complicated system of appropriate times and types of offerings to be brought, an elect class of priests to supervise the system, and a liturgy of psalms and hymns to be sung before and after the ceremony.

The fundamental purpose of the sacrificial system, according to Baruch Levine, was “to formalize or reaffirm and, at times, to repair the relationship between the worshipper and God and between the community of worshippers and God . . . Human beings have always sought the nearness and presence of God (or of the gods, in polytheistic environments). We are filled with anxiety at the prospect of God’s withdrawal, or absence, or distance from the human scene” (xxiv).

²⁹ Interestingly, if one must eat on Yom Kippur, Birkat Ha-Mazon should be said, with the inclusion of the addition for festivals, “Ya’aleh V’Yavo” (Cohen 97).

Arthur Waskow points out that the role of the sacrifice in bringing the donor closer to the Divine presence is reflected in the names of some of the types of offerings, such as “korban,” from the root “to bring closer,” and “oleh” from the root “to go up” (43).

The act of eating the offering was, except in certain specific cases, an integral part of the sacrifice. Levine writes that “most burnt offerings were only partially burned on the altar, while the rest of the substance of the offering was prepared as food for priests and, in some cases, for donors of sacrifices. The object was to celebrate a sacred meal in the presence of God, to share a meal with the Deity. In fact, the sacrifice was generally not efficacious unless the priests and, where applicable, the donors actually partook of their respective shares” (xxxviii). It is sometimes theorized that it was, in fact, only upon offering a sacrifice that the average Israelite would eat meat.

After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis who became the guardians of Jewish tradition wanted to preserve the Temple service to the greatest extent possible. They developed the various prayer rituals with the Temple sacrifices as their organizing principle. For example, the schedule of daily worship services is reflective of the times of day when the sacrifices were offered. The Temple was commemorated in other aspects of Jewish life as well; for example, the work which is prohibited on Shabbat is based upon the forms of labor that were used to construct the Temple (Levine 233).

Mourning for the loss of the Temple, and petition for its restoration, is an essential element of any prayer service, and Birkat Ha-Mazon is no exception. Psalm 137, which introduces Birkat Ha-Mazon on weekdays,³⁰ fulfills this injunction and tells of the longing for Jerusalem by the exiles in Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple. Commenting on verse 6, “let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I cease to . . . keep Jerusalem in my memory even at my happiest hour,” Ibn Ezra writes that no matter what the occasion of personal joy, the memory of Jerusalem must

³⁰ In the Ashkenazi rite. This custom has fallen out of practice in many contemporary communities.

come first. The Rama cites this as the origin of the custom of the groom breaking the glass at a wedding ceremony (cited in Scherman 1984, 183). Arthur Waskow, in a more modern interpretation, sees the recitation of this psalm as mourning for “our separation from the land that was once the earthly source of our food and the Holy City where we brought food to celebrate its spiritual source” (67).

The Temple is explicitly referred to in the text of the third paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon, as “the great and holy House” (“ha-bayit hagadol ve’ha-kadosh”). According to tradition, this line was composed by Solomon upon its establishment (Tal. Ber. 48b).

The Temple is also memorialized in the overall structure of Birkat Ha-Mazon. Lawrence Troster has shown that the sequence of the paragraphs reflects the pilgrimage (“chag,” the same verb-form as the Arabic “haj”) that was made by all Israelites to the Temple in Jerusalem on the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. The first paragraph is universal, the second speaks of the land of Israel, and the third speaks of Jerusalem and the Temple. With each paragraph, we approach more closely to the center of holiness. The “Amen” which closes the third paragraph may be considered the threshold of the Sanctuary, after which individual, personal blessings are offered.

4. As substitute for Temple Worship

After the destruction of the Temple, the priestly hierarchy, the strictly regulated system of proper offerings, and the unique role of Jerusalem as locus for encounter of God lost their meaning. Without the Temple, it was no longer possible to draw close to God through the sacrificial ritual. The result was a “democratization”³¹ of access to the holiness previously available primarily through Temple sacrifice. This access was made possible through the performance of Mitzvot and acts of prayer and blessing.

³¹ Rabbi Lawrence Troster, in private conversation.

In particular, the Dining table became a substitute for the sacrificial altar of the Temple. Many of the rituals associated with meals are intended to remind us of this connection. One clear example is the ritual washing of hands prior to eating bread. This action was performed by the priests prior to entering the Sanctuary in the morning (Chill 131), based upon the Biblical commandment “And Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet at the laver” (Ex. 30:19). The hand-washing was later transformed into a household ritual by way of a statement from Psalms, “I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will compass Thine altar, oh Lord” (Psalm 26:6). The word “altar,” according to a rabbinic interpretation, not only signifies the Sanctuary, but also the dining table (Idelsohn 122).

Two other customs observed in many homes, and particularly at the meals of Shabbat, preserve the memory of the Temple. One is the sprinkling of some salt on the bread which is blessed at the beginning of the meal, because the Temple sacrifice was salted (Dresner 40). The other is the removal of all knives from the table prior to saying Birkat Ha-Mazon. Two alternate explanations are offered for this custom. First, that no knives were allowed to come into the Sanctuary because knives are a weapon of war and the altar is a symbol of peace (Dresner 40). Second, that the altar of the Temple was constructed of stones not hewn with tools, and so the removal of the knives reinforces the transformation of the table into the altar itself (Kadden and Kadden, 1996, 49).

The Temple service is therefore not only memorialized by the act of saying Birkat Ha-Mazon, but the table actually becomes a substitute for the Temple. Louis Finkelstein writes that “in the liturgical service of the Jewish home it [Birkat Ha-Mazon] occupies much the same position that the *Amidah* holds in the synagogue service.”³² Together these prayers helped to make possible the

³² The “Amidah” or “Standing Prayer” is the central section of the synagogue service and is based upon the private prayer service held by the priests before performing their daily sacrifices.

continuance of a full and complete Jewish life after the destruction of Jerusalem” (1928-29, 212). As Dresner puts it, through the act of saying Birkat Ha-Mazon, “every home can be a Temple, every table an altar, every meal a sacrifice, and every Jew a priest” (40).

We might contrast this with the Catholic communion, also a substitute sacrificial service, in which the bread is sanctified and shared by the community. In the Jewish ritual, it is not the food which is transformed, but each person who says the blessings who is transformed into a priest, and therefore eligible to eat the offering of the food served at the meal.

5. Awareness that World, and everything in it, is gift from God.

As has been mentioned earlier, according to tradition, Birkat Ha-Mazon was instituted by Moses at the time when the manna miraculously descended to feed the Israelites during their travels in the Sinai desert (Talmud Ber. 48b). Elie Munk, quoting S. R. Hirsch, writes that by connecting Birkat Ha-Mazon to the manna, the rabbis teach us that “every piece of bread eaten now is as much a gift from God as the manna was” (211). Goldberger, drawing from Talmud Pesachim 118a, asserts that the process by which God “causes a seed to transform earth into food [is] as spectacular as the miracle of the splitting of the sea” (5).

The point of each of these statements is that food is a gift from God, a gift which cannot be taken for granted. The provision of food is a daily miracle, whether it is effortlessly picked from the trees (as in the Garden of Eden) or reaped from the earth through great effort (after leaving the Garden). “The message appears rather clear: When we thank God for giving us food, we are recognizing that there is no intrinsic difference between the manna and the livelihood one wrests from the earth through sweat and hard toil; both are gifts from heaven” (Scherman 1984, 182).

This connection is also made in the blessing said prior to eating bread, “Ha-Motzi.” This blessing thanks God “who brings forth bread from the land.” Bread – not wheat, which would be more technically accurate – to affirm God’s centrality to the entire process of making bread, from

the sprouting of the grain to its baking in the oven. As Evelyn Garfiel puts it, “finding his daily bread never ceases to be a *Nes* [miracle] even to the farmer who toils so hard to produce the grain, for he recognizes its ultimate source to be God’s loving care for all His creatures. It is God ‘Who brings forth [the] bread from the earth’” (122).

In the Talmud, the rabbis emphasize that not only bread is a gift from God, but all food. Although Birkat Ha-Mazon is the only blessing commanded by the Torah (Deut. 8:10), based upon the statement from Psalms “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” (24:1) the rabbis saw it as an obligation to acknowledge that all the fruits of the earth are a gift from God. Therefore, they “instituted the practice of reciting a benediction when partaking of any of them” (Klein 42). There are specific blessings prior to a meal based on several general categories: bread, all other grain-products, things grown on trees, things grown in the ground, wine, and all other edible substances.

The rabbis saw such blessings as not just a nice way of showing appreciation to God, but a true obligation (although, as they are not Biblically ordained, not as Mitzvot). In Talmud Ber. 35a we read that “Our rabbis taught: It is forbidden to a man to enjoy anything of this world without a benediction, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege.” In the next passage, it is compared to “making personal use of things consecrated to heaven.” Here, the words “sacrilege” (“*ma’al*”) and “consecrated to heaven” (“*mikadshei shamayim*”) are reflective of the language of the Temple service, underscoring that if one ate food without reciting a blessing, it is as if one stole the sacrifice off of the altar of the Temple.

The idea that all of the Earth belongs to God, and that humans are merely its caretakers, is reflected in a wide range of Jewish laws, many of which are Biblically based. While the Temple was standing, Israelites were required to set aside the firstborn of all cattle, sheep, and goats, the early fruit from a young tree, the first barley and other foods at each season, and even part of all bread (the “*challah*”) made for the benefit of the priests or for sacrifice at the Temple to God, “as if to pay

‘rent’ to the owner” (Waskow 41). Only by setting aside these consecrated offerings was it permissible for one to make use of the remainder of the crop or the herd.

Human beings, in the Biblical view, did not have absolute authority over the use of the land or its products. Every seven years, no new planting or cultivation of the land could be done, to allow the Earth to rest (Ex. 23:11). During this “shmittah” or “Sabbatical” year, “any fruits or vegetations that grew by themselves . . . became *hefker*, i.e. public property, free for consumption by man and beast alike. The owner of a field was not permitted to store up in his home large amounts of produce, because this would deprive the poor of their sustenance. He was permitted to retain only enough fruits and vegetables for his own normal needs” (Chill 109). Individuals were required to trust in God’s providence throughout the Sabbatical year, not in their own actions.

According to the understanding of both the Bible and the rabbinic commentators, all of the world was the property of God. Use of the land, and any food that could be taken from it, were Divine gifts. After the destruction of the Temple, by the time of the writing of the Mishnah at the end of the second century, “the rituals that permitted a person to consume the foods of the earth were not the sacrifices of animals at the Temple, or the offerings of meal, or the separation from one’s produce the gifts for the priests and Levites. The Jew had to recite the proper formal blessing before eating and then could benefit from the produce of the land” (Zahavy 32)

6. Ethical responsibility to take care of the world

Steve Brown³³ asserts that there is an ethical responsibility derived from our awareness of the world as a gift from God. When one receives a precious gift, and offers one’s gratitude for it, in doing so one must also take responsibility for the care and safe-keeping of that gift. Similarly, he concludes, once we are aware that food, and the Earth itself, is a Divine gift, we are obligated to become stewards, or care-takers, of the planet.

There are many implications of this statement, and there is great disagreement about the degree to which such obligations may be extended. Yet, few would disagree that we are in an era of increasing awareness of the impact that our individual and collective actions have upon the planet. Many argue that unless dramatic life-style changes are made within our own lifetimes, irreversible damage will be done to fragile ecosystems across the globe.

A curriculum on Birkat Ha-Mazon, therefore, should address the Jewish law of “Ba’al Tashchit,” avoiding wasteful destruction; of ecological issues, including water quality, habitat depletion, and bio-engineering of food; and of steps individuals can take, such as recycling and shopping consciously.

7. Gratitude to God as caretaker of all creation

The central idea of the first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon is that God provides sustenance for all creatures, human and animal alike. God provides both generally, to all the world -- as is implied by the words “who feeds the world,” (“hazan et ha’olam”) -- and specifically, to each individual creature, as is implied by the words “He gives bread to every living-thing” (“lechol basar”) (Munk 212). Garfiel observes that the “universal, all-embracing quality of God’s providence, his love” (208) is emphasized by the many repetitions of the root-words “all” (“kol”) and “nourishes” (“zan”).

According to the Midrash, God accomplishes this miraculous task of feeding all creatures at night. “While all His creatures are asleep, God causes the wind to blow. This in turn causes the clouds to gather. Then rain falls causing the fruit to grow. Thus God prepares the meals for all living beings” (Lev. R. 14). God, therefore, is the source of the food-chain, providing sufficient resources on the planet for all creatures to survive.

³³ In private conversation.

One might wonder, considering the widespread hunger that has always existed (now more than ever), whether it is indeed accurate that there are sufficient resources on the planet to feed all people. The answer, according to Francis Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, is yes: "abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today," they write in World Hunger: Twelve Myths. "The world today produces enough grain alone to provide every human being on the planet with 3,600 calories a day [according to a 1984 study]," which the authors observe is enough to make most people fat! (9) The causes of world hunger are complicated, but a shortage of food, except in the relatively rare cases of droughts and famines, is not one of them.

One might also wonder how it is that God sustains all living creatures if some creatures eat others. This is not addressed directly by Birkat Ha-Mazon, but is a fruitful source of discussion.

8. Our responsibility to assist God in taking care of all creatures

Just as our awareness of the world as a gift from God brought with it the responsibility to care for the planet, so too does our awareness of God's desire for the nourishment of all living beings bring with it a responsibility to assist God in caring for all the world's creatures. This concept, called "Tzaar Baalei Chayim," ("avoiding the suffering of animals") is central to a Rabbinic understanding of the place of humanity in the World. "This concern for the welfare of animals is not merely a whim with one or two of the Rabbis. It is an essential part of our religion. None of the pagan civilizations with which Jews were acquainted had anything to say about kindness to animals" (Greenberg 118).

A few of the laws expressing Jewish concern for the welfare of animals include

- A man is forbidden to eat before he gives food to his beast (T. Ber. 40a).
- One may not plow with an ox and ass together (Deut. 22:10) (because their strength is not equal and one or other will suffer).

- If you see your brother's ass or ox fallen down, you are required to help him pick them up" (Deut. 22:4).
- You are required to let your animals rest on Shabbat (Deut 5:14).

In terms of eating, Dresner writes that "Schitah," "kosher slaughter," should teach reverence for life (27). The basic idea behind kosher slaughter seems to be to give the animal as painless a death as possible, but even if this were not the case, the act of slaughtering an animal should awaken one's awareness to the suffering that animals might feel!

Similarly, vegetarianism seems to be particularly sanctioned by Jewish thought, even elevated. "The permission to eat meat is . . . a compromise, *a divine concession to human weakness and human need*. The Torah, as it were, says: 'I would prefer that you abstain from eating meat altogether, that you subsist on that which springs forth from the earth, for to eat meat the life of an animal must be taken and that is a fearful act'" (Dresner26). In the Garden of Eden, all of the creatures are vegetarians; likewise, Isaiah 11:6-8 describes a messianic future in which no animals will eat one another, presumably implying that humans will be vegetarians as well. In general, the attitude towards eating meat is stated clearly in the Talmud: "The Torah teaches a lesson in moral conduct, that man shall not eat meat unless he has a special craving for it, and shall only it occasionally and sparingly" (Chulin 84a).

9. To help confront our increased alienation from the sources of food

Birkat Ha-Mazon is an opportunity to examine where our food comes from, how it is grown and raised, how it is packaged and transported to us, and how it is prepared. In the modern era, most city-dwellers have lost touch with the sources of origin of their food. This is evident in the description of the world in Goldberger's How to Thank HaShem for Food: "The earth is the most ancient and the most modern food-factory which was created and is constantly maintained by the Master of the Universe" (21). We have become so alienated from the processes of farming and

harvesting that in order to provide an analogy that makes sense to the contemporary reader, Goldberger describes the workings of the world in terms of a factory, the strongest symbol of industrialization and the human domination of the planet one could find!

Arthur Waskow analyzes the problem, asking whether “in our own time of earthquake both in the world and for the Jewish people . . . we need to rethink how to make food sacred as deeply as our ancestors did? For them, food was no longer what they grew in a small land by dint of their own labors, but what came to them by ship and camel train. For us, food has more and more become what is manufactured, not just grown: It comes from crossbred and genetically engineered plants and animals; it comes with inserted vitamins; it comes heavily packaged, precooked, frozen, irradiated, invented” (68). Steve Brown asserts the value that Birkat Ha-Mazon can have in responding to this situation, for each time we say a blessing we acknowledge God and the chain of events (human or otherwise) that enabled us to have the gift of food in front of us.

Even when the Israelites experienced the miracle of manna falling from the sky, they still were obligated to collect it every morning, for it would rot if kept overnight (Ex. 16:21). The lesson here seems to be that our sustenance is the result of a partnership between God and human beings. Food is a miracle, but human effort plays a critical role in planting, raising, harvesting, and preparing the food we eat. Ultimately, God is the source of all of our nourishment, but we must also be aware of the humans (such as the farmers, the truckers, and the cooks) which brought the food to our mouths.

10. Other Topics addressed by Birkat Ha-Mazon

In addition to the areas described above, Birkat Ha-Mazon addresses a number of other topics that could fairly be described as “generative.” Unfortunately, it is not possible to do more than describe them in general terms in a paper of this nature.

Such topics include:

- a) **Gratitude for satisfaction of our needs:** Birkat Ha-Mazon offers gratitude not only for food, but for a range of needs (Goldberger lists ten such benefits described by Birkat Ha-Mazon, 23), including life, freedom, and laws by which to structure our lives. In the Talmud, the rabbis determine that one must say Birkat Ha-Mazon even if one has eaten only an amount of bread equal to the size of an olive (Ber. 58b). But is such a small amount of food really satisfying?
- b) **Gratitude and Humility in time of prosperity:** The purpose of blessing after eating (as expressed in Deut. 8:12-18), is that in times of prosperity (when you have “eaten your fill”), one might forget God and think that all of one’s successes are one’s own doing (Deut 8:12-18). Birkat Ha-Mazon teaches us not to take our prosperity for granted.
- c) **Ethical responsibility arising from awareness of our prosperity as gift from God:** We have an obligation to both to respect and to help provide for those who are less fortunate than ourselves, and to make the effective and righteous use of our resources.
- d) **Awareness of one’s membership in a community:** Birkat Ha-Mazon, and in particular the saying of the Mezuman, is a reminder of the social and communal nature of Judaism, in which every individual is a part of a larger collective. Furthermore, each of us depends upon the actions of others (generally, non-Jews) in providing food for ourselves – we are therefore part of a larger community that goes beyond the Jewish people.
- e) **Ethical responsibility arising from awareness of community:** “All Jews are responsible for one another.” Jews have specific obligations towards other Jews. This raises questions of Jewish pluralism and unity. Similarly, we have a responsibility to all people, everywhere, because of our interdependent membership in the “international community” of the human race.
- f) **Universalism vs. Particularism:** The move in the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon from a universal to particularist message, particularly regarding the Jewish relationship with the land of Israel, begs the question of how can one participate in “secular” contemporary society while maintaining an authentic Jewish identity? Are we required to be a “light to the nations,” and what does that mean?
- g) **Tradition/Jewish Continuity:** For some individuals, saying Birkat Ha-Mazon has less to do with the meaning of its text than with connecting with an ethnic or cultural heritage or personal family history. Along with keeping kosher and eating certain “Jewish” foods, it is a form of cultural identification.
- h) **Moral character is developed through habitual behavior:** By making routines out of certain activities, even if performed by rote, one develops self-discipline.
- i) **Gratitude for God’s role in our past:** Birkat Ha-Mazon offers thanks for specific events when miracles occurred for the Jewish people, including the liberation from slavery in Egypt.
- j) **God as active force in our lives, today:** Just as God performed miracles for our ancestors, so too is God involved in our daily lives right now. Much of Birkat Ha-Mazon, as with all blessings, is set in the present tense to emphasize this point.

- k) **God's goodness and providence even when we do not deserve it:** According to commentators on Birkat Ha-Mazon, the text demonstrates that God not only sustains the righteous because of their merit, but even the unworthy are nourished because of God's mercy.
- l) **Connection to the land of Israel:** According to tradition, the second paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon was instituted by Joshua at the time when the Hebrews entered the land of Israel, as an expression of gratitude (Ber. 48b). Much of the language reminds us of the connection between Jews and this land, even when they do not live in Israel.
- m) **The Land of Israel as Jewish inheritance:** Use of such words as "nachalah" (inheritance) in this prayer raises questions of Jewish nationalism.
- n) **Milah as reminder of Covenant with God:** Birkat Ha-Mazon explicitly mentions Milah (circumcision), which serves as a reminder that Jewish possession of the land of Israel is the result of a covenant between God and the Jewish people.
- o) **Responsibilities arising from covenant with God for Land of Israel:** Jewish possession of the Land of Israel is conditional upon Jewish behavior, in terms of how the land is treated and how Israelites treat one another and their neighbor.
- p) **Consolation from current state of Alienation and Exile:** Although the Temple has been destroyed, Birkat Ha-Mazon offers words of comfort, reminding Jews that God has not abandoned them.
- q) **Expression of Messianic longings:** Birkat Ha-Mazon directly asks for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the coming of a messianic age.
- r) **Food is meaningless without Peace:** Birkat Ha-Mazon concludes with a prayer for peace, and includes the prayer "Oseh Shalom," "Make Peace." Prosperity and bounty are useless when there is no peace.
- s) **Hachnasat Orchim, the honoring of guests and hosts:** The "most distinguished guest is generally asked to lead" Birkat Ha-Mazon (Tal. Ber. 46a, 47a), even if that person was not present for the entire meal. On the other hand, Birkat Ha-Mazon also includes a blessing that guests should make for their host(s).
- t) **The Aesthetic Dimension:** Judah Halevi writes, in the Kuzari, "by blessing God we double our enjoyment of the food." (3:17, quoted in Plaut 1392). This blessing is a way of concluding a meal with everyone still at the table. Also, the choice of melody used to sing Birkat Ha-Mazon will affect the mood and emotional orientation of the prayer.

These terse descriptions cannot do justice to the variety of material, textual and theoretical, that each of these topics addresses as related to Birkat Ha-Mazon. Nevertheless, this list is comprehensive, and should serve to indicate the diversity of generative topics addressed by Birkat Ha-Mazon. It should be noted that each of these areas can serve as a "jumping-off point" to a more

comprehensive study of the subject. For example, one might examine the theology expressed in Birkat Ha-Mazon, and then compare it with the theology expressed by other prayers or contemporary theologians.

In the final third of this section, I will (again, only briefly) address the topic areas that are related to a study of Birkat Ha-Mazon, separate from the text and ritual of Birkat Ha-Mazon itself.

C. Minhag and Halachah associated with Birkat Hamazon

A study of Birkat Ha-Mazon would not be complete without a study of the “Minhagim” (customs) and “Halachah” (laws) associated with its recitation. A brief outline of these rituals and the variations among them are detailed below.

1. Rituals associated with eating Bread

A variety of rituals are associated with eating bread. Some of these are halachic requirements, while others are merely customary. Exploration of the significance of each of these actions is a vital part of a curriculum on eating, as they will be encountered when Birkat Ha-Mazon is actually said.

Prior to a meal, these rituals include:

- On Shabbat, festivals, and special occasions, saying Kiddush, the blessing over the wine and the day.
- At meals where Kiddush is made, the bread is covered until it is blessed.
- Ritual washing of the hands, with an accompanying blessing.
- Sprinkling some salt over the bread.
- Saying “Ha-Motzi,” the blessing over the bread, prior to eating it.

After the meal, but before Birkat Ha-Mazon there are also a number of rituals:

- On Shabbat, singing of “zmirot” (songs), especially “Tzur Mishelo.”
- Removing all knives from the table, or covering them.
- Leaving some bread remaining on the table.

- “Mayim Achronim” or “Negelvasser” – a second ritual washing of the hands
- On Shabbat, festivals, and special occasions, a second Kiddush (the “kos sheni”) may be made at the conclusion of Birkat Ha-Mazon.

Each of these rituals is, individually, a rich source of generative topics. For many of these rituals, such as covering the bread or making the Kiddush, there are associated ritual objects which are often family heirlooms. Certainly, at the minimum, a familiarity with the structure of the meal, the context into which Birkat Ha-Mazon fits, should be a part of any curriculum.

2. Variations in Ritual and Custom

Examination of Birkat Ha-Mazon should include study of the variations in ritual, custom, and language between communities, movements, and even individual families. For example, this thesis has predominately focused on the Ashkenazi version of Birkat Ha-Mazon. Yet, the Sephardi and Yemenite texts all differ from the Ashkenazi in several paragraphs. Time should be provided in the curriculum to explore the variety of texts and customs that may be found relating to Birkat Ha-Mazon, both out of sensitivity to the different backgrounds of individual students, and to heighten awareness of and dialogue between the diverse cultural expressions which make up the Jewish people.

Another area of diversity is the melody used for singing Birkat Ha-Mazon. Different tunes result in shadings, or entirely different readings, of the same text. Examination of these differences can lead to enhanced appreciation for the text and also for the different experiences of the various communities.

Additionally, the text of Birkat Ha-Mazon is modified when it is said at a wedding celebration, in a house of mourning, at a brit milah, and for individual holidays. These textual variations should also be explored, with reference to how the changes relate to the different occasions at which Jews get together for a meal.

Finally, when bread is not eaten, Birkat Ha-Mazon is not said at all. To be comprehensive, a curriculum on Birkat Ha-Mazon should also explore how the blessings which are said after such a meal differ from the full Birkat Ha-Mazon.

3. Halachah of Birkat Ha-Mazon

Especially, but not exclusively, in communities for whom saying Birkat Ha-Mazon is a daily practice, it is important to examine the different laws pertaining to its recitation. Issues that would be covered include: determining who may be counted for the Mezuman, what to do if a paragraph is accidentally skipped, and when a shortened version of Birkat Ha-Mazon may be used.

IV. Towards developing educational tools based upon Birkat Ha-Mazon

Having examined the various rubrics generally found in Jewish education of which Birkat Ha-Mazon is a part, and then detailed some of the generative topics which are specific to this blessing, I turn to the question of how to turn this information into concrete goals around which lessons, or a curriculum, may be based. In this section, I will describe a process by which such goals may be developed, offer some concrete examples, and demonstrate how lessons based upon them may be integrated into a Jewish Study program.

A. Starting Points

There are, of course, many different and valid approaches to the development of curriculum. Ralph Tyler, for example, advocates that one should begin by developing a clear statement of one's philosophy of education and its implications for educational objectives (37), and based upon it one should develop learning experiences in keeping with what we know about the psychology of education (37-43). The outcomes of these learning experiences should be expressed in terms of unambiguous behavioral objectives (46-47).

More recently, Howard Gardner has theorized that there are five general "approaches" or "entry-points" by which the teacher may introduce new materials (245-46). I will briefly define each one of these approaches, and relate it to the teaching of specific generative contents of Birkat Ha-Mazon as described above:

- **Narrational entry point:** The presentation of a story or narrative about the concept in question. To examine our relationship with the Earth (5, 6), our alienation from the sources of our food (9), or our dependence upon others in providing food for ourselves (10d), one could trace the process by which a seed grows into wheat, is harvested, made into bread, and brought to one's table. One could also look at God's role in each of these steps (5, 10a, 10j).

- **Logical-quantitative entry point:** Drawing conclusions about the concept through deductive reasoning. To explore how the text views God as caretaker of all creation (7), one might count the number of times which “all” (“kol”), “world” (“olam”) and forms of the verb “nourish” (the root “zon”) appear in the first paragraph of Birkat Ha-Mazon.
- **Foundational entry point:** Examination of the philosophical and terminological facets of the concept. To explore how Birkat Ha-Mazon expresses gratitude for satisfaction of our needs (10a) or our prosperity (10b), one might contrast the way “and you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless” (Deut. 8:10) is understood by the rabbis in the Talmud (Ber. 58b) with its apparent meaning from its context in Deuteronomy.
- **Esthetic approach:** Artistic or sensory appreciation of the subject. To look at how the aesthetic dimensions (10t) of Birkat Ha-Mazon affect our understanding of it, one might compare the different ways it is sung by different communities and discuss how the melodies shape our experience of making the blessing. As another example, students could create artworks based upon each of the paragraphs of Birkat Ha-Mazon, according to how they see it, and then the class could discuss these creations in terms not only of content, but also choice of color, media, and so on.
- **Experiential approach:** The “hands-on” approach, making direct use of materials. To teach about the importance of every individual to the community (10d and 10e), one could play some “leadership initiatives” or “group building activities,” such as those found in Karl Rohnke’s work (see Bibliography).

It should be clear from these examples that Birkat Ha-Mazon can be taught using any of Gardner’s approaches. Such activities would need to be scoped and sequenced appropriately for the age being taught. In the final section, I will examine how they could be integrated into an existing school curriculum.

B. The place of Birkat Ha-Mazon in Jewish education

Earlier, I asserted that the ability to comfortably recite Birkat Ha-Mazon should be considered a key component of Jewish literacy, and that learning the text “by rote” was a worthwhile goal in and of itself. In fact, it is often in this manner that Birkat Ha-Mazon is currently taught in most educational environments, if it is even explicitly taught. More often, unfortunately, at the conclusion of a meal, the students, campers, and adults who are present are expected to simply follow along with the singing of the blessing -- often without transliteration, translation, or even the Hebrew text in front of them.³⁴

On the other hand, Birkat Ha-Mazon can be studied on its own, without actually reciting it at the conclusion of meals. It is in this form that Birkat Ha-Mazon is often encountered in the elementary grades at supplementary schools. The text, or more likely the first paragraph of it, is among the prayers which are part of the Hebrew curriculum. There may be some discussion of its meaning, with the explained that Birkat Ha-Mazon is recited at the end of a meal – but all as a hypothetical.³⁵

It is my contention that meaningful study of Birkat Ha-Mazon is predicated on both familiarity with the text, and the use of the text in context, after eating bread. It is through the actual performance of this ritual that students have the opportunity to make the connection between the words of the blessings and the act of eating. In many environments (summer camps, day schools, youth retreats, many “Confirmation” programs), sharing a meal is already a part of the routine. In others, such situations may have to be constructed, in the form of class dinners, snack-time (with challah), parties, or the like.

³⁴ According to Mishna B’rura 185:1, even if one is familiar with Birkat Ha-Mazon, one is obligated to recite it using a text (Goldberger 1).

³⁵ One curriculum, notably, which does not take this approach is the Melton Curriculum (Dorph and Kelman, see Bibliography), which from the earliest grades encourages recitation of Birkat Ha-Mazon as part of a weekly simulation of the Shabbat ritual in the classroom.

Each individual educational environment must determine the amount of the text with which they wish the students to be familiar, using what the students already know (if anything) as a starting point. Where Birkat Ha-Mazon is not being said, it can be taught in stages. One may also choose to teach Birkat Ha-Mazon in its entirety, and then, together with the students, decide on method for abridging the text while retaining its meaning.³⁶

Study of Birkat Ha-Mazon can be easily integrated into existing curricula on prayer, blessings, and Mitzvot, as discussed in the section on rubrics. It can also be an organizing principle for a curriculum in itself, as it touches on such a diverse range of generative topics. Perhaps the most intriguing potential of Birkat Ha-Mazon, however, is the possibility of using it as a bridge to the secular curriculum. Because it addresses such concepts as nutrition, ecology, and agriculture, Birkat Ha-Mazon can be easily related to science or social studies lessons. Whether on the elementary or high-school level, topics such as digestion, energy cycles and food chains, habitat, resources, and biodiversity can lead to, or be based upon, study of Birkat Ha-Mazon.

³⁶ An example of a curriculum for teaching Birkat Ha-Mazon from scratch, and then meaningfully abridging it – which I used with a Reform Jewish Confirmation class (8th – 9th grade) -- is available at <http://www.jtsa.edu/users/sakaiser/birkat.html>.

V. Conclusion

Whether in the form of stand-alone lessons or a full curriculum, Birkat Ha-Mazon has, inexplicably, been underutilized in Jewish education environments. It should be clear that there is nothing intrinsic to this blessing that has resulted in this situation. Because it is already in use in such a diverse range of environments, and because the text is such a rich source of generative topics, I see a great opportunity for the development of lessons based upon this blessing.

This goal of this thesis was to outline some of the key concepts and values which can be drawn from Birkat Ha-Mazon which can be used as the starting point for creating lessons or curricula. The next step will be to develop concrete goals based upon these generative topics, and then to examine the (all-too-few) existing curricula to see the degree to which they respond to these goals.

It is my hope that this thesis will prove to be a useful tool in this process of developing materials for teaching using Birkat Ha-Mazon, and that this, in turn, will encourage greater practice, and understanding, of this Mitzvah.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR TEACHING BIRKAT HA-MAZON

Although there is no single curriculum on Birkat Ha-Mazon for children or teenagers, there is a

“self-guided” curriculum available for adults: Moshe Goldberger’s How to thank Hashem for Food (see above). The perspective, it should be noted, is not very progressive.

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This thesis is printed on 60% post-consumer waste/100% chlorine free recycled paper. No animals were harmed in the writing of this thesis, although several house-plants were often ignored.