

I have noticed lately that when Birkat Hamazon, grace after meals, is announced after a simḥa meal, an amazing thing happens. It is as if Harry Houdini or David Copperfield was performing an illusion - the people in the social hall disappear. It reminds me of the story of the Priest and the Rabbi discussing the problem of how to get rid of mice in their buildings. They have tried every remedy from traps to poison, without success. One day, the Priest is visiting the Rabbi and notices that there are no longer any signs of mice. He asks, how did you get rid of them? The Rabbi responds, "Simple. I put little kippot and tallitot on them, called them up to the Torah, proclaimed them Bar Mitzvah, and they never returned!

I am saddened when I see people leaving when Birkat Hamazon is announced, but I understand what is going on. There may be some people who are leaving because they truly have to be somewhere else at a specific time, but basically, the exodus is an indication of a general discomfort with basic Jewish behaviors. It is a sign that Synagogue services and other Jewish rituals are intimidating, because they makes otherwise intelligent people feel inadequate.

No one likes to feel ignorant. Everybody in this room is intelligent and feels competent in his or her chosen vocation and/or avocation. Most people have completed a bachelor's degree, and many have completed some post-graduate educational program. For many otherwise intelligent people, walking into the synagogue is a humiliating experience precisely because it is one of the only areas of their life in which they feel like . . . well, total idiots.

It is natural to run away from a place or experience that makes one feel so awkward. I hate going into hardware stores, for example, because I don't have the vocabulary to ask for what I need, and this makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable.

The publisher of the "Idiot's Guide" series of books has made a lot of money by tapping into these feelings of inadequacy, and providing clear and simple resources to overcome them by learning. From a modest beginning explaining how to use computers, they have branched out to many other areas of life. There is even an Idiot's Guide to Judaism and another one to Jewish History. Essentially, what they have done is made it cool and easy to be a "recovering idiot!"

There are good reasons to want to be a more educated and comfortable Jew in the synagogue. Jewish rituals, prayers, and behaviors have meaning beyond the simple mechanical act itself. Ritual is a way of turning belief into action. The ritual behaviors of Judaism, when taken seriously, change the way we think about the world and our role in it. Let's use Birkat Hamazon as an example. Birkat Hamazon in a narrow sense is about thanking God for the food we have just eaten, but a closer examination of the text reveals a much deeper meaning. It suggests that God's creation of humanity was not a random accident, but a planned event in which we play a meaningful role as God's partners. It suggests that we as a Jewish people have a covenant with God, and the land of Israel is part of that promise. It suggests that injustice in the world is not inevitable, and it is our responsibility to pursue justice and righteousness. Finally, it suggests that we should behave with goodness and integrity, even if we are not always treated in the same way.

Birkat Hamazon consists of four basic blessings. In the first, we thank God for being הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַיּוֹרֵד מַיִם מִהַשָּׁמַיִם לְפָנֵינוּ וְיָרַד מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם לְפָנֵינוּ וְיָרַד מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם לְפָנֵינוּ וְיָרַד מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם לְפָנֵינוּ, the one who graciously provides food for the world. Not only for human life, but because of God's kindness and compassion, there is enough food grown on this planet to sustain all life. John Arnold, director of 2nd harvest of West Michigan, has told us that the problem of hunger in the world is not due to a lack of food. The problem is a human inability or unwillingness to move the food from the place where it exists in abundance to the

people who need it elsewhere. This blessing reminds us that we are partners with God. God provides the food, but we need to provide for the people.

The second blessing thanks God for the land, אֶל-לְהֵיךְ עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאֹכֵלֹת וְשׂוֹבְעֹת וּבִרְכֹת אֶת-ה' הַטְּבֵה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לָךְ. We eat, are satisfied, and thank God for the good land which was given to us in the covenant that God first made with our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. God gave them land, progeny, and sustenance in exchange for loyalty, a promise repeated through the generations. The land of Israel is more than just a piece of geography -- to us it is a reminder of our place in the universe. Under the reestablished modern Jewish state of Israel, the desert has once more bloomed and become fertile. Why didn't this happen under British, Turkish, or Arab rule? It is not that they were incompetent farmers. Rather, they just didn't care enough about the land. It wasn't really theirs. There is nothing magical about Jewish stewardship of the land, other than our strong religious sense that **this land** is a gift from God, and we, unlike Christians or Muslim, have a mitzvah to visit and settle the land of Israel. This blessing reminds us that maintaining our relationship with God and the land that God gave us is dependent on our remembering our promise to God.

The third blessing asks for the reestablishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, וּבְנֵה יְרוּשָׁלַיִם עִיר, הַקְדֵּשׁ בְּמַהְרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ, a vision of the messianic era. The classical Biblical prophecies teach us that the messianic era will bring a fundamental change to human nature -- we will live together in complete peace and harmony, we will transform instruments of war into implements of agriculture, we will all worship one God together. I understand this to mean that every human being will recognize God's sovereignty over the world -- that all people were created in the image of God, and to act unjustly towards another person is to commit injustice against God. This blessing teaches us that it is our duty to engage in tikkun olam, acts which repair the brokenness of the world and make it into a better place.

The fourth blessing thanks God for God's goodness to all, הַמְלִיךְ הַטּוֹב וְהַמְטִיב לְכָל, אֶל-לְרַחוּם וְחַנוּן, that we are judged favorably at this time of year. Imagine what would happen if the world operated under the principles of strict justice. Imagine that God denied us our dinner every time we cut somebody off in traffic. True, our roads would be a lot safer. But ultimately, I want people to behave with integrity because it is the right thing to do, not because they are afraid of punishment. We should behave towards others the same way God behaves towards us. This blessing teaches us to develop the habit of gratitude for the goodness we receive from others, and to לָכֶּה זְכוּת, give the benefit of the doubt and act with goodness and kindness towards others.

So you see, Birkat Hamazon is not just about food. It is about being thankful for having enough food on our table, and a reminder that we work in partnership with God providing food for the hungry. It is a reminder that our possession of the land of Israel depends on our loyalty to God and God's covenant with us. It asks that we work on bringing the messianic era by making the world a better place. And it suggests that we be conscious of and grateful for the blessings bestowed upon us daily. All this in less than 5 minutes for the short version that we usually recite after a simḥa meal in the social hall, or 10 minutes for the longer version. What I ask of you is simply to give Birkat Hamazon a chance. Copies of a guide to Birkat Hamazon and even a tape of the melody are available from me. Try singing Birkat Hamazon after your Shabbat or other meals at home. Stick around next time it is announced at a synagogue function, and use the time to reflect upon the words, and what they teach you about the privilege and responsibility of

being human. Thinking it about it this way, doesn't it seem like a worthwhile way to spend 5-10 minutes?

Birkat Hamazon is just one example of the richness of Jewish tradition that opens up when you dedicate yourself to overcoming the feelings of ignorance and discomfort when you are presented with an opportunity to perform a Jewish ritual. I want every person who is Jewish, who is considering becoming Jewish, or who have committed themselves to raising a Jewish family to feel welcomed, not intimidated by Jewish ritual and tradition.

We conclude Birkat Hamazon with one of the most well known and beautiful prayers in our liturgy, *עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן*. May the one who makes peace in the heavens, bring physical, spiritual, and emotional peace, security and comfort to us and to all Israel, and let us say, Amen.