

HUNGER AND FOOD: SOME JEWISH VIEWS

A Text Study Session by Rabbi David Nelson, Associate Director, ARZA

INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah said, "...If there is no flour, there is no Torah" (Pirkei Avot 3:17). This teaching has been used – and misused – many times, in many creative ways. But we often are so eager to put its wisdom to use that we skip over, or ignore its fundamental meaning: If people have no flour, that is, no bread, that is, no food, they cannot learn or function as human beings. All other needs can be put off a bit – "decent" housing, "comprehensive" medical care, "meaningful" education. But if an individual has no food, he or she will die, in just a few weeks. In its essence, hunger is that simple.

The purpose of this study guide is to explore a few important texts and ideas about hunger from Jewish tradition, as a way to enhance our understanding of the responsibility thrust upon us as Jews by Torah. By no means does it include all, or even most of the relevant texts. Our tradition has a great deal to say about the subject. But this will provide a starting-point for thinking and discussion about what we should do to alleviate hunger in the world.

We begin with one of the most familiar texts to engaged Jews, but one that, because of its familiarity, we rarely read carefully. The text is *Birkat Ha-mazon*, the blessing traditionally recited after every meal. Every child at summer camp knows the Hebrew words by rote and sings with gusto while banging on the tables. Now it's time to read what the words mean.

TEXT I. THE FIRST *BERAKHAH* OF *BIRKAT HA-MAZON*

Blessed are You, Eternal Ruler of the earth, who nourishes the whole earth in goodness, in grace, in love and in mercy. God gives bread to all flesh, for God's goodness is eternal. And through God's great goodness we have never lacked, nor will we ever lack food forever, through God's great name. For God nourishes and sustains all, brings benefit to all, and prepares food for all God's creatures, those whom God created. Blessed are You, Eternal, who nourishes all.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. According to the *berakhah*, God is the source of food, nourishment, and even bread. This claim is similar to that found in the *berakhah* recited before eating bread, which says that God "brings forth bread from the earth." How do you reconcile these claims with the fact that almost all of our food comes not directly from God (even if we identify God as Nature) but comes to us instead through a vast, complex, and multi-layered system of technology, economics, and human social interaction. (Try this: Make a list of all the processes, products, natural resources, and human beings needed to get a loaf of bread onto your dinner table. You'll be

amazed!) How is all this human activity related to the claim in the *berakhah*?

2. The *berakhah* asserts that “through God's great goodness we have never lacked, nor will we ever lack food forever....” Statistics seem to conflict with this claim. “In 2001, the number of Americans who were food insecure, or hungry or at risk of hunger, was 33.6 million, a rise over 2000, when 33.2 million Americans were food insecure. The number of individuals who are suffering from hunger rose from 8.5 million in 2000 to 9 million in 2001.” (source: USDA's Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States, 2001) Aside from the strange governmental policy reflected in this quotation to re-label “hunger” as “food insecurity,” how do you square the traditional claim of *Birkat Ha-mazon* with the current state of hunger in what is either the world's richest, or at least among the top few richest, countries?

The next text is also from *Birkat Ha-mazon*, appearing in the very last paragraph (a paragraph which is not usually included in Reform Movement practice). It also happens to be a quotation from Psalm 37:25.

TEXT II. *Birkat Ha-mazon* and Psalm 37:25.

Hebrew: *Na'ar hayiti, gam zakanti, v'lo ra-iti tzaddik ne'ezav v'zar'o m'vakesh lachem.*

English: I was young, and I have grown old, and I have not seen a righteous person abandoned, and his offspring asking for bread.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Many find this a troubling line. Some even find it offensive. There are many ways that different Jews deal with it in their recitation of *Birkat Ha-mazon*. They include:

- Skipping the verse altogether
- Reciting it in a whisper, instead of out loud
- Adding the word “*rak*,” meaning “only” before “*lachem* – bread” with the intention of communicating that the truly righteous and their offspring are on a spiritual level that teaches them to ask for more than just bread, i.e., for spiritual sustenance in addition to physical nutrition.
- Re-interpreting the punctuation of the text as follows: I was young, and I have grown old, and I have not seen: A righteous person abandoned, and his offspring asking for bread! This interpretation implies that until now, that is, until I grew “old” I never saw the obvious fact that there are righteous who are abandoned and whose offspring ask for bread. The verse thus becomes a wake-up call.

1. What do you think about this verse?
2. What do you think about the four approaches to it, listed above?
3. If you find the verse troubling, can you think of any other creative ways to deal with it?

TEXT III. From the Mishnah with commentary by Rabbi Pinhas Kehati

NOTE: The Mishnah was the first collection of oral legal traditions, edited in the land of Israel about the year 200 C.E. It then formed the basis for the studies in the academies of Babylonia and the land of Israel which were compiled in the Gemara. The Talmud is comprised of the Mishnah plus the Gemara. The following text is from the second tractate of the Mishnah, with commentary and explanation by the modern Israeli scholar Rabbi Pinhas Kehati.

Mishnah Pe'ah 8:7

One who has enough food for two meals does not take from the *tamhuy*. [One who has] enough food for fourteen meals does not take from the *kupah*. And the *kupah* is collected by two and distributed by three.

Commentary

During the Tannaitic period [i.e., the period of the Mishnah] there were two charitable institutions in every Jewish community: (1) the *kupahi*, the communal charitable fund, whose officials would collect weekly from each member of the community an individually fixed contribution.... From the fund charity was distributed to the poor of the city every Shabbat eve. Each poor person was given sufficient money for seven days' food. (2) The *tamhuy* was the charity dish, from which the wandering poor were fed daily. The *tamhuy* officials collected daily from the houses all kinds of food or money, in order to supply the food for the *tamhuy*.

... The *tamhuy*... is collected and distributed by three because the distribution is made immediately after the collection and if the collection were to be done by two, there would be the trouble of searching for a third person in order to distribute the *tamhuy* (Talmud, Bava Batra 8b; Rashi [Rashi was an 11th century French commentator]). Rambam [i.e., Moses Maimonides, 12th century Spain, Morocco, and Egypt] explains that since the quantities of the contributions to the *tamhuy* are not fixed but left to the donor's discretion, the collection for the *tamhuy* also involves matters of monetary jurisdiction [and therefore must be adjudicated, according to the rules of the Mishnah, by a court of three].

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are differences between the *kupah* and the *tamhuy*? What can we learn from the distinctions (a) between giving food and giving money, (b) between daily and weekly distributions, and (c) between fixed contributions (to the *kupah*) and non-fixed contributions (to the *tamhuy*)?
2. What do you think of the two different explanations given by Kehati for the number of people who collect and distribute the *tamhuy*, i.e., the opinion of Rashi that it was a practical matter of needing to distribute immediately and the opinion of Rambam that it was a matter of law?

3. When the Mishnah says, "enough food for two meals," it uses the Hebrew word "*se'udah*" for "meal." A *se'udah* is a substantial meal, a "square" meal, perhaps even a feast. Who determines when an individual is eligible to receive food from the *tamhuy*? Why do you suppose the Mishnah uses the word *se'udah* even though it has a connotation that is far beyond subsistence-level eating?
4. What practical implications can you glean from this ancient Jewish tradition about the *kupah* and the *tamhuy*? How (if at all) does the tradition affect your sense of personal *tzedakah* obligations and practices? How might it affect our communal *tzedakah* obligations and practices, say in our synagogues?