



Is Reciting Brachot Mindfully only for the Great Spiritual Masters?

How Can Busy Women Recite Blessings with Kavana and Practice Mindful Eating?

I find it challenging to focus on the words of prayer and blessings. As much as I know that we must envision standing before Hashem – the Creator of all – when we bless Him, my mind keeps wandering. For example, when thanking Him for our sustenance, it is especially difficult to concentrate on the words of the long *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals). After teaching for so many years about raising up sparks from the food through holy intentions, how do I find the time and the peace of mind to focus and practice what I preach? I'm fed up with feeling like a hypocrite, when sharing beautiful concepts about Conscious Eating the Torah way. It's time to make a change, but how? Keeping the halachot of reciting the correct blessings, over the right amount of food at the right time, and not forgetting the after-bracha, is a piece of pie compared to reciting brachot with deep *kavana* (intention) and eating consciously for the sake of serving Hashem. I'm keenly aware that G-d's word is the essential, vitalizing power concealed within our meals, and that blessing with proper intention purifies and elevates the Divine sparks contained within the food. As Rabbi Tzaddok of Lublin teaches, "When recognizing this truth by blessing Hashem for our food, we elevate our pleasure of eating, and transform our table to an altar and our food to a sacrifice" (*Et haOchel*). I am close to a person who admirably takes her time to elevate the sparks in the food. She waits till no-one is speaking before reciting her blessings and takes thrice as long as I to recite a bracha. She also eats extremely slowly, chewing every bite, spending substantial time without checking her email or doing anything else while eating. However, she doesn't have a million emails to check, blogs to write, a ½ acre garden to upkeep, fruits to pick and use wisely, a house to clean, meals to cook, classes to prepare, schedules to organize, students to council, clients to heal and the list goes on... So, how can busy women find a way to recite blessings with kavana and practice mindful eating?

When Do Mindful Blessings and Eating Take Priority?

It is all about priorities and finding the proper balance. We need to know the facts and learn the underlying depths of the laws in order to get the priorities right. *Parashat Eikev* offers the perfect opportunity to delve deeper into the concept of elevating sparks from food:

ספר דברים פרק ח פסוק ג)...כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצֵא פִּי הָשֵׁם יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם
 "Humanity does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of Hashem does humanity live" (*Devarim* 8:3).

If we want to live and keep healthy, we must realize that it is not only the food that nourishes us, but rather the divine sparks contained within it. G-d, in His great goodness, connected the spiritual with the physical through food. The holy sparks disseminated within it are "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of Hashem." Whereas, our body is nourished by the physical aspects or nutrients contained in the food, our soul is nourished by the spiritual power or sparks of holiness. The taste and pleasure we experience from food derive from the sparks of holiness contained within it. The main energy we receive from our food comes from these sparks, which attach themselves to the soul when eating in holiness (Rabbi Alexander Ziskind of

Horodna, *Yesod V'shoresh Ha'avoda*, sha'ar 7, Chapter 2). Which busy woman doesn't need more energy? Even from a pragmatic standpoint, it is worthwhile to expend energy in reciting blessings in order to get more energy in the long run. It's also about developing better habits – i.e., changing the pattern of absentmindedly mumbling a blessing on the run. I like to suggest starting with Shabbat. Baruch Hashem for this day of rest – away from our distracting devices – to strengthen our connection with the Creator. For starters, why not take this one day a week to really focus on every word of the brachot we recite?

Grace After Meals is a Mitzvah Directly from the Torah

In our home, thanks to my husband, every Shabbat meal, we eat the first bite of bread in silence slowly and mindfully. It is a great idea to extend this habit to the first bite of every meal during the week as well, for everything follows the beginning. If we weigh the gain against the extra minute it takes to chew one bite of food mindfully, three times a day, wouldn't it seem as time well spent? For various reasons, some people only eat bread on Shabbat, so this is the perfect day to put energy into the Grace After Meals, which we recite after eating a minimum of a *ke'zayit* (a piece of bread the volume of a matchbox). Whereas, the blessings before food are Rabbinical, we learn from *Parashat Eikev* that thanking Hashem for the food after having eaten a satisfying meal is a Torah obligation:

ספר דברים פרק ח פסוק י (וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ
 “When you have eaten and become satisfied, then you must bless Hashem your G*d for the good land which He has given you” (*Devarim* 8:10).

The Sages taught, from where is it derived that the Grace after Meals is from the Torah? As it is stated: “And you shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless...” “You shall bless” – that is the blessing of: “Who feeds all...” I only have a Torah source for blessings after eating. From where is it derived that one is obligated to recite blessings before eating? You said that it can be derived through an a fortiori inference: When we are satisfied, we must bless G-d; when he is hungry, all the more so (*Babylonian Talmud, Brachot* 48b).

Halachot for Reciting Grace After Meals

Rabbi Manis Freedman compares praising G-d to a husband telling his wife: “I love you!” Even when knowing that my husband loves me, after having stayed married to me for close to 40 years, I still like to hear him repeat, “I love you!” Reciting blessings enhances our loving relationship with Hashem. Just as in a husband and wife relationship, expressing words of love are not enough. The intention, timing, tone of voice and demeanor makes all the difference. I’ve been studying [Peninei Halacha by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed](#) and got up to the laws of blessings. When we recite Grace after Meals or any blessing, we must enunciate the words loud enough that we can hear them ourselves, otherwise we did not fulfill our obligation. It’s preferable to recite the blessings even louder, because that awakens the intention. Someone who doesn’t understand Hebrew, can recite the blessing in the language he or she understands (*Shulchan Aruch* 185:1-3; with *Mishna Berura*). When a person is not sure whether he recited Grace after Meals for his meal, he can only recite it if he still feels full, as then it’s a mitzvah from the Torah. If he isn’t full, he doesn’t recite it, since then it is only a Rabbinic obligation [as the Torah states, “When you have eaten and become satisfied...” Yet, the rabbis added the requirement to recite Grace after a *ke'zayit* of bread (*Shulchan Aruch* 184:4). According to most halachic authorities, even if a person only ate a kezayit of bread, but ate other foods with it, which made him full, he has a Torah obligation to recite Grace (Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, [Peninei Halakha, Sefer Brachot](#) Chapter 4).

Recreating Paradise Through Elevating the Sparks

In this world, the spiritual food is covered in a garment, yet the blessing reveals its inner essence. In contrast, the snake, who is nourished by physicality, tastes only the physical husk of the food. Therefore “everything he eats tastes like the dust of the ground” (*Bereishit* 3:14). By blessing Hashem for our food, we free ourselves from the curse of the snake, and enjoy the Divine life force within the food. Since eating from the Tree, good and evil became mixed. To ensure ‘Free Choice’ the sparks of holiness fell into the husks. In every food, there also exists such a mixture. Our main spiritual service is to gather these dispersed sparks and elevate them (Meor v’Shemesh on *Parashat Pinchas*). Reciting brachot mindfully is not only for the great spiritual masters. If this were true, what would happen to the holy sparks that fell into the food of regular people? Every Jew has the opportunity to extract holy sparks and push away waste and husks, through eating healthy foods with proper intention (*Yesod V’shoresh Ha’avoda* sha’ar 7, Chapter 1). Recognizing the Creator of our food through appropriate blessings, has great ramifications upon all levels of reality. By working on eating in holiness, recognizing Hashem as the source of our sustenance, and reciting the appropriate blessings with pure intention, we can participate in rectifying eating from the Tree of Knowledge and recreate our lost Paradise (Excerpt from one of Rebbetzin Chana Bracha’s upcoming books, *A Taste from the Wellsprings, Wholesome Spirited Cookbook*).