

Grace After Meals

The spiritual aid used in Judaism that I chose to explore was the tradition of saying a blessing after meals. Being raised in a Christian household, I am quite familiar with saying grace before meals, so the idea of saying a blessing after the meal was intriguing to me. When I researched this custom, it made much sense to thank God for providing the sustenance that we have just consumed. It also seemed correct to take the time after the meal to reflect upon it and the fact that it was provided for by God. Saying the grace prior to a meal seems to be anticipatory and less of a reflection.

The grace said after a meal is called the Birkat Ha-Mazon. This consists of four blessings. They are Birkat Hazan the blessing for food, Birkat Ha-Aretz the blessing of the Land, The Birkat Yerushalayim the blessing for Jerusalem and the Birkat Ha Tov v'Ha-Maytiv blessing for being good and doing good (www.jewfaq.org). I found an English version to recite at www.Chabad.org. It begins with the recitation of Psalm 137.

I also found information regarding the mindset of prayer called Kavanah. The word Kavanah means concentration or intent. So saying a prayer is more than simply reciting the words. It should be done with a clear mind and free from outside distractions so that the meaning of the blessing can be reflected upon and understood. Keeping this in mind, I made a conscious effort at preparing my mind before saying the blessing every time.

The first day was a little difficult and quite awkward. I almost forgot to say the blessing at least twice. I found myself having to take a moment before the meals to acknowledge the fact that I was about to partake in a meal and to remember the blessing afterward. This actually turned out to be a good practice because I found that I was already reflecting upon what I was doing as I sat down to eat the meal. The other part that I initially found awkward is that I take my lunch at work, usually in my office. Because we don't have a lunch period anybody can appear at my door anytime, so I needed to find a way to be able to say the blessing without any distractions. To do this I decided to eat my lunch in a conference room with the doors closed. That way I was able to have the correct mindset while saying the blessing.

Because I was reciting or reading something with which I was not familiar, I did make sure not to simply read the words. I made the effort to really think about what I was saying and asking. If I found myself mindlessly reading, I would stop, consciously clear my mind and begin again. I would also sometimes take a moment to reflect upon what I had just said at times during the blessing.

By the end of the second day, saying the blessing after my meals was becoming more fluent and natural. I was not forgetting, and in fact my meal time did not seem complete until I said the blessing. I was surprised at how quickly it became part of my routine. It also changed what mealtimes were. I thought about how usually, when it was time for a meal, I would sit down and eat, it would be over and I would get up and move on to the next task I had or whatever came next. I feel like this actually caused me to focus more on the meal as an event and on food as more than just something I am putting in my mouth because I am hungry. Although the focus started out as the blessing after the meal, it caused me to reflect more deeply on the meal itself and the act of eating a meal.

I found that this practice, for me, seems to be a better way to thank God for the food I have eaten and that He has provided. When I consider saying grace before the meal as I have done, it seems like the blessing is said and then I move on to the meal no longer really being aware of God's role in providing the food I am eating. When I am saying the blessing after the meal, I can actually reflect on the specific foods I just ate and God's role in providing for me.

A related effect was a sense of serenity, after the prayer, several times throughout the day. The act of clearing my mind and then focusing on the prayer has always had a stress reducing and calming effect on me. Since I was doing this three times a day, I felt that calmness and serenity much more. This really was a very welcome side effect that I had not considered when I was anticipating these three days. I believe that it was also being truly thankful several times throughout the day that seemed to prevent me from getting so bogged down in the stress of the day or any other negativity that threatened my psychological well-being.

I believe that I will actually continue this custom of saying grace after a meal. Although I will probably not continue to recite the specific blessings that are used in Judaism, I will give thanks for the food that has been provided for me and my family and reflect upon the meal that I have just eaten and how I believe it was provided for me.