

The Gluten Free Meal: A Concurrence in Concept, A Dissent in Detail  
A response to Rabbi Pamela Barmash's "Birkat Hamazon and Zimmun"

Rabbi Reuven Hammer  
Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner  
Cheshvan 5777 / November 2016  
OH 184:4.2016b

Having noted that for those who are eating gluten free, using alternative non-gluten breads, current halakha seems to propose that they never trigger Birkat Hamazon, and Rabbi Pamela Barmash asks, "Does it make sense for the liturgy meant for a main meal to be omitted so often?"

Indeed, it does not.

She proposes, therefore, to rule with the minority position of Rabbi Akiva (Mishnah Berakhot 6:8). She defines the main meal, variously as 1) providing satiety, 2) providing a major part of a person's nutritional needs, and, since her ruling implicates whether Hamotzi should be recited before the meal when the result of the meal has not yet been ascertained, she considers that the intention to fulfill the above is sufficient.

This conclusion runs against several lines of traditional halakhah in this area. As Rabbi Barmash concedes, the law has not been like Rabbi Akiva. More to the point, the halakhah endeavored to reduce areas of personal consideration in favor of rules that could be applied across the board. Indeed, in the matter of determining if a meal is a "main meal" (k'viat seudah), the normative halakhah is careful to define it in terms of the amount eaten, and determines that amount by what most people would consider sufficient, and specifically not what the eater would consider sufficient (OH 168:6 "דבטלה דבטלה" – "his view is overruled by the common view").

Thus her solution does not appear optimal, and a tighter ruling that required Birkat Hamazon for other breads that function like breads of the five grains, but not for breadless meals, seems to be required. Are there grounds for such a ruling?

The sages appeared to tie netilat yadain, Hamotzi and Birkat Hamazon into a seamless bundle. They stated clearly that the blessing Hamotzi is tied exclusively to the five major grains, as is Borei Minei Mezonot when those grains are cooked or baked as cake or crackers (Tur OH 208, assumed but not clearly stated in Shulchan Arukh there). In Rambam's formulation (Hilkhhot Berakhot 3:11), "Wherever one says Hamotzi in the beginning, one concludes with Birkat Hamazon... Wherever one says Borei Minei Mezonot in the beginning, one concludes with the one blessing in lieu of three (Al Hamichyah)."

Having given that generalization, however, he immediately hedges – "Save rice." For the blessing before eating rice is Borei Minei Mezonot, whereas after it is Borei Nefashot (Rambam, Hilkhhot Berakhot 3:10, OH 208:7, Berakhot 37a). In so ruling, the gemara breaks the simple association of Borei Minei Mezonot with the five grains, and Beit Yosef explains that (Tur OH 208, s.v. haochel) "[rice] is called mazon because it satisfies and provides nutrition – נקרא מזון כי הוא משביעו וסועד הלב". In fact, although both Rambam and Caro (OH 208:8) limit this exception to rice alone, many rishonim would apply it to millet and other grains as well. Note carefully the comment by the Chafetz Chayim (Yisrael Meir Kagan, Beur Halakhah to Mishnah Berurah OH 298:8: "In truth, many rishonim believe that the blessing over millet is Borei Minei Mezonot like rice... This is the view of Rosh and Raavad... [n.b. a lengthy list]... and the

unchallenged statement of the author (of Shulchan Arukh) [n.b. that this blessing applies beyond the five major grains only to rice] is solely the opinion of Rif, Rambam and Rabbenu Yehudah. One needs wonder (צריך עיון) why the author opted to rule against the Rosh and all the other rishonim who hold by his stance. (Perhaps they were not known to him, for he did not cite them in Beit Yosef<sup>1</sup>). Therefore... one who wishes to say Borei Minei Mezonot is not prohibited from doing so, IMHO ( כך נראה לעניותי ) (דעתי). Know also that several rishonim believe... that this is also the case with regard to other grains which we know nourish and sustain like rice and millet... That being said, one who says Shehakol on millet and all of these [n.b. as per Caro's ruling] **certainly has upon what to rely** (my emphasis)<sup>2</sup>. In rice, and possibly other grains, we find a foodstuff wherein the opening blessing does not adequately determine the closing blessing.

A similar case is found as well in OH 208:9, where a breadstuff that has as its opening blessing Hamotzi nevertheless does not then require Birkat Hamazon. We stand alerted to the possibility that a different standard might apply to Birkat Hamazon than the standard requiring Hamotzi; that the requirement of Hamotzi is tied to eating of the five grains, even a small amount, whereas the standard for Birkat Hamazon has to do with eating a "main meal". And from the case of pat haba-ah b'kisnin (cake and crackers), which Rabbi Barmash highlights, we learn further that the distinction between sitting for a meal and snacking, has halakhic grounding as well.

Our ruling – our solution to the problem that Rabbi Barmash rightly posed that those eating gluten-free bread, whether as a matter of medical necessity or choice, should not be forever free of Birkat Hamazon – should be that the eating of a bread, whatever its source, that is specifically intended to be a grain-bread substitute, should be recognized as constituting k'viat seudah – a main meal – and require Birkat Hamazon, **whereas breadless meals do not**. But unlike pat haba-ah b'kisnin which has a major grain at its heart, the blessing for such a gluten-free bread should not revert to Hamotzi, which is inappropriate for such a product, but remain Borei Minei Mezonot for bread made of other grains (rice, millet, amaranth, teff) and either Shehakol or Borei Pri Haadamah/Etz on breads made of other plants (potatoes, almonds), depending on your stance with regard to flour and subsequent baked goods<sup>3</sup>. Such gluten free bread would require n'tilat yadaim before it<sup>4</sup>, since it is the start of k'viat seudah, and Birkat Hamazon at the end of the meal, but would retain its own blessing.

---

<sup>1</sup> This speculation is not necessary, for Caro made clear in his introduction to Beit Yosef that he would rule, in the first case, according to the majority opinion of two of the three major authorities, Rif, Rosh and Rambam, and here two of these rule clearly against the third. My suspicion, however, is that Chafetz Chayim was aware of this, and his hesitation is substantive.

<sup>2</sup> It appears that Chafetz Chayim is here subtly ruling against Caro.

<sup>3</sup> There is sustained argument concerning whether grinding denatures a product, whereupon a flour is no longer appropriate for the berakhah Borei Pri..., and a subsequent baked good, if it was not of the five major grains, and thus could not qualify for the new blessing Borei Minei Mezonot, should require the blessing Shehakol (mashing, chopping, even perhaps a blender do not do so, as Rabbi Barmash notes in her citation of a responsum by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in footnote 21). Alternatively, others would apply the blessing Borei Pri..., applying the argument of "denaturing" only to pressing or liquefaction (but not to olive oil, whose blessing is Borei Pri Haetz, since this was considered the essential usage of olives).

<sup>4</sup> N'tilat yadayim has its origins in purity rituals, and as such applied to fruits as well as bread when they were terumah. The rabbis applied n'tilat yadaim to their meals even in the absence of terumah, and always began a meal with bread. Thus did n'tilat yadaim come to be associated with Hamotzi, whereas it is better associated with k'viat seudah.