

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHY WE NEED TO SAY BLESSINGS AND A BLESSING FOR CHOCOLATE

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Saying blessings is so much a part of Jewish life that we may not question the need for them. There are two kinds of basic kinds of blessings. The first are said before ritual acts that are part of the commandments (e.g., lighting Shabbat candles). The second are said to acknowledge God as the source of creation.

Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without a benediction is like making use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof (Psalms 24:1)." (B. Berachot 35a)

According to the verse from Psalms, everything belongs to God. To simply take it without permission would therefore be stealing from God (a most unwise course of action). Therefore, we say the blessing to transfer acknowledge a transfer of ownership from God to us.

The benedictions take our desires, a potentially destructive force to our souls, and turn them into prayer. This is the genius of the rabbinic system: it does not try to eradicate desires, an impossible task in any case, or even denigrate them. Rather, it seeks to utilize the energy our desires engender and redirect it toward a high purpose. Blessings convert desires, which, unrestrained, could hurt us and those about us, into holy, safe energy.

Tosefta (an early work of rabbinic literature redacted only 20 years after the Mishnah was in 220 C.E.) and the Yerushalmi (the Talmud of the Land of Israel) give us not only the blessing over sweets. They also support creativity and spontaneity in prayer:

If they brought before him types of desserts he recites over them the benediction, "Creator of types of sweets"....Rabbi Meir says, Even if one saw a loaf [of bread] and said, "Praised be He who created this loaf, how nice it is," that serves as its benediction." (T. Berachot 4:4)

If one saw figs and said, "Praised be He who created these figs, how nice they are" that serves as their benediction. (Y. Berachot 4:4)

God did not have to make a world in which chocolate exists. But God did so (halleluyah!). It is good to remember, as often as possible, what we tend to take for granted.

Discussion Questions:

1. When you next sit down to eat, before you dig in, think of all the people involved in getting that food to your table: all the way from the farmer (perhaps in another country), to the persons who packed it, the ones who made the packaging, the people who shipped it and those who made the technology and found the energy source for the shipping, to those who received it and then sold it until you bought it. All of a sudden, you realize (hopefully) how interconnected we all are. Please tell us of your experiences with this spiritual exercise.
2. We are often so caught up in the idea of saying blessings in precisely the right way that we forget that the sages

give us license to say it our own way. What's needed is true gratitude. In my own practice, sometimes I say the blessing over one of God's wonders because I know it but sometimes I just say, "Wow!" or "God gets a 10 for that one!" How do you express your gratitude to God? Are there any special words or phrases you use?