

## HUNGER & FOOD IN OUR TRADITION

*Some of the following lessons were taken from “Kemah: Kehillot/Communities Mobilizing Against Hunger,” a project of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia (originally written by Joanne Glosser, Beth Huppin and Bill Kunin of CAJE) and co-sponsored by a grant from MAZON.*

### **JEWISH PRAYER/T’FILLAH**

#### Birkhot Hanehenin/Blessing of Enjoyment

Teach about the *berakhot* recited before eating. Tradition teaches that “one who eats without a *berakhah* is as one who steals food” (*Brackot 35a*). This teaches us that food does not belong to us, but rather to the Holy One. Yet we are partners with G-d in the making of food, as the *berakhah* over bread teaches us: *Hamotzi lechem min ha’aretz* – G-d brings forth the wheat, and human effort makes it bread. We must complete the process not only for ourselves, but also for all those in need.

#### Birkat HaMazon/Grace After Meals

The first few lines of the blessing read:

Blessed are You Lord  
Our G-d, Ruler of the cosmos,  
Who consistently feeds all out of goodness  
With grace, with lovingkindness, with mercy.  
G-d gives bread to all living things  
G-d is eternally merciful.  
And because of G-d’s great goodness  
Never are we lacking or will we lack  
Food forever or longer.  
For the sake of G-d’s great name  
Because G-d feeds and provides  
sustenance for all,  
And is good to all, and prepares food  
For the creatures which were created –  
Blessed are You, Lord  
Who feeds all.

ברוך אתה י  
אלכנו מלך העולם  
הזן את העולם כלו בטובו  
בחן וחסד ורחמים  
הוא נותן לחם לכול בשר  
כי לעולם חסדו  
ובטובו הגדול  
תמיד לא חסר לנו ואל יחסר לנו  
מזון לעולם ועד  
בעבור שמו הגדול  
כי הוא זן ומפרנס לכול  
ומטיב מזון ומכין מזון  
לכול בריותיו אשר ברא  
ברוך אתה י  
הזן את הכול

**Questions:**

- 1) Why is there a need for a blessing **after** the meal? Haven't we already thanked G-d by having a blessing before the meal?
- 2) How is this prayer an appropriate response?
- 3) Does this prayer raise questions or problems? Explain.
- 4) If G-d feeds all people and all living creatures, why is there hunger?

**Leader's Guide:**

1) When we are hungry it is easy to be thankful for food. It is when we have been satisfied that it is easy to take food for granted. It is when we have finished eating that it is even more difficult to remember to be grateful.

2) Jews traditionally say *Birkat HaMazon* after every meal. This prayer says that G-d feeds all people. It is logical to expect this statement right after G-d has directly and specifically fed the Jewish people.

According to the *Midrash*, Moses wrote this prayer in the wilderness the first time that manna fell. Imagine that you are in the middle of the wilderness after having fled from Egypt with only *matzo* to eat. One morning you wake up and find the ground covered with manna. How would you feel? Would you be moved to prayer?

Students should also discuss the relationship between the Jews' experience in Egypt and Jews' sensitivity to human need. Does our history of wandering in the desert impact our desire to help our fellow man?

4) Hunger has many causes. But we must remember that, in terms of G-d's role, we must place the responsibility to end world hunger on people, on ourselves. Through G-d's will, the world produces enough food for all – It is simply a matter of distributing it properly (which is the purview of human beings). By saying *Birkat HaMazon* after we eat, we not only thank G-d for the food with which we have been provided, but we also confront our responsibility to make food available to all.

## HOLIDAYS/CHAGIM

### Shabbat

The Shabbat practice of serving two loaves of *challah* at each meal recalls the manna that the Holy One provided the Israelites in the desert. It also recalls the double portion they received on Fridays so as not to have to gather food on Shabbat.

When we wandered in the desert, G-d provided manna for us. We strive to be like G-d by providing food for others.

**Relevant Texts:**

It was one of the miracles that manna tasted different to everyone. Whatever people liked, they found in the manna. *Yalkut Shimoni, I:258*

Only those who eat manna [i.e., those who have enough to eat] can truly study Torah. *Mechilta Beshallah 17*

Manna was one of the ten wonders that G-d created on the eve of the first Shabbat, at twilight. *Avot 5:8*

**Questions:**

- 1) Is the fact that the Jews liked manna important? Why did G-d make it so people would enjoy it?
- 2) In terms of fighting hunger, does it matter whether the people to whom we donate food like the food we give? Should the food be not only enjoyable, but healthy, too?
- 3) Was it hard for the Israelites to trust that G-d would send manna each morning?

**Activity Suggestions:**

- 1) Make *challah* together. Try different flavor variations (with raisins, extra sweet, savory, etc.).
- 2) Deliver *challot* to poor and ill Jews.

Rosh HaShanah

**Relevant Text:**

And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation, both men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month...Then he said to them: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared..." And all the people went their way to eat and to drink and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that we declared to them.

*Nehemiah 8:2-12*

**Questions:**

- 1) What day is this talking about?
- 2) What does it mean to "eat the fat and drink the sweet?"

3) What do “portions” refer to?

4) During what other holiday do we send “portions of food” along with “gifts to the poor” (*matanot l’evyonim*)?

**Answers:**

1) Rosh HaShanah

2) “Eat the fat and drink the sweet” encourages us to celebrate. This is the source for using honey on Rosh HaShanah.

3) “Portions” refer to portions of food

4) Purim is the other holiday during which we send portions of food and gifts to the poor.

**Activity Suggestions:**

1) Use cans of food as “tickets” for High Holy Day services.

2) Make resolutions for responding to the hunger problem. Plan class projects for food drives, fundraising for MAZON, etc.

Yom Kippur

**Relevant Text:**

ותשובה ותפילה מעבירין את רע הגזרה

“...but *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* can annul the severity of the decree.” *Unetaneh tokef*

**Questions:**

1) What do we do on Yom Kippur?

2) What kind of *tzedakah* are we supposed to perform?

**Answers:**

1) On Yom Kippur, we make *teshuvah* (repentance), we pray and we fast.

2) But, as we read in *Isaiah 58:1-11*, prayer and fasting are not enough. We must also perform righteous and charitable acts (i.e., *tzedkakah*). Isaiah urges us to fight

wickedness, give bread to the hungry, welcome the poor into our homes and clothe the naked, among other things.

According to the Talmud, (*brachot 6b*), “The merit of a fast day lies in the charity dispensed.”

### **Activity Suggestion:**

1) Ask parents to figure out the total amount of money they would have spent to feed their families if they were not fasting on Yom Kippur. They might consider donating those funds to an organization like MAZON. In addition, food that might ordinarily have been eaten might instead be donated to a local food pantry.

### Sukkot

#### **Activity Suggestions:**

1) On Sukkot, we are thankful for the bounty of the fruit of the harvest. Our gratitude compels us to share with the less fortunate among us. Suggest that your class raise money for MAZON or bring non-perishable food for donating.

2) Because of its tie-in with the harvest, Sukkot is an appropriate time to teach *brachot* for various kinds of food. It also provides a perfect opportunity to explore the meaning behind *Birkat HaMazon*.

3) On Sukkot, we honor the tradition of *ushpizin* (inviting biblical “guests” into the *sukkah* each day). As a way of doing so, you might encourage your class to invite flesh-and-blood guests into their *sukkah*. Consider inviting someone without a family to share the holiday, or with someone who might not otherwise receive an invitation (i.e., a less fortunate member of the community). Visit your local synagogue office or Jewish Family Service affiliate for names.

### Simchat Torah

#### **Relevant Text:**

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר, אם אין תורה, אין דרך ארץ. אם אין דרך ארץ, אין תורה. אם אין חכמה, אין יראה. אם אין יראה, אין חכמה. אם אין חכמה, אין דעת. אם אין דעת, אין בינה. אם אין בינה, אין קמח. אם אין קמח, אין תורה. אם אין תורה, אין קמח.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: If there is no Torah, there is no social order. If there is no social order, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no awe. If there is no awe, there is no wisdom. If there is no understanding, there is no knowledge. If there is

no knowledge, there is no understanding. If there is no sustenance, there is no Torah. If there is no Torah, there is no sustenance.

*Mishnah Avot 3:17*

### **Questions:**

- 1) How are Torah, social order, awe, wisdom, knowledge, understanding and sustenance linked? Give examples of each.
- 2) What is *kemach*
- 3) What do Torah and flour have to do with each other?
- 4) How does this text imply that people can contribute to Torah in the world? What can you do, specifically?

### **Answers:**

- 2) Figuratively, *kemach* means sustenance; literally, it means flour (the basic ingredient of bread, the “stuff of life”).
- 3) In the most literal sense, without food life is not possible. More figuratively speaking, Torah is our “bread”; it sustains us and guides the way we live our lives. We need Torah and bread: Each of them nourishes our bodies and our souls.

## Chanukah

### **Activity Suggestions:**

- 1) Coming at the end of the secular calendar year (and bringing with it fall and then winter), *Chanukah* is an appropriate time to decide where class or school funds collected for *tzedakah* might be distributed. Consider sending the money to MAZON or other food-related charities to help in the fight against hunger.
- 2) Encourage families to make one night of *Chanukah* “*Tzedakah* Night.” On that night, each family member sends the money that would have gone towards buying a gift instead to a charitable organization s/he would like to support.

Families might also consider volunteering their time at a food bank, soup kitchen or shelter.

## Purim

### **Relevant Texts:**

ויכתוב מרדכי את הדברים האלה וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים אשר בכול מדינות המלך  
אחשורוש הקרובים והרחוקים. לקיים עליהם להיות עושים את יום ארבעה עשר לחודש אדר  
ואת יום חמישה עשר בו בכל שנה ושנה כימים אשר נחו בהם היהודים מאויביהם והחודש  
אשר נהפך להם מיגון לשימחה ומאבל ליום טוב לעשות אותם ימי מישחה ושימחה ומישלוח  
מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאביונים.

And Mordechai wrote these words and sent scrolls to all the Jews in all of King Achashverosh's provinces, both near and far. To establish for themselves the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Adar and the 15<sup>th</sup> day as well, for every year, as days that the Jews were delivered from their enemies. On these days, the month was turned for them from anguish to joy, from mourning to a day of gladness; and these days should be days of feasting and joy, and sending portions each to his friend, and gifts to the poor.

*Esther 9:20-22*

*The following two texts from Rabbi Moses ben Maimon's (Maimonides) Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah describe Mordechai's words being put into practice.*

One is duty bound on the day of Purim to distribute (gifts) to the poor.

One must not give to less than two poor people, giving to each one a present or money or a cooked dish or some other kind of food, as it is said "gifts to the poor," i.e. (at least) two gifts to two poor persons. Purim money may not be diverted for any other charity.

It is better to increase gifts to the poor than to make for oneself a big meal or to send more portions to friends, for there is no greater or nobler joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers. He who makes the heart of the unfortunate to rejoice resembles the Divine Presence, as it is said, "to revive the heart of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

*Isaiah 57:15*

### **Activity Suggestion:**

1) Use boxes of beans, macaroni and cheese, rice pilaf or the like as groggers to drown out the name of Haman. After the *megillah* reading, they can be donated.

### Pesach

### **Activity Suggestions:**

1) Participate in a *maot hittim* (Pesach food, literally "wheat money") fundraising event.

2) Study the *Haggadah's* passages, such as *halakhma anya*, that relate to feeding the hungry. Stress the idea of empathy that recurs in the *Haggadah* (e.g., "Once we were slaves in the land of Egypt").

3) Participate in MAZON's Passover appeal by symbolically inviting the less fortunate to share in your *seder* (i.e., letting "all who are hungry to come and eat"). Consider donating to MAZON (or other food-related charity) the amount of money it would cost to invite one extra person to your *seder* table.

## Shavuot

### **Questions:**

- 1) Why do Jews eat dairy on *Shavuot*?
- 2) What is the purpose of *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws)?
- 3) What do we gain from the reading of *Megillat Rut*?

### **Answers:**

- 1) According to tradition, the Israelites ate dairy on *Shavuot* because they had just received the Torah, which taught them the laws of *kashrut*.
- 2) The Torah teaches us that *kashrut* works to help make us holy – ritually holy (*bein adam lamakom*) and ethically holy (*bein adam lachavero*). The two forms of holiness are inseparable: Eating kosher food is not enough to make us holy if we are ethically deficient (if, for example, we do not commit ourselves to good works, such as providing food for our less fortunate neighbors).
- 3) The reading of *Megillat Rut* gives us the opportunity to teach about the law of *peah* and *leket*, the traditions of leaving the corners of the fields and forgotten gleanings for the poor.

What kinds of parallels might be found in our modern, non-agricultural society?

*More information is available from Auerbach CAJe or on the website of the Mitzvah Project at [www.jewishphilly.org](http://www.jewishphilly.org).*