

# Shortcuts

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

*“And you shall eat and be satisfied and thank the Lord.”* This phrase in the Torah that we read this week is the basis of the law that we should thank God for our food. You might argue that it makes sense for thanking God after we have eaten but even then, the rabbis declared that although the Torah says we should “eat and be satisfied” we make blessings after we eat food or drink, even if we only consume a basic amount. And the rabbis add that it is logical if we thank God after we have eaten, that we should thank God before as well. Almost all blessings are made before we actually do the act whatever it is. Only a few come after as well (like before and after reading from the Torah). And this is another one of the few, which shows how important eating is. *“Human beings live not only on bread but on all the things that come from God”* (Deuteronomy 8.3).

You might ask how could the rabbis innovate such laws of specific blessings, using the words “God has commanded us” and declare they are implicit in the Torah? But that is the point of the oral law. When you or say something, the way it is understood depends on how the person hearing you understands it. If I tell my son “Don’t stay out late” what do I mean by “late”? Is it midnight or four in the morning? It is only if we both know exactly what hour we have in mind that we can avoid misunderstanding.

The rabbis relied on how people understood the command at the time it was given. But they also understood that a command means much more than the actual words. To give another example, if I tell my daughter to “make sure she behaves” when she goes out” I don’t have to specify “Don’t take drugs or get drunk.” She should understand this herself that these are implied in my statement. And that’s how the rabbis work. We ask, “How did they understand it at the time.” And we ask, “What is implicit in what the Torah says.”

The purpose of Torah is to get us to think before we act and to appreciate our good fortune and the things we have, even if it is just enough to live on. Most of us go into a restaurant and food goes in one end and out the other without our once thinking how lucky we are. That’s why before we eat we should spare a thought and thank God for having something to eat. And when we have finished we should be grateful for the pleasure we have had.

But the rabbis were realists. They also knew that sometimes we are under pressure and cannot say all that should be said. “Better a little with good concentration (intent) than a lot without” they said. That is why if you do not have the time or cannot concentrate to say the full long blessing, the Talmud says it can be enough if you simply say” Thank God for this food,” or in Aramaic “Brih Rahman, Marey De Hai Pitta” literally “Bless the Merciful One, master of this bread.”