I ❤ ISRAEL: Bread and Jerusalem

One of the deepest spiritual experiences I have in Israel has to do ironically with food. More specifically, eating a meal with bread, something I usually don't do during the week. This extraordinary spiritual experience comes at a price. In my case, it means gaining about 6 or 7 extra lbs in less than three weeks. But I believe it's worth it…

Before eating, we Jews recite a blessing, or in Hebrew, "berakha". This first blessing expresses recognition to God *before* enjoying the benefits of what He created. If we don't recite this blessing before eating, we will consume what He created without asking for His permission. Then, *after* eating, we recite another blessing, this time to "give thanks". The ultimate blessing of gratitude is the Birkat HaMazon, the only blessing, and prayer explicitly registered in the Tora, recited after eating a meal with bread.

Reciting the Birkat HaMazon in Israel holds great significance. Why?

Birkat HaMazon consists of three biblical blessings (plus one rabbinic). The first one refers to how the Creator takes care of and sustains His creations and provides us with food. Then comes the central blessing, which specifically focuses on thanking God "for the land of Israel and the food it produces" (□□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□). Israel is described as a "generous" fertile land, the land that we Jews long for, and a land of extraordinary abundance (□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□).

The third blessing focuses on Jerusalem, and the endless pleas and prayers to see His Holy City rebuilt. It concludes with a millennial (and for centuries, impossible) longing, "May God rebuild Jerusalem soon in our days," that we may witness it.

Of course, one can go to a restaurant in Jerusalem, like Cafe Rimón or Noya Restaurant, and enjoy literally “the best food in the world”, then take a prayer book, recite the ritual blessing, and be done with it. But in doing only that, one misses the incredible “meaning” of eating in abundance in the land of Israel.

The difference between perceiving events in Israel as natural or supernatural lies in the mental ability to contextualize or the mental laziness of “normalizing”. If one does not contextualize, everything is taken for granted, the present is experienced as something normal, and the realization of living a miracle is missed. The rabbis denounced this spiritual myopia—which unfortunately does not affect only a few Jews—with the following words: “en ba’al hanes makir benisó,” “whoever lives a miracle resists seeing it as such.”

Contextualizing is what Tefila (Jewish prayer) aims to inspire in us. In the case of the Birkat HaMazon, it is this prayer that awakens in my heart the idea that what I have just eaten is a gift from the Creator. The ultimate intention of the Birkat HaMazon is to de-normalize the privilege of having food on the table. The Tora warns us about the danger of forgetting who provides the bread we have just eaten. Birkat HaMazon is the antidote against the danger of “forgetting God”.

There is something more.

When I am in Israel, the Birkat HaMazon transports me to an additional dimension. I think of the extraordinary (and perhaps undeserved) privilege I have as a Jew living in this generation. I think, for example, of the poverty that the land of Israel endured for so many centuries, how this land never yielded its fruits; it was a land of swamps, arid, dry, without water, and yellow from neglect. With thousands of miles of desolation and solitude, as Mark Twain described it in 1890. But exactly as the prophet Ezekiel prophesied 2,500 years ago, “once the children of this land returned to it,”

Israel gradually became a paradise, a true Garden of Eden that bears fruit, and an extraordinary super-abundance which is evident in Israeli supermarkets, restaurants, and the eccentric flavors, colors, and aromas in the Mahane Yehuda Market on Friday afternoons.

“Contextualizing” is understanding that the reality of present-day Israel was unimaginable and infinitely better than what even the boldest of prophets could have foreseen. As our sages said, “The human eye is incapable of envisioning what only God can accomplish” (□□□□□ ‘□ ,□□□□ □□ □□□).

I also think of the millions of Yehudim who recited this same text of Birkat HaMazon over the past 2,000 years. What did they think when mentioning the abundance of this land? How did they imagine it? I think of the unbearable poverty of Jerusalem described by Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro in his letters or the abuse and humiliation that the few Jews who lived here at that time had to endure. What did they think when they prayed—and dreamed—of a rebuilt Jerusalem? Could they have envisioned the Mamilla neighborhood, the tram that traverses the city, or the train that connects Jerusalem to the airport?

Albert Einstein said, “There are two ways to live your life: one is as though nothing is a miracle, the other is as though everything is a miracle.”

The first way is the result of “normalizing” our blessings.

The second is the essence of Jewish spirituality and the secret to falling in love with Israel.