

Hakarat Hatov and Thanksgiving

LESSON PLAN

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LESSON AT A GLANCE

On the American holiday of Thanksgiving, families gather to enjoy a festive meal and partake in the bounty of the earth. In this lesson, students will study *Birkat Hamazon* (the Blessing after Meals), to explore how its theme of *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good that God provides, resonates on Thanksgiving. Students will then create a project that brings the value of *hakarat hatov* to their families' Thanksgiving celebrations.

OBJECTIVES

- ▶ Students will study and discuss an excerpt from *Birkat Hamazon* and consider how the blessing after meals is an expression of appreciation for the gifts that God has bestowed on the Jewish People.
- ▶ Students will analyze additional Jewish texts to explore the concept of *hakarat hatov*, showing appreciation and gratitude to God.
- ▶ Students will explain how giving thanks to others can also be seen as a way to thank God.
- ▶ Students will craft thank-you décor to add a Jewish element to their Thanksgiving holiday tables.

ACTIVITY: THANKS, THANKSGIVING, AND TODAH

1. Begin class by displaying several traditional Thanksgiving objects on your desk: a pumpkin, ornamental corn, a picture of a turkey, a bag of cranberries, etc. You may also want to come to class wearing a pilgrim's hat and/or shoes. When students arrive, welcome them to your Thanksgiving celebration and ask the following questions.

Why do Americans celebrate Thanksgiving?

Why do you think we are celebrating Thanksgiving today?

Why do you think we are celebrating Thanksgiving in a Judaic class?

TEACHING TIP

If time and resources allow, this lesson provides an excellent opportunity to study *Birkat Hamazon* in context. In addition to using the props mentioned above, invite students to break bread with you at the feast. Spend a minute or two to review with them the method for ritual hand washing and remind them to recite the *berakhah* (blessing) of ...*Al Netilat Yadayim* after washing and *Hamotzi* before partaking of bread. These *berakhot* are available at babaganewz.com/teachers. Supplement the bread with other Thanksgiving treats such as dried cranberries, popcorn, etc. When the class finishes the feast (and the lesson), you can sing *Birkat Hamazon* together.

2. As a class, study and discuss the following Jewish texts (also available to print at babaganewz.com/teachers).

DEVARIM 8:10

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God your God for the good land which God has given you.

דברים ח:י
וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ.

To what mitzvah does this verse refer? [saying *Birkat Hamazon*]

This is the only *berakhah* that is mentioned in the Torah. All other *berakhot* (before meals, etc.) were instituted by the Sages. Why do you suppose *Birkat Hamazon* was the only blessing commanded in the Torah?

Why do you think Judaism traditionally mandates that we recite *berakhot* before we eat and follow our meals with *Birkat Hamazon*?

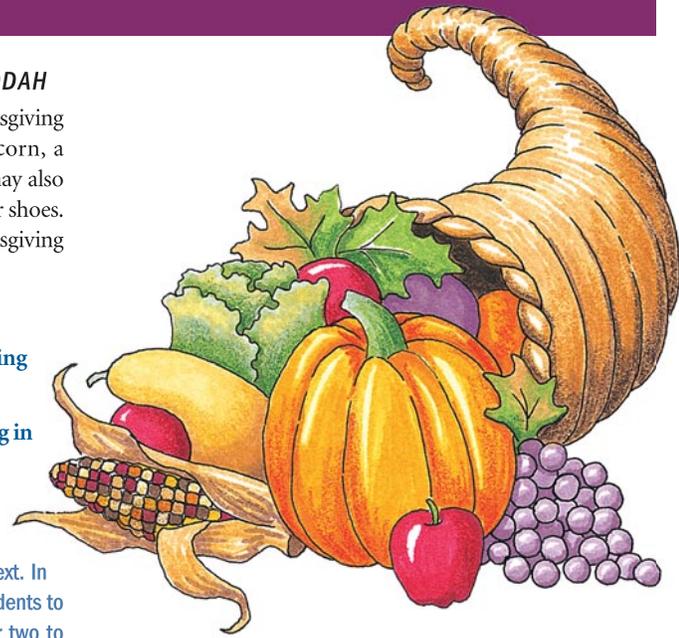
What values does the recitation of *Birkat Hamazon* reflect?

Now study the first *berakhah* of *Birkat Hamazon* (see babaganewz.com/teachers).

What do you notice about the words in this text?

Which words are repeated most often? [all, world, verbs for sustain/nourish]

Why do you think those words are the most repeated? How do they help establish the theme of *Birkat Hamazon*?



Now study the second *berakhah* of *Birkat Hamazon* (see babaganewz.com/teachers).

For what do we thank God, according to this excerpt from *Birkat Hamazon*?

Is this a personal thank you or a collective thank you? How do you know?

Are there other things for which you think we, the Jewish People, should thank God that are not listed in this *berakhah*?

If you were to compose a personal thank-you *berakhah* to include in *Birkat Hamazon*, what would it say?

TALMUD MEGILLAH 18A

The Temple service and expressing thanks are one.

תלמוד מגילה דף יח עמוד א
עבודה והודאה חדא מילתא היא.

RASHI ON TALMUD MEGILLAH 18A

Expressing thanks is also a form of service of God.

רש"י מגילה דף יח עמוד א
אף הודאה עבודה של מקום הוא.

What is the relationship between serving God and giving thanks?

Why do you think that the Talmud equates service in the Temple and giving thanks?

How does Rashi's commentary expand upon the Talmud text?

How does Rashi's commentary help you understand the Talmud text?

When do we thank God during *tefillah* (prayer)? Provide an example.

How do we serve God when we express gratitude to people who have done kindnesses for us?

VOCABULARY

הַכִּרַת הַטוֹב **recognizing the good (literal), showing appreciation**

תּוֹדָה רַבָּה **thank you very much**

בְּרַכַת הַמְזוֹן **blessing after meals**

סְעֻדָּה **festive meal**

יוֹם הַהוֹדְיָה **Thanksgiving**

How might celebrating American Thanksgiving be a way to express gratitude to God?

What can you do at your Thanksgiving dinner that ensures that you thank God at the celebration?

PSALMS 92: 2, 5

It is a good thing to give thanks to God, and to sing praises to Your exalted name...for You, God, have made me glad through Your work; I will sing joyously of the works of Your hands.

תְּהִלִּים צַב־ב, ה
טוֹב לְהוֹדוֹת לַה' וְלִגְמוֹר לְשִׁמְךָ עָלֵינוּ...
כִּי שִׂמַּחְתָּנִי ה' בְּפַעֲלֶךָ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יְדֶיךָ אֲרַנֶּן.

Why do you think the psalm uses singing as a way to express gratitude to God? Why is singing a good way to express thanks?

Can you think of any songs—Hebrew or English—whose lyrics express thanks to God?

What is the reason for singing thanks to God according to this text?

What is the relationship between feeling happy and feeling appreciative?

Is it possible to feel gratitude even if you are having a difficult time? Explain.

How does saying *Birkat Hamazon* express the feelings in this psalm?

3. After studying the texts, ask:

How can we incorporate these texts and the ideas they teach us into our families' Thanksgiving celebration?

How can we ensure to include all guests at the table, even those who may not be familiar with *Birkat Hamazon* or Jewish texts?

Explain that in addition to the ideas the class just generated, students will have the opportunity to create a project to present at their Thanksgiving celebrations. You may choose one project from the following ideas to present; you may opt to set up a few of the ideas with instructions and have students choose one project; or if time permits, you may set up several stations and have students complete more than one project.

► BIRKAT HAMAZON MATS

Provide art materials, such as construction paper, scissors, glue, glitter, and markers to students. Instruct students to choose one meaningful line from the *Birkat Hamazon* texts that they just studied and write the text in Hebrew and/or English on a large piece of paper. Decorate the page with images that reflect the meaning of the text and how it expresses gratitude to God. Laminate the completed papers that can then be used as a placemat on the Thanksgiving table.

► THANKFUL THOUGHTS

Have students brainstorm a list of at least ten thoughts or expressions such as: my family, my home, what I'm most thankful for, my favorite things, etc. Be sure they think about small and large gifts that God has given them in their lives. Students should then cut out the list with one thought per strip of paper. Decorate a bag or envelope to store the thoughts. At the Thanksgiving table, each family member or guest can select a thought and expound on it, explaining how that thought relates to them personally and for what they are most thankful.

► A WORLD OF THANKS

Have students research online how to say "thank you" in different languages. Students can transfer the terms they learn onto pieces of paper that can be strung together as a decoration to hang in the doorway to welcome guests on Thanksgiving. Then instruct students to brainstorm a few questions that they can pose at the table (and maybe a parent or host would allow them to place the questions under people's seats or plates) to get a conversation going about how Judaism says thanks to God in different ways.

► SINGING OUR THANKS

Challenge musically inclined students to compose a new melody for *Birkat Hamazon*, write a personal *kavannah* that fits the tune of the first paragraph of *Birkat Hamazon*, or to arrange a rendition of *Birkat Hamazon* that is novel or unique. As an alternative, teach students a different song that also expresses thanks to God that they can teach at their Thanksgiving feast. One suggestion for a song is "*Modeh Ani*," a version of which is available on the iPod at babaganewz.com.

