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POWER AND BEAUTY: THE MISHNA'S CELEBRATION OF CREATION IN BERAKHOT CHAPTER 6

Mishna is the foundational text of the Torah she-Be'al Peh. Both concise and comprehensive, it presents virtually all major topics of traditional halakha, sometimes adding aggadic material which has an ethical or spiritual component. The unadorned terse style of the Mishna would seem to render it ideal as a text for *keviat ittim la-Torah* (establishing time for regular Torah study). A typical Mishna unit can be read in under a minute, and another several minutes a day should suffice to read a standard commentary, to clarify difficult words and phrases, and to present the basic contents of the Mishna before the reader.

However, the very features of the Mishna that render it attractive for study on a regular basis also present serious obstacles for most would-be Mishna students. The Mishna does not normally present reasons for its rulings or discussion of disputed topics. Hence, study of the Mishna generally is dry and matter-of-fact, devoid of the intellectual challenges of Talmud study or the spiritual stimulation of Tanakh or Jewish thought. Moreover, it is difficult to study the Mishna as an integrated text, as opposed to a loosely-arranged collection of individual statements. Rarely does the Mishna present a topic in logical order or provide important background information. More often than not, the Mishna will open the discussion of a topic with a seemingly marginal detail and it frequently departs from the logical flow of the discussion, often inserting associatively arranged sub-units disconnected from the topic at hand.

Attempts to understand the apparently chaotic editing of the Mishna have classically focused on the mnemotechnical benefits of the occasional forays into associative units, such as the *ein bein* section of *Megillah* chapter 1 and the *tikkun olam* section of *Gittin* chapters 4-5. In academic talmudic scholarship, many seemingly infelicitous arrangements are

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attributed to speculative reconstructions of the Mishna's textual pre-history, suggesting that R. Yehuda ha-Nasi possessed limited maneuverability in splicing together authoritatively transmitted oral texts from a wide variety of earlier sources. Explanations of this nature, when supported by firm evidence, may provide understanding of how this text came to be, but they do little to render the final text of the Mishna intelligible, meaningful, challenging, or inspiring.

I believe that much of the arrangement of the Mishna can be understood in a far more satisfactory fashion by employing the kinds of literary tools that have yielded dramatically impressive results in the study of Tanakh. Close reading of Mishnaic units on all levels – from the individual pericope, through “collections” (*kevatsim*), chapters, and tractates – reveals a surprising number of verbal repetitions, wordplays, and literary structures such as *inclusio* (envelope structures), *anaphora* (parallels between unit openings), and *epiphora* (parallels between unit endings).¹ These phenomena suggest that Mishna is carefully arranged, but that considerations of language and style play a far greater role than has previously been suspected. This presents the student of Mishna with both an opportunity and a challenge – to understand what meanings might underlie those Mishnaic arrangements that frequently prefer the formal to the topical and the associative to the logical.

I will seek to illustrate how these questions may be approached by focusing on what is arguably the most fundamental unit of Mishnaic redaction – the chapter. In this article we will focus on the sixth chapter of *Berakhot*, and my working assumption is that the luminous observation of *maran* ha-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein regarding Tanakh study may be applied as well to Mishna:

The structure of a *perek* and response induced by it are part of what it presumably is intended to communicate to us. The symbolic import of a phrase or a *pasuk* – what we call its “meaning” – is a function of the sum total of associations elicited in its specific context; and that context is a matter of form as well as substance, of form insinuated in substance.²

¹ Hundreds of examples of these phenomena throughout the six orders of the Mishna have been collected in my dissertation, *The Literary Method of Redaction in Mishnah based on Tractate Rosh Hashanah*, (Doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University, 2001), 323-365.

² Aharon Lichtenstein, “Criticism and *Kitvei ha-Kodesh*,” in *Rav Shalom Banayikh*, eds. Hayyim Angel and Yitchak Blau (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing, 2012), 23.

The prominence of literary phenomena in the arrangement of Mishna in general, and of Mishna *Berakhot* chapter 6 in particular, further suggests that the “meaning” which the Mishna redactor sought to convey, while rooted in the realm of practical and conceptual-analytic halakhic thinking, is not limited to this domain. The echoes and associations evoked by literary repetitions have important ramifications in the aesthetic domain as well, making relevant a further point noted by R. Lichtenstein regarding study of Tanakh:

Readiness to open our sensibilities to the power and beauty of *kitvei ha-kodesh* is the first step in enriching our literary experience of them. In order to maximize our response to them, we should, secondly, learn to read them critically. The elements which impact upon us are not always patently evident, and need to be ferreted out by dint of active critical exertion. Passive reading may leave significant factors unnoticed; or, short of that, the interaction and combination of qualities which give a passage its specific contours, may remain unperceived. We discover these elements through close reading and careful scrutiny. Critical analysis, grounded in conscious awareness, thus enriches our response to *kitvei ha-kodesh*.³

As I shall attempt to demonstrate, opening our sensibilities to the power and beauty of Mishna *Berakhot* chapter 6 through careful scrutiny and analysis of its literary interplays will serve to deepen our appreciation of the main message of the chapter – the power and beauty of God’s Creation.

I. THE LITERARY SHAPE OF THE CHAPTER

Berakhot chapter 6 opens a unit that deals with the blessings recited before and after eating (chapters 6-8) and, like many other sections of Mishna,⁴ this section opens *in medias res*, with a question that presupposes preliminary knowledge: “How do we bless over produce?” The Tosefta opens its parallel presentation of blessings over food with the introduction notably missing from the Mishna:

A person should not taste anything without a blessing, as it says, “To the Eternal is the earth and its fullness (Psalms 24:1).” Whoever benefits

³ Ibid.

⁴ Like our section, the two other major sections of tractate *Berakhot*, dealing with *keri’at shema* (chapters 1-3) and prayer (chapters 4-5), also open *in medias res*.

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from this world without a blessing has desecrated [sacred objects] until it is permitted [for use] by all the commandments.⁵

The Tosefta's introduction supplies both the necessary halakhic information – the requirement of blessing before eating – and a halakhic-spiritual rationale for this imperative. Why did the Mishna, here as elsewhere, decide to forego such an introduction? While the Gemara occasionally does wonder why the Mishna has launched a topic in midstream,⁶ students of Mishna rarely ask such questions, whether due to resigned acceptance that Mishnaic redaction is often inscrutable or to viewing investigation of redactional methods as possessing marginal value. It is indeed difficult to speculate why the Mishna so often omits introductory material, but in many cases close attention to what the Mishna does present affords important insights into what R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, redactor of the Mishna, sought to highlight. Regarding our chapter, it bears noting that the introduction provided by the Tosefta and the opening sentence of the Mishna address different aspects of the benedictions over food. The Tosefta provides a rationale for blessing not only over food, but over any benefit derived from the world. The Mishna focuses immediately on blessings over *perot* (produce), and it bears noting that the blessings prescribed by the Mishna relate to their natural source, by means of which God has provided the products of the earth, rather than to the human benefit per se: “Creator of the fruit of the tree/vine/earth” or “Who has taken bread out of the earth.” The more general blessing of *she-haKol*, “that all came to be by His word,” is relegated by the Mishna to secondary status, both as a catch-all blessing for someone who failed to recite the proper blessing (mishna 2) and as a default blessing for those foods which are not *perot*, i.e. do not grow in the earth.⁷

⁵ Tosefta *Berakhot* 4:1. See Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshuta*, *ad loc.*, regarding the apparent inner contradiction in the second statement, as to whether the onus of desecration is removed by a blessing or by “all the commandments.” The Tosefta continues with a statement regarding the need to use one's body for service of God, connecting the topic of blessings over food with the broader topic of sanctifying the physical.

⁶ In several places the gemara asks *tanna heikha kai* (where is the *tanna* “standing” – *Berakhot* 2a and parallels) or *mai tanna de-ketanni* (what was said [earlier] that he [now] says? – *Pesahim* 69b and parallels).

⁷ By way of contrast, the Tosefta adds several formulae to the list of blessings which focus on the character or use of the food item, rather than their source: “creator of kinds of *kissanin*” (Tosefta 4:3), “creator of kinds of seeds” (Tosefta 4:3), “creator of kinds of *mezonor*” (Tosefta 4:7). The Tosefta also presents the opinion of R. Meir (opposed by R. Yose), who approves blessings that forego entirely the inclusion of the food in a general category, focusing directly on the specific food to be consumed: “Who has created this bread/these figs.”

Indeed, it would appear that the Mishna and the Tosefta focus on different aspects of *birkot ha-nehenin* (blessings of those who enjoy). The introductory remarks of the Tosefta present blessings over food as an acknowledgement of divine sovereignty, necessary in order to attain divine permission to enjoy His bounty.⁸ In its focus upon a diversified set of blessings, differentiated by the manifold ways in which man gains access to the produce of the earth, the Mishna immediately orients us towards understanding blessings as expressing something beyond gratitude. The variegated blessings recited over food present each act of eating as reflecting the different modes of access provided by divine creation for human enjoyment of the natural world. Each blessing elevates man's consciousness from the immediate pleasure he is about to enjoy to the multifaceted gift by God to man of His earth.⁹

⁸ This aspect of *birkot ha-nehenin* is generally referred to by latter-day commentators as a *mattir* (that which permits) – see, for example, the Rav's *Reshimot Shiurim – Berakhot* (compiled by Zvi Reichman), New York, 5772, 400; Eliyahu Meir Lifshitz, *Torat Imekha*, II, Maaleh Adumim, 5770, 7. R. Elyakim Krumbein, “*Ha-Hitrahashut ha-Ruhanit bi-Berakhot*” *Alon Shvut* 160, 5762, 129, notes cogently that viewing blessings as a *mattir* is intimately bound up with viewing them as expressing gratitude (cf. first suggestion by R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Olat Re'iyah* [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5723], 345). Of course there are expressions of gratitude – *birkot ha-mazon* as a prime example – that have nothing to do with the notion of a *mattir*. A *mattir* conjoins expressing gratitude to the notion that “everything in the world must on some level be sacred... A *bracha* is a license to use the sacred for mundane purposes.” (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav – Thinking Aloud* [transcribed: R. David Holzer], Israel 2009, 307). Several sources further view blessings as a way of sanctifying the personality or the act of eating (see sources in R. Krumbein's article and compare with Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek* (translated by Naomi Goldblum), (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), 112-114, as well as other places in his writings). The various blessings over food and different conceptions of their precise contours may be seen as grounded in different modes of expressing gratitude.

⁹ Compare Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek*, 21-22, and Jonah Fraenkel, “*Ha-Mattarat ha-Hinnukhiyot be-Hora'at ha-Talmud*” [in Hebrew], *Mayim mi-Dalyav* (5751), 97. Similarly David Kraemer observes that through the framework of benedictions the eater “will now recognize that food is not merely food, but that different foods have distinct places in the ‘divine’ scheme. Eating will no more be a quotidian act but an act that notices the Creator and His design” (*Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages*, (London-NY: Routledge, 2007), 75). In halakhic parlance, the idea presented here may be termed viewing blessings as forms of *shevah* (praise) – see, for example, the Rav's *Reshimot Shiurim*, 400 and Rav Asher Weiss, *Minhat Asher – Deuteronomy*, 103-105. As explained by R. Meir Lichtenstein in the first installment of his *Virtual Beit Midrash* lectures on *birkot ha-nehenin* (<http://www.etzion.org.il/he/%D7%A4%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%97%D7%94-6>), the “praise” aspect of blessings over food offers man a mode of drawing near to God, fulfilling the talmudic dictum that “who would want to be a *basid* – let him fulfill the matters of blessings” (*Bava Kamma* 30a).

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Having noted this general point about the way our chapter presents the aim and character of *birkot ha-nehenin*, let us now turn to a more detailed analysis of the chapter's arrangement.

Most of chapter 6 deals with the blessings recited before eating; only mishna 8 deals with blessings recited after eating – “*shalosh berakhot*” (“the three blessings” = “*birkat ha-mazon*,” Grace after Meals) and “*berakha abat*” (one blessing = “*al ha-miyyab*”).¹⁰ There is, however, a clear distinction between the subject of mishnayot 1-4 (half I) and the subject of mishnayot 5-8 (half II). Mishnayot 1-4 deal with blessings recited over individual foods, whereas mishnayot 5-8 deal with the blessings that a person recites in the framework of a meal.¹¹ The diction of our chapter clearly reflects the difference between the two halves. In the second half of the chapter, there are seven instances of the keyword “*mazon*,” which in these mishnayot denotes the main course of a meal. Thus, wine and *parperet* serve as appetizers “before the *mazon*” (5-6), and again as dessert “after the *mazon*.” Rabbi Akiva in mishna 8 requires reciting “three blessings” even over cooked vegetables on condition that this dish constitutes his *mazon*, namely, serves for him as the main course of a meal. By contrast, the word “*mazon*” is absent entirely in the first half of the chapter, but a different keyword (4 instances), *min* or “kind,” is very much in evidence: “who creates diverse kinds (*minei*) of herbs” (m. 1), “over anything to which a kind (*min*) of curse attaches” (m. 3), “if one has several kinds (*minim*) [of food] before him” (m. 4), “something of the seven kinds (*min*)” (m. 4). Three of the four instances of the word *min* are in statements made by R. Yehuda, a point we will pursue further below. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that the word *min* focuses on the uniqueness of each individual food, while the word *mazon* indicates the meal in which various “kinds” of food are eaten together.

Attention to these keywords helps us understand the subtle difference between two apparently similar mishnayot. Both m. 4 and m. 5 present cases in which two different foods are eaten, and the blessing recited over one food exempts one from reciting a blessing over the other. However,

¹⁰ This blessing is termed in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 44a, Yerusahalmi 6:1, 10b) *berakha abat me-ein shalosh*. In the Mishna here and in Tosefta 4:6 and 4:15, the best textual witnesses use the term *berakha abat* (one blessing).

¹¹ The difference between the two halves of the chapter may reflect the historical development of blessings over food. Biblical and early post-biblical sources refer to blessings before and after eating only within the context of meals (see sources collected in Moshe Benovitz, “Blessings before the Meal in Second Temple Period and Tannaitic Literature” [in Hebrew], *Meghillot* VIII-IX (2010), 81-96, whereas blessings before eating individual foods first appear in the Mishna and tannaitic parallels.

in m. 4 the keyword *min* reflects the central issue of this mishna, namely the qualities of the food over which the person should recite the blessing, whereas the word *mazon* in m. 5 highlights a different issue: the recital of a blessing at one stage of the meal (“before the *mazon*”) obviating the need to repeat the blessing over the same food at a later stage of the meal (“after the *mazon*”). The two mishnayot approach their common issue from two different angles: m. 4 examines the features that characterize “kinds” of food and their significance, while m. 5 defines the interrelationship among acts of eating at different stages of the framework called a “meal.”

Situated at the juncture between sections I and II of the chapter, these two mishnayot serve, due to their similarities, to link together the two sections. While continuing to focus, like the rest of section I, on the different blessings required for different foods, m. 4 adumbrates section II’s discussion regarding the use of a single blessing for several foods eaten together. Similarly, m. 5’s discussion of a single blessing serving for different parts of a meal retains the proviso of section I that each blessing pertains to a specific kind of food. Together these two mishnayot, each of which nudges the topic of its section in the direction of the other section, serve as a segue between the two halves of the chapter.

In addition to the literary bridge provided by these two transitional mishnayot, several other connections link the two halves of the chapter:

- M. 1 notes two foods of particular importance that require special blessings: wine, for which “who creates the fruit of the vine” replaces “who creates the fruit of the tree,” and bread (“*pat*”), for which “who brings forth bread from the earth” replaces “who creates the fruit of the earth.” These two foods feature prominently in the second half of the chapter as central components of the meal: wine is drunk during all stages of the meal – before (5), after (5), and during (6) the *mazon*; bread is the object of the main benediction of the meal, exempting one from blessing over the *parperet* (5).¹² Similarly, m. 7 implies that apart from *mali’ah*¹³ all other foods eaten during the meal are

¹² The *parperet* mentioned here and in *Pesahim* 10:3 (*parperet ha-pat*) might be grain-based *mezonot* (Rabbenu Hananel, Rashba, Meiri), or diverse kinds of foods eaten for appetizers or for dessert (Rashi, Rambam). Modern scholars incline toward the explanation of Rashi and the Rambam. See *Tosefta ki-Fshutah*, I, p.65, s.v. *minei kisinin*; S. Safrai and Z. Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal*, 23.

¹³ The term *mali’ah* can denote various kinds of salted food. It usually refers to salted fish (m. *Nedarim* 6:3, and see m. *Beitsa* 4:5), but it can also denote salted meat, salted olives, or the like (see, for example, *Shabbat* 128a; *Ta’anit* 30a; *Berakhot* 38b). *Mali’ah* was generally eaten as a *parperet*, but our mishna refers to the practice of eating *mali’ah* as the main course of a meal. According to the Yerushalmi (6:7, 10d),

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regarded as “subsidiary” to the bread, and therefore the blessing over the bread exempts the other foods. The two special foods of m. 1 and their special blessings thus constitute the principal elements of the meal in mm. 5-6. Bread’s central role in the meal is further reflected in the Sages’ position in m. 8 that the “three blessings” (*birkat ha-mazon*) are not recited over the “seven kinds,” indicating that *birkat ha-mazon* is recited only over a meal based on bread.¹⁴

- One mishna in each half, m. 4 and m. 8, records a view that attaches special importance to the seven species of fruit with which Erets Yisrael is blessed: “R. Yehuda says: If among them is one of the seven kinds, he blesses over that” (m. 4); “If one has eaten grapes, figs or pomegranates, he recites three blessings after them – the words of Rabban Gamliel” (m. 8). This parallel is particularly striking, inasmuch as these two mishnayot are placed at the conclusion of their respective sections, and in both cases their topic diverges from the main topic of the section, as noted above.
- The chapter is framed by an envelope structure – both m. 1 and m. 8 address the blessings over vegetables: *yerek* (vegetable) in m. 1 and *shelek* (boiled vegetable) in m. 8.
- The *she-haKol* blessing, which appears twice in the first half (m. 2, m. 3), appears again in m. 8 as one of the possible blessings to be recited over water.

Before attempting to understand the significance of the connections between the two halves of the chapter, let us examine the structure and themes of each half separately.

II. FIRST HALF (M. 1-M. 4) – KEYWORD: “MIN” (“KIND”)

The keyword, *min/im*, (kind/s), appears in three of the four mishnayot in the first half of the chapter. The instances of the term are further connected by the central role they play in three disagreements between R. Yehuda and the Sages. The term appears three times in statements of R. Yehuda, and only once in positions of the Sages. The Mishna’s use of this keyword suggests a connection among the three positions attributed

this practice stems from a period when people ate meals of poverty rather than of wealth. According to the Bavli, we are dealing with a person who ate a large quantity of sweet fruit (*perot Ginnosar*) and wants to counterbalance their excessive sweetness.

¹⁴ This understanding – adopted by the gemara *Berakhot* 44a – is further supported by the language of R. Yehuda’s presentation of R. Gamliel’s view (m. 8) in Tosefta 4:15, “... or grain which was not made into bread....”

to R. Yehuda,¹⁵ and indeed in all three controversies the specific qualities of the *min* seem to play for him a more significant role regarding benedictions than they do for the Sages. To understand the reasoning underlying this point we need to review some of the central conceptions of the framework of blessings established by the Mishna.

We have already noted that the Mishna's opening question, "What blessings are said **over fruit**?" highlights the purpose of the blessing to thank God, not only for the foods themselves, but also for more general and longer-lasting gifts – the gift of the land and the gift of the trees. The differentiation in our Mishna between fruits of the earth and fruits of the tree is rooted in a distinction found in many realms of halakha, such as the following:

- the obligation of *pe'ah*¹⁶
- the definition of a field with respect to the giving of *pe'ah*¹⁷
- the definition of a field with respect to plowing shortly before the onset of the sabbatical year¹⁸
- *kil'ayim*¹⁹
- the time of tithes²⁰

Fruits are different from produce of the earth in many respects. The farmer cares for them in different ways, a person strolling through a field experiences them in different manners,²¹ and they fill different roles in man's diet. Beyond this differentiation between fruits of the earth and fruits of the tree, there are foods singled out for special blessings (wine and bread), and the disputes between R. Yehuda and the Sages address

¹⁵ Of course, from a halakhic-conceptual point of view there is no necessary interdependence among these three controversies, and one may easily find ways of accepting R. Yehuda's position in one, while adopting the approach of the Sages in another. The argument here is textual, based on the juxtaposition of the three controversies, along with the keyword which links R. Yehuda's three positions.

¹⁶ "Whatever is a food and is stored... is liable to *pe'ah*; and grain and pulse are included in this rule; and among trees..." (*Pe'ah* 1:4-5).

¹⁷ "All these cause a division in the case of sown fields, but in the case of trees only a fence forms a division" (*Pe'ah* 2:3).

¹⁸ "Until when may one plow in a tree-planted field on the eve of the sabbatical year" (*Shevi'it* 1:1); "Until when may one plow in a corn-field on the eve of the sabbatical year" (*ibid.* 2:1).

¹⁹ "One may not bring [together] a tree with a tree, nor greens with greens" (*Kil'ayim* 1:7).

²⁰ "From when are fruits obligates in tithes...and in [the case of] vegetables..." (*Ma'asrot* 1:2, 4).

²¹ "Every tree that is pleasant to the sight" (Gen. 2:9).

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whether other *minim* should also be accorded special halakhic treatment. What characteristics of these *minim* accords them special status according to R. Yehuda, but not according the Sages?

Let us examine the three controversies, opening with m. 4, which affords the clearest view of the point of contention between R. Yehuda and the Tanna Kamma.

- M. 4 – According to the Tanna Kamma, priority regarding blessings depends on personal preferences: “The more favored kind is given priority” (*Berakhot* 41a).²² R. Yehuda disagrees and says that halakha assigns objective priority to the seven kinds, because these are foods for which Erets Yisrael is especially praised. Inasmuch as *birkot ha-nehenin* involve thanking God for the gift of the earth, and not only for the immediate pleasure of eating, preference should be accorded to those fruits which represent the gift of the Land of Israel. The Tanna Kamma, however, argues that *birkot ha-nehenin* relate to the “earth” as part of creation, and – unlike Grace after meals – have no specific relationship to the Land of Israel.
- M. 3 – Here, too, the Tanna Kamma focuses on the immediate experience of the eater. Though he failed to reap the principal blessing from God’s gift – the wine turned into vinegar, the locusts destroyed the crop, or the fruit fell from the tree before it was fully ripened – his resourcefulness enabled him to derive some benefit from the curse, and it behooves him to thank God for any benefit that he derives. Consistent with his position in m. 4, here too R. Yehuda maintains that blessing God requires viewing the occasion from a broader perspective. Having the blessings of the land snatched from one’s grasp shortly before it became accessible is a “curse,” a sign of divine displeasure. Although man has contrived a way to derive benefit from this curse, this does not transform it into a blessing, and R. Yehuda perceives a dissonance in blessing God for things that He has cursed.²³ R. Yehuda sees in the benedictions over food a semiotic code that transcends immediate benefit, relating to broader ramifications of the Divine blessing to which man is responding. In

²² Rambam, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 8:13 and Rosh, par. 25, debate whether “favored kind (*haviv*)” means that the person generally prefers this food or merely that he prefers it at this moment. For our purposes, the question as to whether superior significance is conferred by momentary desire or by entrenched preference is less important than the shared assumption that significance is measured by subjective preference rather than by objective considerations.

²³ A similar definition of curse, serving a similar idea, is found in R. Joshua’s argument in m. *Ta’anit* 1:1 that it is inappropriate to praise God for providing rain at a time (the festival of Sukkot) when rain would actually be a “sign of curse.”

this semiotic code, the “kinds” of food in mm. 3 and 4 are diametric opposites: the “seven kinds” of m. 4 represent the Divine gift of Erets Yisrael, whereas the “kind connected to a curse” represent the nullification of the land’s blessing.

- M. 1 – First let us understand the controversy in the mishna in its own terms. The terms “fruit of the earth” and “green” (“*yerek*”) require some clarification.²⁴ In the context of our mishna, the fact that bread (*pat*) is counted among “the fruit of the earth” indicates that we are dealing with dietary staples, such as grains and legumes, whereas the meaning of the term *yeraqot* in the mishna apparently accords with its meaning in modern Hebrew, namely, “vegetables.” “The fruit of the tree” and “the fruit of the earth” comprise man’s main foods, and according to the Tanna Kamma there is no need to institute a special blessing for vegetables. R. Yehuda’s adding of a third blessing, “who creates diverse kinds of herbs,” is based on the wording of the verses in *Genesis* 1:11-12:

Genesis 1:12

And the earth brought forth
vegetation (*deshe*)
Plants (*esev*)²⁶ yielding seed
after its kind
And tree yielding fruit,
whose seed was in itself,
after its kind

R. Yehuda M. 1

Who creates diverse kinds of
herbs (*deshe*)²⁵
The fruit of the earth

Who creates the fruit of the tree

²⁴ The term “*yerek*” appears in several other sources, but there is no uniformity regarding the way it is used, as is demonstrated by Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshutah*, I, 59, and see sources cited there. An additional complication which we will not investigate here is the Tosefta’s different version of the dispute between R. Yehuda and the Tanna Kamma (Tosefta 4:4).

²⁵ Ephraim Chazan, “*Leshon Mikra ve-Leshon Hakhamim be-Matbe’a Berakha*” [in Hebrew], in *Sefer Yovel le-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*, ed. M. Bar-Asher (Jerusalem, 5752), 693, proves the scriptural background of the wording of the blessing, “*bore minei desha'im*,” from the fact that the word *deshe* appears nowhere else in the Mishna, and is very rare in rabbinic literature in general.

²⁶ The scriptural term, “*esev*,” parallels the mishna’s “*perot ha-arets*” (“fruit of the earth”), for here and in other places it denotes man’s primary foods: “Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed... and every tree... for food” (Gen. 1:29), “And you shall eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of your face shall you eat bread” (Gen. 3:18-19), “And the hail smote every herb of the field, and broke every tree of the field” (Ex. 9:26). As noted by Hanokh Albeck, *Mehkarim be-Baraita ve-Tosefta ve-Yabasan la-Talmud* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1969), 150, the relationship between the verse in Genesis and *birkot ha-nehenin* is even more striking in the position of Tanna Kamma in Tosefta (4:4: “Over *zera'im* he says: ‘who creates diverse kinds of *zera'im*’; and over *desha'im*, he says: ‘who creates diverse kinds of *desha'im*.’”

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The correspondence between the three blessings of R. Yehuda and the three types of vegetation enumerated in Genesis chapter 1 suggests that here, too, R. Yehuda focuses not on human enjoyment alone, but on broader, more objective aspects of the Divine blessing. The diverse “kinds” over which blessings are recited reflect the Divine actions which have made the bounty of the earth possible: just as the “kinds” of m. 4 highlight the gift of Erets Yisrael, the “kinds” of m. 1 focus on the creation of the world. Of course the creation of the world, embedded in the formulation of all the blessings over food, plays a central role in the Tanna Kamma’s blessings as well, but we may distinguish between the ways in which R. Yehuda and the Tanna Kamma conceive the role of creation in the system of blessings. For R. Yehuda, the consumer employs the “kinds” of Genesis 1 in categorizing the foods over which he is blessing, thus re-experiencing the event of creation as a prelude to his enjoyment of the food.²⁷ For the Tanna Kamma, creation appears in the blessings not as an occasion to be re-experienced, but as the source of the Divine bounty whose current enjoyment is the main focus of the blessing. Accordingly, his categories of blessings, while corresponding partially to the “kinds” of creation, are determined primarily by the role that different foods play in human culture – much as, in mm. 3 and 4, the Tanna Kamma argues that the “kind” of the food is secondary to the way in which man enjoys it.

We may readily understand R. Yehuda’s conception in which blessings focus heavily on Divine activities underlying the bounty we enjoy. However, at first blush, the conception of Tanna Kamma seems puzzling. Why should the blessings we address to God be so heavily influenced by the ways in which human beings decide to enjoy the gifts He has showered upon us? An important key to understanding this point may be found in the two special blessings recorded in m. 1: “who creates the fruit of the vine” and “who brings forth bread from the earth.” These two special blessings were instituted because more than other foods, wine and bread symbolize human creativity and culture.²⁸ Bread and wine, both of which are produced by particularly long and complicated processes, are the two main items in a civilized person’s diet. The establishment of

²⁷ Compare the suggestion of R. Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Mo’adot* (Jerusalem: Horev Press, 5746), 27-28, that, in order for man to understand the meaning of human eating, he needs to re-experience the divine blessing pronounced upon man at the time of his creation; however, he does not differentiate between the views of R. Yehuda and the Sages.

²⁸ Regarding the production of bread, see the list of prohibited labors in Mishna *Shabbat* 7:2, and compare Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:2.

special blessings precisely for those foods that represent human creativity may be understood in light of the wording of the blessing for bread. The formula, “who issues forth bread from the earth,” is taken from the verse in Psalms: “He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for the service of man: that he may bring forth bread out of the earth; and wine that makes glad the heart of man; oil to brighten his face; and bread which sustains the heart of man” (104:14-15). However, whereas the blessing attributes the bringing forth of the bread to God, the verse says that God causes the plants (= grain) to grow, but it is the work of man that “brings forth bread out of the earth”! The surprising use of the verse’s language within this blessing leads to an interesting conclusion – we bless God not only for the material gifts which He bestows upon us, but also for the ability He gave us to transform His gifts into products of even higher quality. A paradoxical phenomenon emerges: the greater the extent to which the product reflects intensive human productivity, the more man’s blessings of God are enhanced. The hierarchy of the blessings in our chapter gives concrete expression to one of the principles underlying the section dealing with *birkat ha-mazon* in the Torah (Deuteronomy 8:10-18):

When you have eaten and are replete, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you forget not the Lord your God... Lest when you have eaten and are replete... And you say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. But you shall remember the Lord your God: **for it is He who gives you power to get wealth.**

No one disputes that the special dietary importance conferred by human productivity on bread and wine is expressed in the special blessings instituted for them.²⁹ Tanna Kamma extends this idea to other laws concerning blessings over food: alongside the “natural” features of different foods (“fruit of the tree/earth”) granted by God, their utilitarian features accorded by man play an important role in determining how to bless over them. However, R. Yehuda maintains that only regarding bread and wine, in whose production human activity plays such a central role, do the benedictions acknowledge the human role in actualizing the potential

²⁹ The special importance ascribed to human productivity is a central theme in the debates between R. Akiva and the Roman procurator Tinnæus Rufus – see Tanhuma *Tazria* 5 and compare Bavli *Bava Batra* 10a.

embedded in Divine creation.³⁰ Blessings over other foods focus on Divine, rather than human creativity.³¹

III. SECOND HALF (M. 5-M. 8) – KEYWORD: “MAZON” (“MEAL”)

Mishnayot 5-7 examine the laws of blessings connected to the framework of a meal, addressing two central components of this framework: m. 5 and m. 7 deal with the relationship between the food items and m. 6 deals with the relationship among the people. The message common to all the mishnayot in this collection is unity. M. 5 teaches that the “*mazon*” (= the body of the meal) joins all parts of the meal into a single entity, so that blessings recited on the wine and *parperet* “before the *mazon*” exempt a person from reciting blessings on the same foods consumed “after the *mazon*.” The continuation of m. 5 teaches that the main food of the meal is bread, and therefore its blessing exempts *parperet* foods. M. 7 cites an exception to this rule, proposing a broader principle that has no exceptions: “A blessing is recited over the principal kind, and this serves for the subsidiary.” Situated between these interrelated mishnayot, m. 6 teaches that the diners are united by the shared framework of the meal, and one may recite a blessing for all, provided that the diners are reclining and – in the case of wine – if the wine was not brought to them in the middle of the *mazon*, “for during the main course, they do not drink wine together,

³⁰ The dispute between Tanna Kamma and R. Yehuda may impact on how we approach the difference, noted by Jonah Fraenkel (see above, n. 9, at 97), between the way in which *yerek* is defined regarding the laws of blessings and the laws of vows, inasmuch as definitions regarding vows generally follow common usage, rather than formalistic criteria.

³¹ A different line of thought is suggested by David Sabato, “*Shittat Hakhamim be-Sivvug Berakhot*” [in Hebrew], *Telalim* 5 (5770), 42-44, who roots the dispute between R. Yehuda and the Sages in the question whether blessings over food function as a *mattir*, or as *shevah*. This understanding of the dispute between R. Yehuda and other tannaim may be supported both by several passages in the Tosefta (see Sabato’s discussion at pp. 40-42) and by the gemara’s explanation (40a) of R. Yehuda’s position based upon Psalms 68:20 (cf. Sabato, 41). However, as noted above, the Mishna and the Tosefta appear to have different conceptions of the nature and purpose of blessings, and we may note in particular that the Tosefta presents R. Yehuda’s view quite differently from the Mishna (see especially m. 1 and Tosefta 4:4). As analyzed here, the Mishna’s point of departure is presentation of preliminary blessings of “praise,” and accordingly the dispute between R. Yehuda and the Sages may be seen as rooted in different understandings of the nature and contours of this “praise.”

but rather one eats while another drinks, such that there is no ‘fixedness’ to the drinking of wine.”³²

Why does m. 6, which deals with the unity of the diners, interrupt the two mishnayot that deal with the relationship between the foods that are eaten? It would appear that m. 6 is juxtaposed to m. 5 because they both deal with the framework of a meal,³³ and they both contain the keyword “*mazon*” in the expressions: “before the *mazon*,” “after the *mazon*” and “during the *mazon*.” M. 7 teaches that there is a case in which a person eats bread without establishing the framework of a “meal,” when the bread is eaten as a subsidiary to a different food over which meals are not established.³⁴ This mishna adds a concluding note to both m. 5 and m. 6, as we can see from the following table:

<p>Mishna 5 It does not exempt the bread</p>	<p>Mishna 6 If wine is <i>brought</i> to them... Although the incense is not <i>brought</i></p>	<p>Mishna 7 It exempts the bread If salted food is <i>brought</i> before him</p>
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Like m. 5, m. 7 discusses exempting one food with the blessing over another, focusing on the role of bread; like m. 6, m. 7 discusses “bringing foods” that are not an integral part of the meal. The placement of

³² Hanokh Albeck, *Commentary on Zera'im* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1957), ad loc. In Tosefta 4:12, Ben Zoma explains: “If wine was brought to them during the meal, each of them recites a blessing for himself... because the throat is not free.” Rashi (43a *s.v. ho'il*) explains, “because the diners’ hearts are not directed toward the person reciting the blessing, but rather to swallow” and this resembles the explanation proposed by Albeck. The Rambam, however, explains (*Commentary to the Mishna* to our mishna; *Hilkhot Berakhot* Tosefta, end of chap. 4) that Ben Zoma means to say that one should not recite “Amen” during a meal, lest food go down his windpipe.” Noting that in the Hellenistic symposium wine during the meal was ancillary to the food, whereas after the meal the drinking of wine played a ceremonial function, Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 146, has suggested that this might be the reason why in the formal meal described in the Mishna – similar in many respects to the symposium – only after the meal would wine be drunk in unison.

³³ The word *se'uda* (meal) is explicitly mentioned at the end of m. 6.

³⁴ Carefully examine Tosefta 4:14, where various Sages deal with different situations of “salted food and bread,” some of them in the framework of a meal, and some apparently not.

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m. 7 at the end of this unit teaches that determining “principal and subsidiary” and the eating framework called a “meal” do not always correspond to one another. It would further appear that not only does m. 7 deal with the eating that lacks the framework of a meal, but also – in contrast to the group dining in m. 6 – with solitary dining: “If salted food is brought before **him**.” In this way m. 7 may be seen not only as a concluding note to mm. 5-6, but also as a conclusion to all the laws of *birkot ha-nehenin*, connecting the laws regarding blessings over individual foods (= the topic of mm. 1-4) to the laws regarding blessings over interrelated foods.

M. 8 diverges from the topics discussed in mm. 5-7, and, before discussing the puzzling placement of this mishna at the end of our chapter, it will be useful to examine the literary integrity of the first seven mishnayot of the chapter. At first blush, it would appear that the two parts of the chapter address very different aspects of the laws of blessings – the specific character of individual foods (“kinds”) in part I, focusing primarily on their qualities and sources in nature and creation, as opposed to the culturally conditioned interrelationships among foods (*mazon*) and among diners in part II. However, as noted above, several literary connections link the two parts of our chapter, suggesting that the governing ideas of the two parts of the chapter are intertwined. Some of these connections relate to m. 8, and they will be discussed below.

One highly suggestive literary connection between mm. 1-4 and mm. 5-7 is the adumbration in m. 1 of the special standing which mm. 5-7 accord to bread and wine. This link indicates that wine and bread are accorded special individual blessings precisely because of their unique role within a meal. Here we return to the issue of “nature and culture,” which featured prominently in the controversies between R. Yehuda and Tanna Kamma. No one disputes that the cultural framework of a meal shifts the frame of reference for blessing God from the discrete food item (*min*) consumed by the individual to a unified set of hierarchically arranged foods (*mazon*) consumed by a group of people. However, even the individual blessings of part I, while based primarily according to their natural features of different “kinds,” take cultural significance into account, especially regarding wine and bread, the central foods of a meal. Regarding the blessings over other individual foods, R. Yehuda clearly emphasizes the centrality of Divine/natural considerations, whereas the Tanna Kamma strikes a fairly even balance between natural and cultural factors. In sum, we may say that, for the Tanna Kamma, when we bless God for food our blessings include our gratitude both for the produce His natural

world has provided and for the ability He has granted us to imprint upon nature our distinctly human cultural stamp.³⁵

We may discern a similar conceptual matrix at the transitional point of mm. 4-5, which link the two parts of the chapter. The rules of m. 5 regarding exempting one food with the blessing over another are determined partly by “kind” (nature) and partly by the role of each food within the meal (culture): blessings over wine or *parperet* exempt other foods of the same nature, regardless of the part of the meal (before or after the *mazon*) when they are consumed, but bread’s unique cultural role accords its blessing a unique status within the framework of the meal. In m. 4, R. Yehuda confers special status upon certain “kinds,” even when eaten as a snack, due to their national-geographic (cultural) significance, whereas Tanna Kamma insists that, absent the framework of a meal, all “kinds” are created equal. Here, too, we see that, for Tanna Kamma, blessings over individual foods relate to their source in nature, reflecting cultural significance only within a meal – or regarding foods such as wine, which are associated with meals. R. Yehuda, on the other hand, incorporates the cultural-symbolic significance associated with different “kinds” into his framework of blessings over individual foods.

In light of the ways in which the two major sections of our chapter, mm. 1-4 and mm. 5-7, are woven together literarily and conceptually, let us now examine the reasons why the placement of m. 8 at the end of the chapter is puzzling. M. 8 has two parts, both of which seem out of place at the end of the chapter.

- M. 8₁ discusses *birkat ha-mazon*, the central topic of chapter 7, and it is not clear why this mishna is appended to our chapter.
- The discussion in M. 8₂ regarding the blessing before drinking water seems to be a throwback to the first part of the chapter, inasmuch as it relates to the individual blessing recited before a specific kind of beverage.

Let us examine each part of the mishna separately. M. 8₁ is connected literarily both to the mishnayot in the second half of the chapter and to the framework of the entire chapter. The connection of m. 8₁ to the

³⁵ Regarding the universal human drive to humanize the act of eating by imposing upon it human cultural forms, see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom* (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing, 2006), 4-18. The Rav continues his essay by delineating ways in which Judaism has further elevated eating from the human-cultural to the sanctified, an idea that features prominently in many of the Rav’s writings – see Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility* (New York: Urim Publications, 2012), 75-78.

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second half of the chapter is indicated by the use of the keyword *mazon*, in presenting R. Akiva's view that *birkat ha-mazon* is recited over any "kind" of food – even if it is a *shelek* (a boiled vegetable) – as long as it serves as "his *mazon*," the mainstay of his meal. The keyword *mazon* signifies that m. 8₁ and mm. 5-7 share an important topic – reciting blessings over a meal. M. 8₁ and mm. 5-7 are connected by the position of the Sages, as well, even though they don't employ the keyword *mazon*, because in their view only meals which include bread – the mainstay of the meal in mm. 5-7 – require recitation of *birkat ha-mazon*.

These linguistic and topical connections between m. 8₁ and mm. 5-7 indicate an interrelationship between the two special qualities of a meal – the unique nature of its preliminary blessing(s) and the requirement of a final blessing. However, there is a significant difference between the Sages and R. Akiva regarding the nature of this interrelationship. For the Sages, the criterion for being considered a meal is the same regarding blessings before and after eating – bread.³⁶ R. Akiva, on the other hand, differentiates between the objective framework called *mazon*, centering on bread, necessary for reciting a single preliminary blessing over all the foods of the meal, and the subjective framework called *mezono* (his main food), over which *birkat ha-mazon* should be recited. All tannaim, including R. Akiva, agree that cultural norms determine the hierarchy which establishes bread alone as the mainstay of a meal, whose blessing exempts all other foods. However, whereas the Sages apply the same hierarchy to *birkat ha-mazon*, R. Akiva regards the blessing after eating as reflecting the individual's own sense of satisfaction after having concluded what he regards as a "meal" rather than a snack.

The position of the Sages defining a "meal" as a culturally defined event strongly links the entire second part of the chapter (both mm. 5-7 and m. 8₁) to the unique standing conferred upon bread in the opening mishna of the first part. M. 1 is further linked literarily to R. Akiva's view, but as a contrast rather than a comparison. R. Akiva states that *birkat ha-mazon* may be recited even over *shelek*, a cooked dish made from the same *yerek* (leafy vegetables) which m. 1 places at the bottom of the hierarchy of *perot* (produce), as indicated by the separate blessing (*borei minei*

³⁶ This correlation is drawn explicitly in a baraita (Yerushalmi 6:1, 10a), which states that all foods over which three blessings are recited also require the *ha-motsi* blessing, and vice versa. As noted by the gemara in *Berakhot* 44a, the biblical sources for the Sages' view is the juxtaposition of the verse "and you shall eat and be satisfied and shall bless..." (Deuteronomy 8:10) to the verse "a land where not in poverty may you eat bread" (Deuteronomy 8:9), understanding that what is eaten in verse 10 is the bread of verse 9.

desha'im) established by R. Yehuda. This literary parallel, which frames the chapter in an envelope structure (*inclusio*), further underscores R. Akiva's contrast between preliminary and final blessings: the framework of preliminary blessings is structured in accordance with a hierarchical ranking of foods, whereas the obligation of final blessings is determined by the individual sense of satisfaction.

How may we understand the opposing views of R. Akiva and the Sages regarding the question as to whether a "meal" has a single definition or two different definitions regarding *birkot ha-nehenin* and *birkat ha-mazon*? I would suggest the following explanation. In the view of the Sages, any enjoyment of eating requires preliminary expression of the religious significance of pleasure, but only the cultural framework of a meal transforms the act of eating into the uniquely human experience marked by the singular blessings that surround this event. Both the unique preliminary blessing which integrates the enjoyment of diverse foods into a single multi-faceted experience and the rich (three blessings) song which follow the eating demarcate the cultural event of the meal as a religious celebration of divine bounty. For R. Akiva, on the other hand, interrelating foods so that one blessing can exempt the entire meal is indeed a cultural phenomenon, determined by a socially sanctioned hierarchy; however, the obligation to thank God after eating is occasioned by the bio-psychological satisfaction of having eaten one's fill,³⁷ whether or not this conforms to the cultural event defined as a "meal."³⁸

Thus far we have noted the connections between m. 8₁ and the first half of the chapter through the views of the Tanna Kamma and R. Akiva. A further link to the first half of the chapter is provided by Rabban Gamliel's view in m. 8₁, where its requirement of *birkat ha-mazon* for

³⁷ The biblical source for R. Akiva's view is the word *ve-sava'ta* (and you shall be satisfied) in the verse "and you shall eat and be satisfied and shall bless..." (Deuteronomy 8:10), as noted by Bertinoro, *ad. loc.*, and see further the remark by R. Avraham ben ha-Rambam, *Ha-Maspik la-Avodat Hashem* (translated by Nissim Dana), (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1989), 219, that tradition mandates *birkat ha-mazon* only for a bread-based meal, not for other foods that nourish and satisfy (presumably negating the view of R. Akiva). No doubt, R. Akiva would agree that one who has eaten a bread-based meal needs to recite *birkat ha-mazon*, but only because he is "satisfied," not because of the cultural event known as a "meal."

³⁸ This distinction needs to be qualified. R. Akiva's language of *mezono* indicates that "satisfaction" is not purely biological, inasmuch as it depends to some extent on the subjective way in which the person defines the mode of eating in which he is engaged. Similarly, as noted above (n. 32), the "cultural" definition of a meal is linked to foods which are regarded as inducing satisfaction. Nevertheless, even though nature and culture can never be fully divorced from one another in human experience, different events are often defined primarily in terms of one or the other.

any meal including one of the seven species reminds us of the special status accorded to the seven species by R. Yehuda in m. 4. This parallel is particularly striking from a literary point of view, inasmuch as mm. 4 and 8 conclude, respectively, the first and second sections of the chapter.³⁹ The conclusions of both sections thus indicate the special importance in the realm of blessings of the foods which symbolize the bounty of the Land of Israel, at least according to some of the tannaim. However, here, too, there is an important distinction between preliminary blessings and final blessings. Regarding preliminary blessings the special role of the seven species is confined to the minority opinion of R. Yehuda, whereas regarding final blessings, even the Sages – who limit the “three blessings” of *birkat ha-mazon* to bread – concur with R. Gamliel that the seven species are accorded unique status, requiring a single final blessing.⁴⁰ Unlike R. Akiva, for whom the criteria for preliminary blessings are more formalistic than the subjective criterion he advocates for final blessings, the Sages distinguish the two kinds of blessings in the opposite direction: precedence among foods is determined subjectively regarding preliminary blessings, whereas final blessings are determined by fixed formal criteria – “meal” for *birkat ha-mazon* and seven species for a single final blessing.⁴¹

IV. THE CONCLUDING MISHNA OF THE CHAPTER – M. 8₂

Placing the discussion of the preliminary blessing over water in m. 8₂ serves two literary functions: (1) The return, after m. 8₁, to preliminary

³⁹ In both cases, the concluding mishna diverges from the main topic of the section and glances ahead towards the next literary unit. We have already noted above how m. 4 links up with m. 5 to segue from individual blessings to meals, and m. 8 introduces the blessings after eating which will be discussed throughout chapter 7.

⁴⁰ The plain sense of Tosefta 4:15 (compare anonymous view in Tosefta 4:7) is that the Sages maintain (in opposition to R. Gamliel) that other foods require no final blessing (see Lieberman, *ad. loc.* and see *Berakhot* 37a and *Gilyonei ha-Shas, ad. loc. s.v. u-le VaSof ve-lo kelum*).

⁴¹ A distinction, however, ought to be noted between the type of “subjective” criteria in mm. 4 and 8. In m. 4, the Sages advocate “subjectivity” in the sense of preference, an act of will, whereas R. Akiva in m. 8 refers to the “subjective” sense of physiological satisfaction. Of course the physiological and the psychological are always intertwined, and the preference of m. 4 presumably is rooted in physiological factors such as taste and texture, while the physiological satisfaction of m. 8 is heavily influenced by psychological predisposition, as noted above (n. 38). Nevertheless, each of these two positions focuses attention on a different pole of the psycho-somatic continuum.

blessings shows that this is the central topic of the chapter, and the brief discussion in m. 8₁ about blessings after eating is a digression rather than a shift to a new topic. This in turn fortifies our conclusion from the literary connections linking m. 8₁ to other mishnayot in the chapter that the appearance of *birkat ha-mazon* in our chapter is designed to indicate its similarities to and differences from *birkot ha-nehenin*.

(2) Separating the blessing over water in m. 8₂ from the blessings recited before all other foods and drinks (mm. 1-3) indicates that this blessing differs from other *birkot ha-nehenin*. This differentiation emerges clearly from the singular blessing prescribed for water by Rabbi Tarfon, and we may understand the nature of the difference by examining the language of this blessing. Whereas most of the blessings recited over food focus on the creation of various sources of culinary enjoyment, the “*borei nefashot*” blessing focuses on the creation of man (“*borei nefashot rabbot*” = many people) and his vital needs (“*ve-hesronan*”).⁴² Interestingly, the blessing recited **before** drinking water is similar to the blessing recited **after** eating a meal.⁴³

⁴² “*Borei nefashot rabbot ve-hesronan*” is the full reading of the blessing in the Mishna (some variants, as well as Tosefta 4:16 and *Mekhilta, massekhta va-yehi*, chap. 5, omit *rabbot* or *ve-hesronan*). The Talmud cites an expanded version of this blessing (*Berakhot* 37a, and Yerushalmi 6:1), designating it for recitation after eating, and some students of liturgical history theorize that the expansion was originally a separate blessing after eating, which was conflated with *borei nefashot* due to the similar themes and language of the two blessings. See: Saul Lieberman, short commentary to the Tosefta and *Tosefta ki-Fshutah*, 69; Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (translated by Richard S. Sarason), (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 1974), 41-42, and n. 8 there. In my analysis here, I have not followed Lieberman’s suggestion (short commentary) that, unlike the motif of thanksgiving that characterizes this blessing when recited after food, the preliminary blessing of *borei nefashot* serves as a blessing of praise.

⁴³ This is the standard version recited today of the first blessing of *birkat ha-mazon*. Similar formulations are found in *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* and in Genizah fragments published in: L. Finkelstein, “The Birkat Ha-Mazon,” *JQR* XIX, 1928-1929, 223; Stephan Reif, “*Keta Genizah shel Birkat ha-Mazon*” [in Hebrew], in *Minhah le-Aharon*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, Haim Cohen (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 5770), 205. *Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*, 102, has an abbreviated version of the first blessing – arguably the original version – in which only the phrases “Who sustains the entire world” and “Who sustains all” appear. Although this version lacks the stronger linguistic parallels found in the other versions, the thematic connection remains clear, including both the idea of sustenance and the universalistic scope (regarding the universalism of the first blessing of *birkat ha-mazon* see: Ezra Fleischer, *Statutory Jewish Prayers: Their Emergence and Development* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2012), 71.

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Blessing before water

(R. Tarfon)

Borei nefashot rabbot

(Who creates many living beings)

Ve-hesronan

(And their needs [lit. lacks])

Birkat ha-Mazon

Le-khol beriyotav asher bara, noten

lehem le-khol basar,

hazan et hakol

(For all the creatures You created,

Who gives food to all flesh,

Who sustains all)

Lo basar lanu val yehsar lanu

(We have never lacked, and may we never lack)

It would thus appear that the Mishna aims to juxtapose two blessings which express gratitude to God for providing vital needs (*hesronan*): food (m. 8₁) and water (m. 8₂).⁴⁴ The views of R. Akiva (m. 8₁) and R. Tarfon (m. 8₂) are thus connected by a common motif with which the Mishna redactor chose to conclude our chapter – thanking God for providing us with our needs. The emphasis on this motif in the chapter’s conclusion underscores its absence in the rest of the chapter: in the *birkot ha-nehenin*, we focus not on Divine satisfaction of our needs but on expanding our enjoyment of eating to praise of God for the manifold joys of the earth which He created for our use and pleasure. After concluding a filling meal – or before drinking water (according to R. Tarfon) – we bless God for satisfying our needs. Concluding the chapter with these blessings indicates that the blessings of praise for creation and of thanks for fulfilling our needs, while distinct, are not disjunct. Our meals provide us with the opportunity to relate to our Creator both as needy and dependent creatures and as marveling contemplators of the diverse means by which the Divine creation yields its bounty to the human consumer.

V. CONCLUSION – BLESSINGS AND THEIR MESSAGES

My comments regarding both parts of the concluding mishna have brought us full circle to observations suggested above regarding the

⁴⁴ The perception of drinking water as fulfillment of a need rather than as a form of enjoyment is underscored by the Mishna’s stipulation that one blesses over water only when drunk “for thirst.” Since the Tanna Kamma also accepts this stipulation, it would appear that, while denying the existence of a special blessing over water, he shares R. Tarfon’s basic conception that the blessing over water expresses a different idea than other preliminary blessings.

opening mishna. What was left unsaid at the chapter's beginning, regarding *birkot ha-nehenin* as expressing gratitude for the food we are about to enjoy,⁴⁵ figures prominently at the chapter's end, where both *birkat ha-mazon* and R. Tarfon's blessing over water express gratitude to God for satisfying our needs for nourishment and hydration. Omitting the themes of gratitude and human neediness from the chapter's beginning, while relegating these themes to the particular blessings discussed at the chapter's end, sharpens the focus throughout the chapter on its major themes: *min* and *mazon*. These two keywords highlight major ideas embedded in the intricate system of blessings over food. Moving beyond the immediate pleasure of eating, our blessings over food celebrate the manifold ways in which God's creation provides the produce we consume, as well as investing man with the ability to confer upon the "kinds" of creation new culinary forms and singularly human modes of dining.

Different aspects of the nature of the "kinds," the mode of eating, and the setting of the blessings focus attention on one or another of these themes, often eliciting disagreement among the Tannaim as to which aspect should be given greater emphasis. These themes, in turn, are further developed in the succeeding chapters of the tractate,⁴⁶ as well as in Talmudic discussions of the mishnayot of our chapter. Having followed these themes as presented between the lines of the Mishna, I believe that the student of the Mishna will be better prepared to locate and pursue them – as well as new themes – as presented in Tosefta, Gemara, *Rishonim*, and *Aharonim*.

⁴⁵ Or as a *mattir* for this enjoyment, a variation on the theme of gratitude, as noted above.

⁴⁶ Especially noteworthy is chapter 9, where many of its blessings celebrate creation, occasioned by the experience of noteworthy natural phenomena, and one of whose blessings, over building a house or purchasing new items, celebrates the divine gift of human productivity. The connection between blessings over food and the blessings of chapter 9 is indicated by the Tosefta at the beginning of chapter 6, as noted in my article, "Approaching the Text and Approaching God: The Redaction of Mishna and Tosefta *Berakhot*," *Jewish Studies* 43 (2005-2006), 68*-70*.