



“The One Who Brings Forth”

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Tu Bishvat has become a day on which many Jews express gratitude for the earth and its bounty. In this sense, it is closely connected to the practice of reciting blessings over food before we eat. How do we experience, when we eat fully formed produce, the miraculous intricacy that produced it? How do we go from the mundane act of eating to a deep sense of appreciation?

The most potent place to think about this question is the blessing over bread: “Blessed are you Hashem, Our God, Sovereign of the Universe, the One Who brings forth bread from the earth (*ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz*).” This is the most specific of our food blessings; rather than referencing an entire class of food (“fruit of the tree”; “fruit of the ground”), it mentions precisely the food we’re about to eat: bread. This specificity makes its language all the more perplexing: “The One Who brings forth bread from the earth.” But God does not in fact bring forth **bread** from the earth; we receive wheat, which we then transform into bread. Why, then, this most specific blessing for this most processed food?

When the Talmud addresses *ha-motzi*, it takes up this question of specificity in the blessing only indirectly. The discussion there focuses on the blessing’s use of the definite article. The



blessings for fruits and vegetables mention “Hashem... Who creates the fruit...” (*borei peri...*). By contrast, the blessing over bread refers to God as “**the One Who** brings forth...” (*ha-motzi lehem*). Why, of all the blessings we have, is this one over bread the only one to specify God as **the One** to provide us?

According to the Talmud,¹ this was actually a debate between R. Neḥemiah and “the Sages.” The latter provide us with the text we know: *ha-motzi*, **the One** Who brings forth. R. Neḥemiah, however, believes that the blessing over bread should be more aligned with the other blessings we offer: *motzi lehem*, without a definite article. The Talmud explains that they disagree about the grammatical effect of a definite article prior to a verb. All agree that this form of the verb, without a definite article, implies an action that took place in the past;² when the definite article is added, however, R. Neḥemiah and the Sages disagree. R. Neḥemiah believes that the addition of the definite article makes the word sound as if it is referring to an action happening in the present, whereas the Sages hold that it still refers to the past.

In practice, we follow the view of the Sages, reciting *ha-motzi*, with the definite article. But if all agree that saying *motzi*, without the definite article, would satisfy our desire to bless about what God has already done, then why not follow the universal view, rather than the one that works only according to one side of the debate?

In a synthetic reading, the medieval commentator Ritva³ suggests that the ambiguity of *ha-motzi* is in fact the point. Blessing God as “**the One** Who brings forth bread” creates a kind of omnisignificance, in which we are simultaneously blessing God for the past, present, and

¹ Bavli Berakhot 38a-b.

² This reflects a difference between Rabbinic Hebrew and modern Hebrew; modern Hebrew speakers would assume that the form of, for example, *borei peri ha-eitz*, implies an act in the present, not the past.

³ R. Yom Tov b. Avraham of Seville, c. 1260-1320.



the future. This awareness of God's blessings to us in all temporal directions makes sense for bread, because unlike fruits of the tree, which have a specific growing season, wheat "sprouts forth regularly."⁴ Wheat, then, represents an orientation toward God that recognizes not only God's goodness in the past, but also God's ongoing generosity in the present and the future. We deviate from the normal structure of our blessings, adding a definite article, precisely in order to create the ambiguity that gestures toward God's ongoing acts of sustenance. Bread provides an opportunity to increase our appreciation for all that we depend on.

Yet bread as a site of maximal appreciation is surprising, because it is precisely the place where it is hardest to see God's hand at work. When I eat an apple, it takes no great act of imagination to travel from the fruit in my hand to an image of the tree on which it grew, back through the branches and trunk into the ground from which it sprouted. It is a short path from the apple back to God's direct engagement in the world. Bread, however, is a human production, an act of artisanship that takes the wheat growing in the ground, sifts it and grinds it into flour, mixes it with water and yeast, forms it, and finally applies heat to make something that is fundamentally unrecognizable as a "fruit of the earth."

The Izhbitzer Rebbe⁵ argues that it is precisely this hidden aspect of bread's origins that makes the definite article in its blessing so important.

מי השלוח, חלק ב, ליקוטי הש"ס, מסכת ברכות לח. כתיב (תהלים ל"ח, כ') מה רב טובך אשר צפנת ליריאתך פעלת לחוסים בך	Mei ha-Shiloah, Part 2, Likkutei ha-Shas, Berakhot 38a It is written, "How abundant is the good that You have in store (<i>tzafanta</i>) for those who fear You, that You do in the full view of people, for those who take refuge in You" (Psalm 38:20).
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⁴ In his comments to Berakhot 38b: "המוציא עדיף בהא משום דמשמע עבר והוהו ועתיד והחטה ממיני זרעים שיוצאין: "תדיר מה שאין כן בפירות אילן שאין פירותיהן יוצאין אלא מזמן לזמן ושייך לברוכי עליהו בורא ולא הבורא דאין צומחין תדיר."

⁵ R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner, 1801-1854.



נגד בני אדם, היינו שהטובה שהשי"ת משפיע אינו ניכר בה שהשי"ת השפיע אותה וזה נקרא רב טובך אשר צפנת, ולכן במוציא כ"ע לא פליגי שכיון שהוא נסתר לעיני אדם וצפון, לכן יכול לומר מוציא לחם, אכן צריך האדם להשתדל היטב שיכיר מפורש שהשי"ת הוא המשפיע, לכן צריך לומר המוציא בה' הידיעה, היינו שיכיר את המוציא מפורש.	That is, that the good that Blessed God bestows, it is not recognizable that God bestows it. This is called, "How abundant is the good that you have hidden (<i>tzafanta</i>)." Therefore, with <i>motzi</i> , all agree that since it is obstructed from human eyes and hidden, therefore a person can [theoretically] say <i>motzi</i> . However, a person must vigorously strive to recognize explicitly that Blessed God is the One Who bestows. Therefore, a person must [in fact] say <i>ha-motzi</i> , with a definite article, that is, that a person explicitly recognizes the One Who brings forth.
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The word *tzafanta* in the verse from Psalms, initially translated as "that You have in store," has a connotation of hiddenness.⁶ Most of the good that God does is hidden. When we look at a piece of bread, the miraculous providence that produced it is hidden from our eyes. Were we to recite *motzi lehem min ha-aretz*, it would be reflective our own experience and therefore minimally valid; a blessing that fails to appreciate the fullness of God's goodness aligns with our actual inability, most of the time, to apprehend in an explicit and visceral way God's role in the world. Just like our knowledge of something that happened in the past, which is intellectual but not instinctive, we know in our heads that we have this bread only through God's good graces, but it is hard to feel that in our *kishkes*.

Our task, however, is to go beyond this minimal form of recognition: "a person must vigorously strive to recognize **explicitly** that Blessed God is the One Who bestows." Like the things happening in this moment before my very eyes, I am called upon to know deep in my bones that God is the One Who brings forth everything—even the highly processed bread on

⁶ This is the same root as *tzafun*, the portion of the Seder when we eat the hidden *afikoman*.



my table—from the earth. Therefore, we bless over bread with a definite article: “Blessed are You Hashem, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, THE ONE Who brings forth”—even now, in this very moment—“bread from the earth.” On this Tu Bishvat, may we work towards moments of visceral and instinctive appreciation for God’s miracles, in all of the ways that they reach us.

