

I Am a Brazen Benscher Collector

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Beth Torah

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Some people collect snow globes...I collect benschers. Benschers, for those of you who may not know, are small booklets containing the Grace After Meals, and often times songs for the Sabbath table as well. I have *a lot* of benschers...They are all different, and thanks to the modern world of Judaica art, they are embossed with beautiful representations and golden letters commemorating the events and dates associated with them.

Like this silver one: from my college roommate's wedding 9 years ago in St. Louis. It has *Ani le'dodi ve'dodi li* in a ribbon around a Kiddush cup: I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

This one, from just three years ago is from my cousin's bar mitzvah in Cleveland. It's a bit slimmer; no songs in this one, just the Grace After Meals. But if he ever forgets his Hebrew name, it's right there on the front: *Ya'akov Koppel*.

This one is from another St. Louis wedding...one of my classmate's from Rabbinical School. What a freilach wedding that was, with all my classmates singing and dancing and whooping up a simcha that was incredibly joyous. The funny thing is that on the front it says Table 14, Mrs. Beverly Blitz. I have no idea who that is, but she probably left before the bensching, so I took hers as well as mine. I don't think that's stealing...

This one from 1997, the same year I got married, is from Sari's old roommate's wedding. Their Hebrew initials, Aleph, Shin, Reish are combined to spell the word *osher*, which means happiness.

On this one, Sari's cousins' hands are intertwined with their initials, *Yud Dalet*, which of course also spells hand in Hebrew...another clever design.

Another comes from Judith and Mark Zagorin's wedding in 1995. I have no clue who they are...but somehow their benschers became part of my collection. Sometimes that happens when you share meals with others.

These two, one from another cousin's bat mitzvah, the other from a good friend's wedding are a bit more economically produced. One tri-fold laminated card with the Birkat on both sides. You need a magnifying glass to read the special additions for Purim or Yom Ha'atzmaut, but they are lovely nonetheless.

This one is from a wedding I officiated in Milwaukee 5 years ago. It makes me particularly proud, because I converted the groom and then got to celebrate a traditional kosher wedding complete with...benschers.

This gorgeous benschler is from Corey Helfand and Jenny Ackerman's wedding. A gender sensitive, laser printed beautiful booklet with the biblical phrase *I have found the one in whom my soul delights*...What a wedding that was...and right here in this sanctuary.

Of course my favorite benschers, say the wedding of Sari and Adam Raskin, August 31, 1997; *kaf chet Av 5757*. I know I'll never forget my anniversary!

And of course there's this little pocket sized benschler that I picked up at a restaurant in Israel, for benschling on the run, or away from home or shul.

We have a basket near our dining room table where we keep these and other keepsake benschers from simchas and celebrations throughout our married life. It's amazing how these little 8 1/2 X 11 booklets contain such memories, such wonderful associations. I don't have a single one of those wedding invitations or save the date magnets, but the benschers I hold onto as the best kind of keepsake from these events.

Visiting a Jewish summer camp this year and watching the enthusiasm for Birkat Ha'Mazon among the kids and staff reminded me of my own history with this ritual. I learned the first paragraph of the Grace After Meals at JCC summer camp. We had a whole repertoire of hand gestures, words, and phrases that we added, sometimes not in the most appropriate ways, at various points in the prayer. But it was only when I got to college, and attended Friday night dinners at Hillel, that I discovered that there are actually additional paragraphs in the grace after meals that I had never heard before. So with each passing week, after a mass produced meal of baked chicken, potatoes, iceberg lettuce, and brownies, I plodded my way through the "long version" until I was eventually able to lead it myself. For me, like so many others, so much

personal Jewish growth happened during my college years of experimentation and independence. It took a little longer for me to discover that the only prayer that is considered biblically commanded is the grace after meals! Not the Amidah, not Kol Nidrei, not even Musaf! All of the vast composition of our prayer books was developed by scholars and sages through many centuries of poetic and prosaic responses to both the delights and the catastrophes they experienced. As time went on, the siddur was canonized with an accepted liturgy that was again developed by the rabbis who wanted to give structure to their revolutionary response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Their audacious claim was that God would just as readily accept prayer as He would animal sacrifice. The prophet Hosea was perhaps the most famous proponent of God favoring and accepting the words of our mouths as effective communication with God, and the rabbis seized on that in reconstructing a post-Temple Judaism. But the Bible itself offers surprisingly little in the way of scripted prayer. The few instances of prayer at all are spontaneous and unstructured. So with literary genius and soaring language the rabbis drew from Psalms as well as life experience to weave the precious document you have in your hands today. But the Grace After Meals was different...In a succinct and unambiguous phrase in Deut. 8:10 God says: You shall eat, you shall be satiated, and you shall give thanks to the Lord your God. No other prayer in the siddur derives from such an unmistakable biblical source.

Now there are a lot of jokes about Jews and food and Jews and eating...I have been one to tell such jokes now and then myself. But there is something very profound about eating as an event, that I believe the Torah captures, as does this retinue of benschers. Eating creates community. Just witness what happens here every Shabbes...Since we instituted a culture of a sit-down Kiddush luncheon each week, a striking transformation happened in our own synagogue community. People sit down. They stop running. We talk. We catch up on each other's lives. We hug each other's kids and grandkids. Some of us even sing. And we are not zipping out the door, but lingering here to be together. The culmination of that is of course the raucous singing of Birkat Ha'mazon. Without the food, however, my sense and my experience is that people are quick to leave. Some might not even come to begin with. Eating, sharing food, celebrating Shabbat and Jewish time with a meal is nothing less than a cultural event. Don't misunderstand, like so many do, the Torah's famous phrase also in our parasha that "Not by bread alone shall a person live." It actually means that a person can live by bread alone, but life is much more interesting there's more to it than that. Bread, food is not only the staff of life, it is the staff of

Jewish life. I'll tell you that in my own evolution toward active Jewish living, the most transformational moments did not happen in shul...(!) The most transformational moments happened when I was invited into people's homes to share a Shabbes or yom tov meal. Do you realize that the word companion means "with bread:" com means with, and pan (like paneira or panini) means bread. Is it possible that companionship with other human beings happens most essentially when sharing food together? This is why part of the mission Sari and I share is to bring people into our home regularly. The relationships and community that are built around a Shabbes or yom tov table are deeply significant and transformative. I was indescribably affected by being invited into someone's home so they could share food with me. That's when I began to really feel a part of a Jewish community. The author Miriam Weinstein writes in her book *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, "Sitting down to a meal together draws a line around us. It encloses us, and for a brief time, strengthens the bonds that connect us with the other members of our self-defined clan, shutting out the rest of the world." And it doesn't have to be only in the eruv where people share Shabbat meals. I encourage you, I beg you to consider inviting people to your home to celebrate Shabbat or yom tov together. Rosh Hashana is coming up...Shabbat is every week...think about opening your home to others. If not every week, every so often. You don't have to be fluent in all the prayers to make this kind of connection with other human beings. I urge you in the coming new year to make a commitment to sharing meals with fellow members of our shul community.

There is an interesting irony to the order that the Torah describes with respect to Birkat Ha'mazon. First eat, then get full, then bless. Typically we would swap step three with step one: that is to say, we would bless first, then enjoy later. But there is profound wisdom here. And I think about it every time my memory is jogged from a wedding or a bar mitzvah when I use one of these benschers. I think about it every time I enjoy a special Shabbes meal with family or friends and I look around my table at my beautiful wife and my precious children. As we sit back, with hearts and bodies filled with sustenance, we say thank you God for the blessings in my life. Some people are prone to pray and beseech God only when they are suffering, when they are sick, when the going gets tough. Rabbi, pray for so and so, who's in the hospital. Rabbi, say a little prayer for me, I'm having surgery. But I can't recall a single time when someone said to me, Rabbi, pray for me, everything is great in my life. Or Rabbi, say a little prayer of thanks to God, I am so happy and content. Birkat Ha'Mazon teaches us not only to

pray when we need something...When we are faced with a challenge or a struggle. It teaches us to marvel and be grateful when we are full.

May we all feel the power of community that is convened when we break bread together...and may we learn to thank God not only when we are empty, but also, and perhaps especially **when we are full.**