

Food and Spirituality in Judaism, or - Feel Free to be Amazed!

Contributed by [Livnot U'Lehibanot](#)

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Food that is eaten daily can be taken for granted. One of the ways Judaism helps us to keep our sense of appreciation alive is by instituting blessings to be said before and after eating.

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things.

To the prophets, wonder is a form of thinking. It is not the beginning of knowledge but an act that goes beyond knowledge; it does not come to an end when knowledge is acquired; it is an attitude that never ceases.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. In radical amazement, the Biblical man faces "the great things and unsearchable, the wondrous things without number" (Job 5:9). He encounters them in space and in time, in nature and in history; not only in the uncommon but also in the common...

We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation...

Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a Sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings - we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on performing a physiological function, we say "Blessed be You...who heals all flesh and does wonders..."

("God in Search of Man" by Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1955)

According to this, blessings aren't said in order to please God, but rather in order to invite the Divine to be a part of our daily experience. This is relevant especially when for many the image that tends to come to mind when thinking of God is of a distant, long-bearded wizard sitting up in the sky, expecting us to obey his strange orders, giving out rewards and punishing our failures. On the contrary, one of the ways of viewing God in Jewish tradition is expressed by the name "Hamakom," which means "The Place." In other words, God is viewed as the constant facilitator of our being, the "place" in which life unfolds. In this sense, blessings are considered to be a way of awakening our consciousness to a life that is full of purpose, sensation and wonder.

"...This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things."

(Abraham Joshua Heschel)