Preface Cup of Wine Used for *Birkat Hamazon*

Day 1

Our Sages (*Berakhot* 52a; *Pesahim* 105b) discussed the mitzvah of holding a cup of wine while reciting *Birkat Hamazon* and drinking it afterward. The *Rishonim* debated the meaning of these discussions. Some ruled that whenever anyone recites *Birkat Hamazon*, whether in a group or by himself, he must recite it over a cup of wine. Others ruled that when an individual recites it by himself no cup of wine is necessary, but when there is a *zimun* a cup of wine must be used. Still others ruled that there is never an obligation to use a cup of wine, but it does enhance the mitzvah of *Birkat Hamazon* if a cup of wine is used. This will be explained in full below in halakha 1. According to the kabbalists, it is highly commendable and preferred to use a cup of wine whenever there is a *zimun*, but when someone recites *Birkat Hamazon* by himself he must not use a cup of wine.

The *Levush* (182:1, cited in the *Mishna Berura* 182:1) explained that our Sages instituted the rule of reciting *Birkat Hamazon* over a cup of wine since this raises the level of our praises and blessings to God, displaying respect for the blessing and for the One Who is being blessed. King David also stated (*Tehillim* 116:13), "I raise a cup of salvation and call out the Name of God." The *Levush* added that the cup of wine represents a sublime kabbalistic concept, since the tenth *sefira* is sometimes called *kos yeshu'ot* – the cup of salvation. It receives the bounty through all the other *sefirot* and it distributes blessing and bounty to the entire world. For this reason, some *Poskim* ruled that it is always necessary to use a cup of wine when reciting *Birkat Hamazon*, even when reciting it alone. Even if someone has no wine at hand, they ruled that he must make an effort to obtain it.

The *Kaf Hahayim* Sofer (182:2) explained that the tenth *sefira* is that of *malkhut*. He cited the holy *Zohar* teaching that the cup of wine used for *Birkat Hamazon* corresponds to *malkhut*, thus supporting the *Levush's* teaching.

Harav Zalman (*Shulhan Arukh Harav* 190:2) taught that when we recite *Birkat Hamazon* at the table, it is comparable to the songs of the *levi'im* accompanying the offering of the *korbanot*. Just like in the *Bet Hamikdash* the *levi'im* sang as the wine libations were offered on the Altar, our Sages instituted that a cup of wine be held aloft while *Birkat Hamazon* is recited and to drink the cup afterward.

Harav David Zakkut of Modina (*sefer Zekher David* Unit 1, chapter 71) explained that the purpose of the cup of wine is to enhance people's joy

while performing the mitzvah of *Birkat Hamazon*. He added that this is why our Sages instituted the use of a cup of wine when performing the mitzvot of kiddush and *havdala*, when reciting the blessing of *kiddushin* and the seven blessings of marriage, and when performing a circumcision. We wish to praise God for sanctifying us with these mitzvot, and the praise is enhanced with our joy. This in turn brings joy to God, and He calls to His attending angels and tells them, ''See how My children take such care to perform My commandments properly.'' For this reason we base our praises on wine, which ''brings joy to God and men'' (*Shofetim* 9:13). The Hebrew word for ''brings joy'' is *hamesame'ah*, spelled *he*, *mem*, *samekh*, *mem*, *het*. These are the initial letters of *havdala*, [*mazon*] *mo'ed*, Shabbat, *mila*, *hatuna* – the occasions when a cup of wine is required.

For another explanation why our Sages instituted the use of a cup of wine for *Birkat Hamazon*, see *sefer Netivot Olam* by the Mahara''l of Prague (Unit *Ha'avoda*, chapter 18).

It appears from the comment of the *Sifte Kohen* (*H.M.* 382:4) that he ruled that the use of a cup of wine for *Birkat Hamazon* is a Torah-mandated obligation, not just an institution of our Sages. Many *Aharonim* expressed their amazement at this position; it seems to be untenable. Nevertheless, the *Petah Hadevir* (192:2) pointed out that several *Rishonim* (Rabbenu Tzemah cited by Rabbenu Yeruham, the *Kol Bo* and others) concurred with this position.

The *Petah Hadevir* concluded that the truth is that all the *Poskim* agree that the obligation to recite a blessing over a cup of wine is only an institution of our Sages, like all other blessings. However, the cup of wine used for *Birkat Hamazon* is special. Our Sages instituted ten rules regarding the cup of wine, enhancing its honor. As such, it is given a status almost like that of a Torah mitzvah. In support of this thesis, the *Petah Hadevir* cited a Tosafot (*Berakhot* 51b) stating that *Birkat Hamazon* is a mitzvah of the Torah and that is why it is necessary to sit in one place while reciting it. ''After all,'' Tosafot added, ''ten rules were instituted for it, in contrast with ordinary blessings.'' Apparently, the ten rules instituted for the cup of wine raise the status of *Birkat Hamazon* over all other blessings, and if so it certainly raises the status of the blessing recited to drink the cup of wine.

Harav Hayim Palachi (*sefer Ru'ah Hayim* 182:1) stated that if someone can drink wine without harming his health and he in fact drinks wine during his meals, it is a terrible sin for him to recite *Birkat Hamazon* without a cup of wine. In all probability God will tell him, ''For your personal pleasure you drank wine, but to honor Me while reciting *Birkat Hamazon* you were too lazy to use a cup of wine.''

As mentioned already, our Sages instituted ten rules to enhance the stature of the cup of wine used for *Birkat Hamazon*. See the preface to *Siman* 183.