

Reciting a blessing over non-kosher food

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QUESTION

Is it appropriate to recite a blessing before or after eating food that is not kosher?

To many traditional rabbis, this may seem an obvious question: you don't say a blessing on committing a sin. Yet for many lay people, especially ones who have started bringing Jewish practice into their lives but are not (yet) fully observant of all the commandments it is a question that deserves consideration. If nothing else, discussing this question can provide an educational opportunity. Additionally, the answer is not necessarily as simple and straightforward as the initial inclination to say "no" might indicate. Our conclusion, in fact, is that in many circumstances it IS appropriate to say a blessing.

RESPONSE

It is clear the reason this question is being asked today is because there are many people on a "spiritual journey" who come from secular backgrounds who are starting to integrate Jewish practice into their lives. They may start reciting blessings over food before they have completely adopted the practice of following kosher. This question came up on Facebook, which, for better or worse, is where many people turn first when looking for an answer.

The "instincts" of many lay people are to say "yes, you should say a blessing." I discussed this question with my 13-year-old daughter Devorah, and she presented two reasons in favor of saying a blessing:

- 1) The person is already doing a sin by eating non-kosher food; why add another sin by failing to say a blessing?
- 2) Perhaps if the person says a blessing before eating, he or she will be reminded that the food is not kosher and will refrain.

My wife Lauri added a third reason: shouldn't you give thanks to God for the food that sustains you?

Those replies are "intuitive." Halachically, of course, the answer may be different.

The "traditional" no response is codified in the Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim 196:1: **אכל דבר איסור אף על פי שאינו אסור אלא מדרבנן אין מזמנין עליו ואין מברכין עליו לא בתחלה ולא בסוף** "one who eats something that is prohibited, even if it is only prohibited rabbinically, is not included in the *zimun* (invitation to bless) before the grace after meals, and he does not recite a blessing, not before and not after." The same opinion is found in Rambam's Mishneh Torah (Brachot 1:19).

Not directly on the topic of non-kosher food, but on the related issue of food acquired through sin, in the Talmud (Bavli Bava Kama 94a) it says that one who says a blessing over bread baked from wheat he stole should not say a blessing, for it would be a curse, not a blessing.

There are, however, rabbinic opinions that are at odds with the Shulhan Arukh and the Mishneh Torah.

The Ravad (Rabbi Avraham ben David, France, 12th century), in his commentary on the above cited opinion of the Mishneh Torah, rules that one is obligated to recite the grace after meals if you enjoyed non-kosher food.

The Tashbetz, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemah Duran (Spain, 14th c.) has an opinion that brings the same logic my daughter Devorah used: if you do one thing that's improper, such as eating food that is not kosher, you should not make the problem worse by failing to fulfill your obligation to say a blessing before and after eating.

When I told Devorah that we do not say a blessing over a sin – for example before stealing something or killing someone – her response was to say that food is different, because there IS a blessing to say over food. Devorah shares the logic of the Tashbetz: the obligation to say a blessing over food exists independently of the nature of the food.

In a debate about whether or not to say a blessing over “non-kosher” food, it is important to define “non-kosher.” Food that is not under rabbinic supervision is not automatically “not kosher.” The traditional sources are clear that if any non-kosher food in a mixture is less than 1/60th of the total, AND the food does not taste of something non-kosher, the food is kosher (some opinions hold that the 1/60th rule prevails, others that the “taste” rule prevails, but all opinions in the Talmud would agree that if both conditions are met the food is kosher). See Bavli Chullin 98b, and my teshuvah [“Is it permissible to eat hot dairy meals in restaurants lacking rabbinic supervision?”](#)

If a person were eating a meal in a restaurant lacking rabbinic supervision, it is likely that something the person ate would be kosher – the bread, a side dish, or a beverage. In principle at such a meal the person would still be obligated to say a blessing for the food that was kosher. Since there are generally no non-kosher ingredients in plain bread, the simplest solution is to eat some bread and say a blessing over the bread, even if the meal included non-kosher food.

PSAK HALACHA

While we of course want to encourage all Jews to follow a kosher diet, we need to acknowledge that we live in an age when many Jews do not follow all the commandments all the time (was there ever an age when they did?). There are traditional families that have a custom of keeping a kosher home and eating whatever they like when they eat out. There are people on a path toward greater observance who are not yet fully observing the laws of kashrut. We wish to encourage such people in their desire to observe the commandments. It would be a mistake to put barriers in their path.

- 1) When eating a meal if any of the food is kosher (see above definition) one should say the appropriate blessing before and after the meal.

- 2) If one were to eat only something that is clearly not kosher – such as a piece of ham by itself – it would be better not to say a blessing as that is the understanding that has been codified in halacha. It is not, however, necessary to make a point of forbidding the practice, or telling the person they are doing something wrong. We can support the view of the Tashbetz that saying a blessing on food is an obligation, and the person who is saying the blessing is doing it with a motivation of bringing additional holiness into his or her life and we do not wish to put a barrier in their way.
- 3) In a case of *pikuah nefesh*, “saving lives,” where the only food to eat is not kosher, one should recite the appropriate blessings even if eating only something that is not kosher, because in such a circumstance it is not a sin to eat the non-kosher food.