

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Ekev

Some years ago, I received this fascinating story via e-mail:*

At the turn of the twentieth century, two of the wealthiest and most famous men in America was a pair of Jewish brothers named Nathan and Isidor Straus. Owners of R.H. Macy's Department Store and founders of the A&S (Abraham & Straus) chain, the brothers were multimillionaires, renowned for their philanthropy and social activism.

In 1912, the brothers and their wives were touring Europe, when Nathan, the more ardent Zionist of the two, impulsively said one day, "Hey, why don't we hop over to Palestine?" Israel wasn't the tourist hotspot then that it is today. Its population was ravaged by disease, famine, and poverty; but the two had a strong sense of solidarity with their less fortunate brethren, and they also wanted to see the health and welfare centers they had endowed with their millions. However, after a week spent touring, Isidor Straus had had enough.

"How many camels, hovels, and yeshivas can you see? It's time to go," Isidor decreed with edgy impatience in his voice. But Nathan refused to heed his brother's imperious command. It wasn't that he was oblivious to the hardships around him; it was precisely because of them that he wanted to stay.

As he absorbed firsthand the vastness of the challenges his fellow Jews were coping with, he felt the burden of responsibility. "We can't leave now," he protested. "Look how much work has to be done here. We have to help. We have the means to help. We can't turn our backs on our people." "So we'll send more money," his brother snapped back. "I just want to get out of here."

But Nathan felt that money simply wasn't enough. He felt that the Jews who lived under such dire circumstances in Palestine needed the brothers' very presence among them: their initiative, their leadership, and their ideas. Isidor disagreed.

The two argued back and forth, and finally Isidor said, "If you insist, stay here. Ida and I are going back to America where we belong."

The two separated. Isidor and his wife returned to Europe, while Nathan and his spouse stayed in Palestine, traveling the country and contributing huge sums of money to the establishment of education, health, and social welfare programs to benefit the needy. Nathan also financed the creation of a brand-new city on the shores of the Mediterranean. And since his name in Hebrew was Natan, and he was the city's chief donor, the founders named it after him and called it...Natanya.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, Isidor Straus was preparing to sail home to America aboard an ocean liner for which he had also made reservations for his brother, Nathan, and his wife. "You must leave Palestine NOW!" he cabled his brother in an urgent telegram. "I have made reservations for you and if you don't get here soon, you'll miss the boat."

But Nathan delayed. There was so much work to be done that he waited until the last possible moment to make the connection. By the time he reached London, it was April 12 and the liner had already left port in Southampton with Isidor and Ida Straus aboard. Nathan felt disconsolate that he had, as his brother

had warned, "missed the boat." For this was no ordinary expedition, no common, everyday cruise that he had forfeited, but the much-ballyhooed maiden voyage of the most famous ship of the century. This was the Titanic.

Nathan Straus, grief-stricken and deeply mourning his brother and sister-in-law could not shake off his sense that he had had a rendezvous with history. The knowledge that he had avoided death permeated his consciousness for the rest of his life, and until his death in 1931, he pursued his philanthropic activities with an intensity that was unrivaled in his time. Truly, his life was a blessing for the Jewish people.

Today, Netanya is a scenic resort city of 200,000 and headquarters to Israel's thriving diamond trade - one of the most important industries in the country. And in almost every part of the city, there is some small reminder of Nathan Straus's largesse, his humanity, and love for his people. His legacy lives on....

What motivates some people to do more than just appreciate the blessings they have in their lives; and to actually *be* a vehicle for blessing?

This week's portion, *Ekev*, contains one of the pivotal verses of the entire Torah regarding the concept of blessings:

"Ve'achalta' ve'sava'ta' u'verachta' et Hashem Elokecha al ha'aretz hatovah asher natan lach."

"And (when) you shall eat and be satisfied and bless G-d your G-d for the good land which He has given you." (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 8:10)

This verse is actually the biblical basis for the Grace after Meals (known as the *Birkat hamazon*): the four blessings we say after a meal which includes a satisfying helping of bread. Coming as it does, in the midst of Moshe's speech to the Jewish people (now in its third portion....) and his stern warnings to the generation about to enter the land of Israel lest they forget who they are and why they have been charged by G-d with the challenge of conquering the land of Israel, this verse begs a number of questions.

First of all, how does one bless G-d? Thanking G-d is one thing; after all, it makes sense to be appreciative of all the gifts we are blessed with and the value of being thankful for it all, especially to the source of all good in this world makes a lot of sense. But what does it mean to bless G-d? Why would G-d need our blessings, much less demand them? In fact, what exactly is a blessing?

Furthermore, why is the system for blessings after eating bread (the grace after meals or *Birkat hamazon*) so much more involved (3-4 blessings) than say, the blessing over fruits?

In fact, Moshe mentions these 'fruits' in declaring how wonderful the land of Israel is:

"Ki' Hashem Elokecha' me'viacha' el eretz tovah: eretz nachalei mayim...eretz chittah u'se'orah ve'gefen u'te'enhav ve'rimon ,eretz zeit shemen u'dvash."

"For Hashem your G-d is bringing you to a good land: a land of streams of water... a land of wheat and barley, vines and figs and pomegranates, a land of olive (oil) trees and (date) honey." (Devarim(Deuteronomy) 8:7-8)

According to Jewish tradition these are seven special 'fruits' known as the seven species which grew in the land of Israel (and were apparently what the spies brought back to the Jewish people in the desert). Yet even though these species include grains, it is only when these grains are utilized to make bread that for some reason, the blessings we make upon eating them are taken to a different level, resulting in three (and later four) blessings instead of the usual one (known as the *Al HaMichyah* or *Bracha achat me'ein shalosh* blessing made after eating cakes and fruits...)

Considering how beautiful these fruits are, and how much more appreciative one might expect us to be upon eating fruits, than say, on a simple piece of pita....

All of this is wrapped up in understanding the nature of blessings in the first place.

I recall once, at a Friday night dinner, meeting a fellow who seemed quite prominent in his Synagogue, and who had sponsored the evening in memory of his son who had passed away in a tragic car accident. At the end of dinner thinking it would be appropriate, I asked him if he would honor us by leading the blessings after the meals but he politely declined, saying "I don't do that!"

Given that he appeared quite knowledgeable in Judaism and seemed familiar and even comfortable with Jewish tradition, I was somewhat surprised by his comment and later found the opportunity to ask him what he meant.

"I used to buy it all; the whole nine yards" he explained to me.

"And I still think Judaism is an incredible system with a magnificent community structure. I grew up religious and have never driven on Shabbat nor knowingly placed unkosher food in my mouth, and I never will. I even believe in G-d; who else could be the reason we are all here?"

"But after he took my son, I'll be damned if I'm ever going to bless Him again!"

While at the time, due to the circumstances, I wasn't able to have the long discussion such a comment almost demands (and of course, far be it from me to have the arrogance to judge such a person, given the pain he had obviously been and continued to be going through...) I did manage to ask him what he thought blessings were. After all, if you decide you are not going to bless, you must have a working definition of what a blessing really is, right?

Fascinatingly, he had never really thought about it, but upon reflection realized he considered it to be a form of thanksgiving and recognition (and he felt himself unable to be fully thankful to a G-d who, he perceived, had taken his son. Indeed, his decision to remain an involved Jew on every other level other than blessings was, I imagine his own form of rebellion against a G-d he was not quite ready to forgive.

And yet, blessings are not really about saying thank you. The Hebrew word for 'thanks' is *todah*, which is very different from the Hebrew word for blessing which is *'bracha'*.

In fact, thanksgiving is an entirely different topic, and we do in fact have many blessings that are about thanksgiving such as the *'Modim'* prayer (in the silent Amidah) and the *'Nodeh Lecha'* blessing after meals.

So, what is the meaning of the word *'brachah'* (blessing)?

When Hashem (G-d) blesses Avraham, the verse in Genesis says:

*"Va'Hashem Beirach et Avraham Bakol."
"And G-d blessed Avraham with everything."*

And the commentaries there suggest that Hashem actually blessed Avraham by increasing his wealth as well as his progeny. **Rav Soleveitchick** suggests that this is indeed the true nature of the word '*bracha*': to *increase*.

When you are blessed, something is increased, whether it is the joy in your life, your sense of fulfillment or even having more children. In fact, when you bless someone that their business should be successful you are really hoping they will earn more money.

So how do we bless Hashem, and why does Hashem need our blessing? Obviously, Hashem doesn't need our blessings; rather, *we need* to be blessing Hashem. Blessing G-d is, quite simply, the art of increasing Hashem's presence in our lives, and in all that we do.

Thus, blessing G-d when you are eating an apple is actually a conscious decision to elevate the simple act of eating an apple into an opportunity to appreciate G-d's presence in my life. By making a blessing over an apple we allow this apple to become a vehicle for increasing Hashem's presence in our life, which of course not only elevates the act of eating an apple, but elevates as well the person eating the apple.

Which leaves us with the question of why the blessing for bread seems so much more involved than for other foods?

In truth, what separates bread from other types of food, is not the food item itself, but rather what we do with it.

Interestingly, in the portion of *Shoftim*, (Devarim 20: 5-7) which we will read in a couple of weeks, the Torah tells us that there are three instances (aside from being afraid) that allow someone to be exempt from going to battle (if it is a war of expansion or economic security (*milchemet reshut*), as opposed to a war being fought to save the Jewish people from destruction or *milchemet mitzvah*).

If someone has built a new home (and has not yet lived there), planted a vineyard (whose vintage he has not yet savored), or betrothed a woman (but has not yet married...), he need not go to such a war. And the **Baruch She'amar (Rav Baruch HaLevi Epstein** also known as the **Torah Temimah**) points out that these three instances represent a growing appreciation of the nature of our partnership with G-d. When a person builds a home, he often feels as though he has built it himself, and he revels in the pride of his accomplishment. But when a person plants a vineyard, he is much more aware of how much he is really in partnership with G-d, because without the rains, nothing he planted would have grown, so he is much more aware of Hashem as responsible for all the good he is experiencing. And of course, when marrying and having children, it becomes even clearer that we are just vehicles for G- d's plan. We are, on the one hand, blessed to be in partnership with G-d in bringing life into the world, and yet very much aware of how fragile life truly is, and how much Hashem is really responsible for all the good we have in our lives.

When a person goes to war, he actually has to find the balance between placing himself completely in Hashem's hands while at the same time recognizing that G-d wants us to be partners in making the world a better place.

After all, if we truly believed G-d runs the world then we wouldn't bother bringing our guns to battle because it's all in G-d's hands anyway, right?

And yet Judaism suggests that Hashem very much wants us as partners in building this world, hence its creation as an unfinished project....

And of course, this is not because Hashem needs our help to fight, or to finish planting the field. Rather, this is part of Hashem's gift to us; it is we who gain from the process of being partners in building this world.

All of which brings us back to the wheat growing in the field.

The Talmud (in tractates Berachot and Shabbat 74b) tells us there are ten processes in making bread. (Hence the ten words of the blessing over bread: the '*Hamotzi*'...) We come to an empty field, but if we watch it and wait for it to grow bread it will be a long wait!

We plough and then sow seeds, reap the grain and then thresh and winnow, gather and divide, eventually making and kneading the dough and then baking it into what finally becomes bread. It takes a lot of work to make bread, which is why, according to some commentaries; it was specifically bread (known as the *lechem hapanim* or show bread) that was put on 'show' in the Temple every week.

Fruit in the fields was essentially a gift from G-d; once the trees are planted all they need is water, and the fruit will arrive. Thus, they represent G-d's gift to us. Bread on the other hand, which takes so much work, represents our gift back to G-d. Bread is all about what we choose to do with the world that G-d gives us.

(Indeed, this is the essence of understanding why the challenge G-d gave Adam after the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge was that we would eat bread 'by the sweat of our brow...'. We did not fully appreciate the gifts (the Garden of Eden) G-d gave us, so now we would need to earn them...

Bread then, is the ultimate expression of our partnership with G-d, and as such creates a much greater sense of the presence of G-d in our lives.

And the more we are willing to be partners in bringing G-d into our lives and into this world, the higher level the world and us along with it, will reach....

In these times filled with so many challenges, and with so much work needed to create a better society, the daily act of blessing our bread, serves as both a reminder as well as an inspiration of how different the world could be, if only we were all willing to make it so....

Shabbat Shalom from Yerushalayim,

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* the story in the email was later found to be a hoax, but it still makes a great story!