

Nesiya Seder Supplement 5772/2012 *Entering the Land: Limitedness and Gratitude*

Sources for Reflection

Entering the Land of Israel

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper. When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.

Take care lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, and His laws, which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God – who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end – and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers, as is still the case.

– *Deuteronomy 8:7-18*

Cultivating Gratitude

There are treasures of happiness all around us and within us. The problem is that we only appreciate them when something terrible happens. Usually when we become sick, we appreciate our health. When we lose someone dear to us, we appreciate our life. And we don't need to wait. If we cultivate the habit of gratitude we can significantly increase our levels of happiness. So, for example, research... shows that people who keep a gratitude journal, who each night before going to sleep write at least five things for which they are grateful, big things or little things, are happier, more optimistic, more successful, more likely to achieve their goals, physically healthier; it actually strengthens our immune system, and [we] are more generous and benevolent toward others.

– *Tal Ben Shabar, interview with bigthink.com, October 2009 (<http://bigthink.com/ideas/16653>)*

Gratitude and Blessings

Our Rabbis have taught: It is forbidden to a person to enjoy anything of this world without [saying] a blessing, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a blessing, he commits sacrilege... R. Levi contrasted two texts: It is written, "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds," (Ps. 24), and it is also written, "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man!" (Ps. 115) [why does one verse say that the earth belongs to God and the other say it belongs to people?!] There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other case after.

– *Talmud Berachot 35a-b*

Suggested Discussion Questions

- Share a story about a time that you felt particularly grateful. Did your feeling of gratitude inspire you to act in any new ways?
- When do you feel the most grateful – when you feel something lacking in your life, or when you have all that you need?
- What makes you act most generously toward others?
- When do you experience a feeling of gratitude for the State of Israel, and when do you feel a sense of pride or independence? How do these feelings affect your views about Israel?

Nesiya Thoughts

When are we most grateful – when we feel something lacking or when we have everything we need? What is the relationship between feeling limited or dependent, and deepening our capacity for gratitude and generosity toward others? And how are these questions connected to the experience of the Jewish people wandering in the desert and entering the land of Israel?

After every meal, Judaism teaches us to say *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals. By saying *birkat hamazon*, we express gratitude for the food we have received and eaten.

The Passover Seder emphasizes and intensifies the experience of receiving abundance and expressing gratitude. At the Seder, we tell stories about the unbearable experience of slavery, and recount the wondrous events which led to our redemption. After our festive meal, we conclude not only with *birkat hamazon* but also with the *hallel* service, declaring gratitude and praise for everything we have received.



The Rabbis base the commandment of *birkat hamazon* on a verse that comes in the middle of a speech by Moses exhorting the Jewish people not to forget the lessons they learned while wandering in the desert: "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deut. 8:10). Moses warns that upon reaching the Land of Israel, the wealth and plenty the people acquire may cause them to forget God, and see themselves as the source of their own well-being: "Beware lest your heart grow haughty... and you say to yourselves, "my own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:14-17).

At first glance, Moses's fears seem counterintuitive. Prosperity and well-being ought to fill us with gratitude. Why would the Israelites choose to deny their miraculous history and relationship with God at the very moment when they have so much to be grateful for?

Reb Nachman of Breslav writes: "A person must guard his memory very carefully, so it does not collapse into forgetting, a form of death of the heart..." For him, memory is a state of active awareness, whereas forgetting is to become willingly indifferent and closed. From this perspective, Moses can be understood to be warning the Israelites against actively forgetting God in order to give themselves credit for their own prosperity. The people can choose to feel successful and independent by arrogantly denying their past; or, they can choose to remember their humble origins and dependence in the desert, and be filled with awareness and gratitude.

The role of *birkat hamazon* is to protect us from the negative effects of "eating and feeling satisfied", to serve as a corrective to our desire to forget. In the moments when we feel most "filled up" with our own achievements, we remind ourselves that prosperity and abundance are precious gifts, and we choose to express gratitude.



For us today, remembering the importance of gratitude may be even harder than for those who entered Israel after wandering in the desert. We have such easy access to material abundance, so much control over our own destinies that we often forget how much we owe – to others, to circumstance, to God.

As a people, too, we are extraordinarily prosperous. For the first time in 2,000 years, the Jewish people has been blessed with the gift of sovereignty, and the State of Israel has become something we can easily take inordinate pride in. These verses, which come right before the verse about *birkat hamazon*, once again speak directly to our lives: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land... where you will lack nothing" (Deut. 8:7-9). There is great opportunity in having our own land, and also great danger. Like the early Israelites, we must be careful lest our "hearts grow haughty... and [we] say to [ourselves], 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.'"

Concluding the Seder with *birkat hamazon* and *hallel*, prayers of gratitude and praise, reminds us, both as individuals and as a Jewish people, not to forget the deep value of acknowledging the tremendous abundance we have been granted. By acknowledging our limitations – in the past and present – and declaring our gratitude, we move toward becoming more generous and kind toward others and the world around us.