

Parsha Potpourri

Parshas Eikev – Vol. 21, Issue 41

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(ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ד' אלקיך על הארץ הטבה אשר נתן לך 8:10)

Parshas Eikev contains the mitzvah of reciting Birkas HaMazon (Grace after Meals), in which we thank Hashem after we have eaten a meal containing bread. Many commentators discuss the tremendous value in saying this blessing with intense concentration and the numerous benefits and blessings that a person can receive for doing so. Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein recounts an inspiring story that demonstrates the power of Birkas HaMazon to alter people's lives in completely unintended ways.

A young Torah scholar in Yerushalayim went to a library to study a certain rare book that was not available in his yeshiva or synagogue. Since he knew that there were no kosher restaurants in the area around the library, he brought his lunch with him, and when he got hungry, he took a break to eat. At the conclusion of his meal, he recited Birkas HaMazon aloud with great fervor.

To his astonishment, the secular librarian approached him when he finished to ask him why he had said **שלא נבוש ולא נכלם ולא נכשל** - we should not feel ashamed or be humiliated, and we should not stumble - when the correct wording is **שלא נבוש ולא נכלם**, omitting the phrase **ולא נכשל**. The librarian explained that although she had recently abandoned the path of Torah observance, she was familiar with the text of the prayer because she had grown up in a religious family.

The young man, who had been accustomed to include the phrase **ולא נכשל** in Birkas HaMazon since his youth, promised to show her a photocopy of a page of a prayer book proving that there is a text of the prayer that includes this expression. However, to his chagrin, when he attempted to locate a source for this wording by searching the relevant books in the library, not one of them contained this phrase.

After the young man finished his research in the library, he proceeded to Meah Shearim, where, after many hours of searching, he discovered an old Haggadah that included the phrase **ולא נכשל** in Birkas HaMazon. Excited by his find, he photocopied the page. He then highlighted these words and drew red arrows pointing to them so the librarian would understand the purpose of the letter. Because he did not know her name, he sent it to the library with a request that it be delivered to the young woman who was working on that day. After mailing the letter, he moved on with life and forgot about the entire episode.

Many months later, the young Torah scholar received an invitation to a wedding, but to his surprise, he did not recognize the names of the bride or groom or their families. Although he therefore had no intention of attending, Hashem caused him to "coincidentally" pass by the hall on the day of the wedding, so he decided to enter and quickly survey the room to see if he recognized anyone.

After looking around and confirming that he did not know any of the members of the wedding party, he concluded that the invitation must have been sent to him by mistake and turned to leave. However, before he could do so, someone approached him and said that the bride desperately wanted to speak with him.

At this point, he was completely baffled, as he was certain that he had no relationship with the bride, but as he approached her, she excitedly asked him whether he recognized her. When he responded that he did not, she told him that she was the librarian who had debated him regarding the proper text of Birkas HaMazon, and she cryptically added that the entire wedding was in his merit.

She explained that at the time of their interaction in the library, she was involved in a serious relationship with a non-Jewish man who wanted to marry her. Although she was no longer religious, she was still uncomfortable with the idea of marrying a non-Jew. Finally, her boyfriend grew impatient and gave her an ultimatum, demanding that she agree to marry him by a certain date, or else he would move on without her.

She went to work on the appointed day, confused and tormented about what answer she would give him. When she arrived at the library, she discovered the letter, which had circulated throughout the library for several weeks until finally making its way to her desk on that fateful day. She opened the letter and was astonished to see the highlighted words: **ולא נכשל** (we should not stumble), which she interpreted as a Heaven-sent message imploring her not to stumble by agreeing to marry a non-Jew.

This wake-up call helped her resolve her doubts, and she informed her boyfriend that she would not be marrying him. From that point onward, she slowly returned to the religious lifestyle of her family, and now she was about to get married and establish a new Jewish home, all in the merit of one passionate Birkas HaMazon.

(ואשב בהר ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה לחם לא אכלתי ומים לא שתיתי 9:9)

In describing how he received the Torah at Har Sinai, Moshe told Bnei Yisroel that he ascended the mountain to receive the Tablets and remained there for 40 days and 40 nights, during which time he did not eat or drink. Rashi quotes the Gemara (Megillah 21a) that says **אין ישיבה אלא לשון עכבה** – Moshe was telling them that he remained on the mountain during this period. As we already know that he was on the mountain for 40 days, why was it necessary for Chazal to repeat this point by telling us that he stayed there, and what lesson are they trying to convey to us?

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that the Gemara is teaching us that when we are engaged in Torah study, it is essential that we tune out distractions and remain fully engrossed in our learning. We may indeed have other responsibilities, but during the time that we are studying, nothing else should be on our minds.

Thus, Moshe informed the Jewish people that although he was only on the mountain for 40 days, he did not view himself as a temporary resident who would soon be leaving, but learned as if he was permanently residing there without any other concerns or considerations. Rav Moshe writes that emulating Moshe by being singularly focused on our learning as if there is nothing else on our mind is the key to succeeding and growing in our Torah knowledge.

Rav Yisroel Reisman adds that this concept is not limited to Torah study, and it applies to all mitzvos. In Parshas Re'eh, the Nesivos Shalom writes that a great Rabbi was once asked what is the most important mitzvah that a person should work on to improve his service of Hashem, to which he responded that the most important mitzvah is the one in which a person is presently engaged.

Chazal teach (Sukkah 26a) that **העוסק במצוה פטור מן המצוה** – a person who is involved in doing a mitzvah is (generally) exempt from other mitzvos, for our attitude must be that whatever mitzvah we are currently focused on is the most important mitzvah in the world, and it therefore deserves our full concentration and undivided attention.

Sadly, this lesson is all too applicable to us, as we live in an era in which it seems virtually impossible to concentrate on anything for more than a few seconds due to the constant beeps and interruptions emanating from our phones and electronic devices. Those who overcome the temptations and refuse to allow themselves to be distracted from their Torah study, prayer, and mitzvos are following in the footsteps of Moshe and will merit tremendous blessing and reward.

Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources that discuss them):

- 1) Moshe told the Jewish people (Devarim 8:5) that just as a father *will* chastise his son, so too Hashem rebukes them. Why did Moshe refer to future punishments that had not yet occurred instead of discussing those that had already transpired and to which they could better relate? (Yalkut HaGershuni)
- 2) Parshas Eikev contains the mitzvah of reciting Grace after Meals (8:10). How many of the 20 common Jewish names mentioned in Birkas HaMazon can you find?

- 3) How is it possible that the correct blessing before eating a food item is borei minei mezonos, yet the beracha after eating just one bite of it is Birkas HaMazon (8:10)? (Chayei Odom 51:17)
- 4) In his recounting of the sin of the golden calf, Moshe told Bnei Yisroel (9:21), “Your sin that you committed, I took it and burned it in fire.” Although Moshe took the physical calf and burned it, what did he mean when he said that he burned the actual sin, something that had no physical manifestation? (Shelah HaKadosh)
- 5) Parshas Eikev contains the second paragraph of Shema, which discusses the mitzvah of wearing tefillin. In what case might a person be told to wear tefillin on Shabbos? (Sefer Mitzvos Gadol Asei 3, Birkei Yosef Orach Chaim 31:2)

Answer to Point to Ponder:

1) The **Yalkut HaGershuni** explains that when a parent wants to intimidate a child to prevent him from misbehaving, he may take out a thick belt to show him what punishment awaits him if he does not listen. Similarly, Hashem is a loving parent, and it pains Him when He has no choice but to mete out punishment. Therefore, He alludes to the rebuke that awaits us in the future if we do not observe the mitzvos, in the hopes that this knowledge will prevent us from sinning and spare Him the need to implement His threats.

2) Including insertions said at various times of the year, the standard text of Birkas HaMazon contains the following 20 common Jewish names, in order of appearance: Baruch, Rachamim, Tova, Chaim, Nissim, Mattisyahu, Yochanan, Yisroel, Mordechai, Esther, Nossan, Dovid, Shalom, Bracha, Yaakov, Nechama, Eliyahu, Avrohom, Yitzchok, Adam.

3) The **Chayei Odom** rules that if bread was baked from grain that was grown in an עציץ שאינו נקוב – a flower pot without a hole on the bottom – it is not considered to have grown from the earth, so the blessing of Hamotzi, which thanks Hashem for bringing forth bread from the earth, may not be said. Instead, the proper blessing before the bread is borei minei mezonos, yet one is still required to recite Birkas HaMazon afterward.

4) The **Shelah HaKadosh** explains that every action a person does creates a corresponding malach (angel). Mitzvos generate good angels, while sins produce bad ones. Moshe recognized that burning the golden calf, although necessary, would not undo the spiritual effects of their actions. He therefore took the destructive malach that was created through their sin and burned it as well. Moshe related this information to teach that when repenting our misdeeds, we must sincerely regret our actions and accept upon ourselves not to repeat them in order to uproot not only the physical consequences of the sin, but the spiritual ones as well.

5) The **Smag** writes that three mitzvos are called אותות (signs) that testify to our special relationship with Hashem: bris mila (Bereishis 17:11), tefillin (Shemos 13:9), and Shabbos (Ibid., 31:13). Because Jewish law requires the testimony of two witnesses (Devarim 17:6), we must have two אותות with us at all times. During the week, we have bris mila and tefillin. On Shabbos, we have the additional sign of Shabbos, so we do not wear tefillin. Accordingly, the **Birkei Yosef** discusses whether a person who is not circumcised because his brothers died as a result of bris mila should wear tefillin on Shabbos since he lacks the אות of bris mila. However, he rejects this opinion because the Rosh writes that there is an actual prohibition against wearing tefillin on Shabbos, and because such a person only has one sign the rest of the week regardless.