

A Sense of Wonder
November 26, 2022 - Parahah Toldot
Rabbi Leora Kling Perkins - Temple Emunah, Lexington

Years ago, I was working at Camp Ramah in the Rockies, where electives include horseback riding, wilderness survival, and mountain biking. One of my jobs was to help the staff leading activities to incorporate Jewish learning and experiences into their curriculum. One of the rock climbing teachers came to me and asked me to create a small laminated card that climbers could bring with them on climbing expeditions, attached to their harness. She wanted this card to have on it the blessings that are known as *Birkot Neheinin*, the Jewish blessings of appreciation. As the climbers were pushing themselves, and overcoming challenges, she wanted them to be able to take a moment to notice what they had accomplished, and to appreciate their surroundings. If they had reached the top of a tall cliff, she wanted them to be able to say the blessing for seeing a beautiful sight, the blessing *oseh ma'aseh bereshit*, for the one who creates the wonders of creation. When they were eating, perhaps while taking a break from physically strenuous work, she wanted them to notice the food, and to say the appropriate blessing over it. If, during their trips, they were out in the rain, getting soaked, and there was a rainbow after the storm, she wanted them to say the blessing over a rainbow. She wanted those blessings to be a regular practice for her students, so that noticing and appreciating their surroundings would permeate their climbing experience.



I, too love *birkat neheinin*, blessings of appreciation, which are typically recited before enjoying food, smells, or unusual sights. I love the way that they help us be more mindful of our lives, and to recast as a blessing something that we might otherwise see as mundane. On Tuesday night, at the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association annual Interfaith Thanksgiving service, I shared a

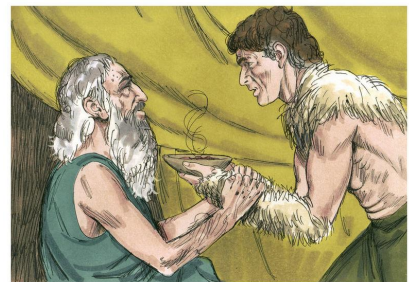


teaching from the Talmud in the name of Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa about this type of blessing: Anyone who enjoys anything in the world without offering God a blessing – it is as if they are stealing from God. This means that if I eat something, or drink something, without first saying a blessing, it is as if I am taking something that isn't mine, even if I bought it with my own money, even if I made it myself. A blessing, in the Jewish tradition, is a kind of payback to God. It is an acknowledgment of how

fortunate we are to have access to the resources that we do. It is an expression of gratitude and a statement of appreciation for what we have.

Blessings feature prominently in Parashat Toldot, but these aren't blessings of gratitude. They are blessings expressing a hope that someone will be given certain gifts by God. In Parashat Toldot, we learn that Isaac wants to offer a blessing to his son Esau, a blessing that he would have abundance, status, and military success. Instead, Jacob, with the help of his mother Rebekah, tricks his father Isaac into giving **him** the blessing intended for his brother Esau. When Esau discovers what has happened, he asks his father for another blessing. This moment is a critical point in the story.

How does Isaac respond? He says of Jacob, "I blessed him, now he must remain blessed!" And when Esau asks for a blessing, he says, "Your brother took away your blessing." It is as if, to him, blessings are a zero sum game. There is only so much of them to go around. Isaac gave Jacob all of the blessing, and there is none left for Esau. He even explains this idea explicitly in the text "I have made him master over you: I have given him all his brothers for servants, and sustained him with grain and wine. What, then, can I still do for you, my son?"



This is a terribly tragic moment. It is tragic for many reasons, but part of what makes it so tragic is Isaac's inability to imagine that he has anything more to give his son. His blessing to Jacob was focused on **resources** and on status—presumably his measure of his sons' well-being. He imagines that only one person can be supreme in these areas. Even when Esau begs, and Isaac does come up with another blessing, it still has baked into it these assumptions about what it means for a child to be blessed. He blesses Esau, "The place that you live will enjoy the fat of the earth. **Yet** by your sword you shall live, And you shall serve your brother; But when you grow restive, You shall break his yoke from your neck."

Isaac's blessing for Esau imagines Esau making the best of a competitive, subservient reality, in which Esau uses what strength he has to his advantage. It doesn't sound like a happy existence. Isaac seems to be limited here by his imagination. For him, blessings are the things that one person has that another person doesn't. It's possible that this worldview stems from his

own experience, where his half-brother Ishmael was thrown out of his family's house, in order to make room for **him** to be the sole inheritor of his family's legacy. **In Isaac's life, good things do seem to come at someone's expense.** Earlier in our own Parashah, Isaac builds a well, and when it causes conflict, he leaves. He does this repeatedly until finally, the local king allows him to stay. I can imagine how difficult it must have been for him, to have to repeatedly put in so much work, only to do it again, and again. I can see why he might have wanted his son to have total control over his life, and not to have to deal with any kind of physical or personal hardship.

One person's happiness, however, doesn't have to be at the expense of someone else. It may be easier to say that when we have our basic needs met, but the ability to enjoy and be grateful for the things we have, whatever they are, is an amazing gift all on its own.



What I think is wonderful about the *Birkot Nehenin*, the blessings of appreciation is that they allow us to notice, and be grateful for, even things that aren't ours. Tonight, a group of us will gather to say Havdalah, the prayer marking the end of Shabbat, and we will say the blessing over fragrant spices. You don't have to own those spices in order to smell them, and by smelling them, you aren't diminishing someone else's ability to enjoy them. We can all enjoy those same spices together, and in fact, doing so together can make it even more special. Likewise, when we say a blessing over a beautiful view, or on seeing the ocean, we aren't suggesting that we have ownership over those things. We are simply being grateful that these things exist, and that we are able to appreciate them.

Something else that I like about *Birkhot Nehenin* is that when we take them seriously, they can help us turn things into blessings. Before I say a blessing, I may have an apple, but afterwards, I have transformed the apple into something I can be grateful for. I may be exhausted, wet, or cold, but if I notice how special something is, that can completely change my mood. Gratitude can transform our experience of the world, when we are fortunate enough to be able to experience it. It can turn everyday experiences into gifts.



When we think about blessings that we may wish for those around us and for ourselves, there are many worthy things that we may wish for. Among them, let us strive to seek and to hold up the blessings that are not zero-sum blessings. May we be blessed with the ability to appreciate the things that we have that we can share, and to experience the world with a sense of awe and wonder.