



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL

TEFILLA

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Birchat Haaretz

Last week, my seventeen year old daughter returned home from a week-long מסע שורשים (“roots journey”) in which she, together with her classmates, delved into their roots. This wasn't a trip to Poland to discover their heritage but rather a trip around Israel in which they focused on building their own identities. In order to understand who they themselves are, they needed to explore their relationship with Eretz Yisrael, Am Yisrael, and Torat Yisrael (through activities as varied as farming the land, interviewing random people on the streets of Tel Aviv, and learning Torah with Rabbanim of Mercaz HaRav). All of these relationships are intrinsically connected. As I began delving into the second bracha of ברכת המזון for this week's article, I noticed again this idea of the inter-connection between these three relationships and it reminded me of my daughter's experiences.

The second bracha of Birchat Hamazon is known as ברכת הארץ and it consists of the two paragraphs of ועל הכל and נודה לך.

נודה לך ה' אלקינו על שהנהיגתם לאבותינו ארץ חמדה ורחבה ועל שהוצאתנו ה' אלקינו מארץ מצרים ופדיתנו מבית עבדים ועל בריחתך שחתמתם בבשרנו ועל תורתך שלמדדתנו ועל חקיך שהודעתנו ועל חיים חן וחסד שחוננתנו, ועל אכילת מזון שאמתה זן ומפרגנס אותנו תמיד, בכל יום ובכל עת ובכל שעה

In this paragraph, we now move beyond thanking Hashem just for our food, to thanking Him for the source of the food – the Land. This makes a lot of sense - if we want to thank Hashem in a comprehensive way, it's only logical to continue our train of thanksgiving with the natural source of our sustenance. One would expect then that the paragraphs of נודה לך and ועל הכל would be full of praise for Eretz Yisrael, describing its natural resources, its fertile ground, its beautiful scenery, and its bountiful crops in detail. And yet...the only words describing Eretz Yisrael in these paragraphs is when we thank Hashem for giving our forefathers “ארץ חמדה טובה ורחבה”, a desired Land of good and expanse. These are very nice accolades, but what are the rest of the two paragraphs devoted to? How can we call this ברכת הארץ when we then go on to seeming tangents about Hashem taking us out of Mitzrayim, Brit Milah, and receiving the Torah?

Our Rabbis tells us that this bracha was composed by Yehoshua as he led the Jewish people into Eretz Yisrael. What was on his mind when he entered into the Land? I am sure he did notice its beauty and bounty, and yet that was not his focus. Instead, he was overwhelmed by the thought that Bnei Yisrael had finally reached their ultimate destination and purpose. ועל שהוצאתנו ה' אלקינו. The entire story of the slavery in Egypt, the miraculous redemption, and the years of wandering in

the desert, had come to a close. The goal of all of these years was to get this moment. The Jewish people had gone through the fiery furnace of slavery, the clear witnessing of G-d's Hand, and the "Midbar school" where they learned about dependence of Hashem, all in order for them to be ready for this stage, to form a nation who would then be worthy to inhabit the Land of Israel, the Land of the destiny of the Jewish people. These must have been the overwhelming and incredible thoughts that were pushing forward in Yehoshua and his people's heads as they "stepped off the plane" into Israel.

But their thoughts (and the bracha) don't end there. Yehoshua also takes note of the fact that living in Eretz Yisrael is conditional. Just because Bnei Yisrael finally arrived in Israel, it doesn't mean that they will also be able to stay or that the Land will continue to yield its fruits. These conditions are *ועל בְּרִיתְךָ שְׁחַתְמָהּ בְּבִשְׁרֵנוּ* - the Brit Milah – becoming part of the Jewish nation and *ועל תּוֹרָתְךָ שְׁלַמְדֵּתֵנוּ וְעַל חֻקֵּיךָ שֶׁהוֹדַעְתָּנוּ* - living by the words of the Torah. Only when we have a combination of all three – living in Eretz Yisrael, forming a Jewish nation, and following the Torah, can we really fill our role as the chosen people.

ועל הכל ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ מוֹדִים לְךָ וּמְבַרְכִים אוֹתְךָ, יִתְבָּרַךְ שִׁמְךָ בְּפִי כָל חַי תָּמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, כְּכַתּוּב: וְאָבִלְתָּ וּשְׁבַעְתָּ, וּבִרְכַתְּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' עַל הָאָרֶץ וְעַל הַמְּזוּן.

The words of the second paragraph of this

bracha, ועל הכל, have recently become a new Israeli hit (if you are not familiar with the song, search "ועל הכל" on Youtube). This new song takes these words that roll off of our tongues so quickly that they no longer have any meaning, and infuses them with new energy and significance. This paragraph is a sudden emotional outpouring of thanksgiving once we have finished listing all the good that Hashem has granted us – physically, spiritually, nationally, and individually.

We conclude the bracha by stating that this feeling of overflowing gratitude is a fulfillment of the pasuk "ואכלת ושבעת וברכת" – "you will eat, be satisfied, and bless". Rabbi Eliyahu Munk in his book *עולם התפילות* points out that though we usually read this pasuk as a command and as the source for the mitzvah of bentching, here we read it as a promise. Hashem promises us that things will be good for us in Eretz Yisrael, we will have plenty to eat, we will be satisfied with what we have, and we will be so thankful that we will spontaneously be full of thanks to Hashem.

Let us try to take the extra minute to read the words slowly or out loud, or to even sing them with a new tune, so that we can tap into this abundant feeling of gratitude for what we have been given. ■

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