



SCHECHTER

Personal Theologies

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When I decided to become a Jewish Educator I did so because I wanted to help young adults learn about their religious traditions and better what they believe (i.e. to be a guide on their journey). In order to do this effectively, I give my Middle School students an assignment to write what they believe about God, miracles, prayer and their role in Judaism (their own personal theology). It is a very difficult assignment. For most tweens and teens, they have never thought about what they believe, but fall back on what their parents tell them to believe. It is an exercise in truly understanding who you are and how faith impacts the way that you live your life.

I give the assignment two times during the Middle School experience. The first towards the beginning of 6th grade and the second time just before 8th grade graduation. I try not to give much direction other than the words, God, miracles, believe, and to write about what they personally feel. Over the course of the three years of Middle School, students are exposed to new understandings of Jewish History, the role of God, the meaning of our prayers and the students' role in Tikun Olam (fixing the world). During these years, students have their B'nai Mitzvah and begin to think more about how things affect them and how they in turn have a hand in their own development.

I love this assignment because it allows me to get to know the students better and it challenges them to do some introspection.

One of my students, made a wonderful insight in his essay. He said (to paraphrase) that even though people don't see big miracles today, like the splitting of the sea, miracles do occur. He goes on to say that when he had surgery and survived, that was a miracle of God.

Each of us has a different perspective on miracles. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, through a concept called Radical Amazement, feels that miracles can be found all around us. A tree can be seen as a miracle of God. An ocean, a sunset, a renowned scholar are all miracles. All we need to do is realize that it is Godly.

In this week's Parsha, Eikev, we are given the commandment to say Birkat Hamazon. D'varim chapter 8, verse 10 states, "You will eat and you will be satisfied and bless Hashem, your God, for the good land that He gave you".

According to tradition, the original purpose of Birkat Hamazon was to thank God for the manna that he provided the Jews while wandering in the desert.

Most of the miracles that we think of from Biblical times (the crossing of the sea, the great flood, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the bush that was not consumed, etc.) occur only one time. The miracle of the manna, however, happened every day (save Shabbat) for 40 years. The only other miracle (according to commentators) to occur more than one time is that the clothes and shoes that B'nai Yisrael wore when they left Egypt, were the same clothes and shoes that they entered into Canaan 40 years later. The clothing never wore down, became dirty or became too small on people.

These two miracles are often overlooked, yet must have been great miracles, if they occurred daily for 40 years (that would be roughly 12,500 times). And keep in mind that this was a miracle for each person.

We take a lot of things for granted. We fail to realize that miracles surround us on a daily basis. We don't take the time to see the Godliness in all that is around us.

Birkat Hamazon is an opportunity for us to maintain humility (this is why we say it immediately after we eat, before going about any other activity, lest we forget to say it). By saying Birkat Hamazon, we realize that though we might have made a delicious meal, without God, we would not have been able to make it.

It allows us to become a partner with God in creation. God gave us wheat; he did not give us Challah.

When we see ourselves as God's partners, we enable miracles to occur. For some of us it takes surviving a surgery, for others, they may still be waiting – they may be looking for a guide for their journey.

Wherever we are on our journey we must make sure to never stand still too long and to always move forward.

AS A FAMILY:

Discuss your thoughts about God. Share how you came to the spot on your journey where you stand today.

Make it a point to say the Birkat Hamazon as a family.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What are the rewards that God will give for following his commandments?
2. With what will the land of Israel be blessed?
3. What previous sin does Moshe remind the people of?
4. What part of the Shema can be found in this week's Parsha? How does it tie in with Chapter 8, verse 10?