

# BUILDING ON OUR BLESSINGS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch*

Last week's Torah portion (Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:4-9) contained the initial chapter of the "Shema", "Listen Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One." The Shema is not merely another Biblical declaration of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish nation. We are instructed to recite the chapters of the Shema twice daily as a reacceptance of G-d's dominion over the world and every facet of our lives. Living in a democratic society we strain to imagine the awe, reverence and subordination one used to feel as he approached a king of an earthly kingdom, but we are obliged to generate those emotions as we approach the King of Kings.

This week's portion of Eikev includes the second chapter of the Shema (11:13-21). It is part of Moshe's continuing monologue throughout the Book of Devarim, reviewing with the entire Jewish nation their intimate relationship with G-d, the blessings which have and will continue to come to them if they follow His word and the desertion and exile they will suffer when they abandon G-d's way. In describing the blessing, the verse (15-16) states "And I will provide you with grass in your fields for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied. But beware for yourselves, lest your heart be seduced and your turn astray and serve other gods..." Rashi notes the juxtaposition of the two concepts, elucidating that care needs to be exercised when we are satiated, because people do not turn their backs on G-d in times of distress, only times of comfort. Nevertheless, this appears to be quite a leap: because of satisfaction and contentment a people would go so far as to serve other gods? How could a nation that has received so much blessing because of their dedication and devotion to Hashem be so completely turned around to forsake Him for false deities?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor of his time and foremost leader of Jewry) explains that this is not an abrupt change. The key is the progression of the seduction of the heart to turning astray to serving other gods. The luxury and prosperity of the divine blessing produces a haughtiness of heart that breeds a disregard of the truth that G-d's grace is the wellspring of the good fortune (as described in Devarim 8:14) that then seduces the heart to pursue the mundane. This pollution of the spirit gradually evolves into turning astray from the sublime until G-d is totally forsaken. We are, therefore, warned to beware of the primary threat: G-d will give you physical blessings to make it easier for you to serve Him and to allow you to sanctify the earthly domain by using it in your service of Him; do not let it cause complacency in your service and distraction from your goals, because the end result, as distant as it may appear, will be tragic.

But we are told the tragic will happen and it has. The Tisha B'Av we experienced not quite two weeks ago is the anniversary our almost two millennia of exile. So what is the way back to G-d? How do we bring our redemption?

Earlier in this week's portion is the description of the bounty the Jewish people will have in Israel. "You will eat and be satisfied and bless Hashem your G-d for the good land He gave you." (8:10) This verse is the basis of the commandment to recite Grace after Meals after a satiating bread based meal. The Talmud (Berachos 20b) relates Rabbi Avira's teaching how G-d explains His affinity for the Jewish people: "I have commanded them to recite the Grace after Meals after they are satisfied, but they have instituted to bless Me even if they eat a piece of bread as small as...an olive." Rabbi Feinstein expounds that even one who possesses the greatest wealth appreciates that the olive sized morsel of bread he now eats comes as a gift from Heaven at this moment; that even with all of the amassed riches and splendorous spread of delicacies on the table, he grasps that the gift is not completely bestowed until it is consumed and enjoyed. With the comprehension that every morsel is its own gift, we bless and thank Hashem just the same for an olive sized piece of bread or a five-course banquet. Thus we can answer the question of why the Grace after Meals includes a supplication for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the heralding of the Messianic era, an obvious difficulty given the apparent incongruity of the two concepts. To the contrary, explains Rabbi Feinstein: the statement of faith in G-d for his complete and absolute dominion over the world that is intrinsic in the Grace after Meals is so impactful that in the merit of such faith in G-d's omnipotence we deserve to be redeemed!

It should not surprise us that the exile brought about by an abuse of G-d's benevolence can be turned around by an absolute statement of faith proclaiming the kindness inherent in every minute detail of His generosity. This opportunity to influence the course of history is but another of Hashem's magnificent gifts...we just need to appreciate our potential.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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Kol HaKollel is a publication of the Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies 5007 West Keefe Avenue; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; 414-447-7999