

# TRUE WEALTH

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

This week's parsha, Naso, contains the well-known Birkas Kohanim, the priestly blessing with which Aaron and his sons are to bless the Jewish nation. "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem enlighten His countenance to you, and give you grace. May Hashem lift His countenance towards you, and give you peace." (6:24-26)

Regarding the third blessing, the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 11:4) records an interesting discussion between the Almighty and His administering angels:

"Master of the Universe: You have written in Your Torah, 'May Hashem lift His countenance towards you etc.' How is this possible? Is it not written in the Torah [regarding Hashem], 'Who does not lift a countenance [i.e. show favouritism], and does not accept bribery?' (Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:17)' Replied the Almighty: How should I not lift My countenance towards them? I wrote in the Torah (Devarim/Deuteronomy 8:10), 'And you shall eat, and be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your G-d,' [i.e. the obligation to recite Birkas HaMazon (Grace after Meals) only applies to one who has eaten his full]. Yet they bless me even when they only have a small portion of bread to eat - the size of an olive or the size of an egg!"

This is the sort of Midrash that, in the immortal words of Rashi, cries out, "Interpret me!" How does the fact that we "go beyond the letter of the law" by reciting Birkas HaMazon on less-than a full meal answer the angels question? And what indeed is implied by the vague and mysterious words "lift His countenance?"

The Gemara (Ta'anis ga) relates that R' Yochanan once met a small boy on his way home from yeshiva. "Tell me," he asked the young lad, "which verse did your rebbe teach you today?" "Today we learned (Devarim/Deuteronomy 14:22) 'A'ser t'aser, You shall surely tithe your produce!' What does it mean?" Said R' Yochanan, "A'ser bi-shvil she- tis'asher - Take tithes and you will surely become rich!" [This is a double entendre: A-ser means to take a tithe. A-sheer means wealth. Thus: Give tithes, and you will become wealthy.]

The Maor Eynayim (parshas Re'eh) asks: How is it possible to make such a bold promise - give tithes, and you will be rich? Are there not many people that diligently separate their tithes yet never become rich?

Chazal, our Sages, say (Avos/Ethics of the Fathers 4:1): Who is rich? One who is happy with his

portion. At first glance Chazal seem to be taking a moral standpoint. I.e. don't be jealous of those who have more than you, for true wealth is to be happy with what you have. Taken in this vein, the usual response goes something like: "Sure, I'm happy with what I have. But giving me what so-and-so has sure wouldn't make me less happy!" Or, "True - but happiness won't pay your bills."

In truth, the Sages are not simply trying to cajole us into avoiding jealousy by making glib statements that, "the main thing is finding joy in your lot." If so, they would say something like "Be happy with what you have!" When they ask, "Who is rich?" they mean it in an absolute sense. One may have the riches of the Rothschilds, yet if he is not happy - is he truly rich? If the real-estate magnate spends his days agonizing over that one last development that would "put him over the top," and make him the biggest land-owner in Ontario, or Canada, or North America etc., is he really any richer than the beggar scrounging for his next meal? At least the beggar's ambition is one likely to be satisfied. No matter how much one may have, it is still possible to fall into the trap of lusting after that one last thing he has yet to acquire.

The story is told of the big-city magnate who one day comes across a small-town fisherman, who spent only a few hours a day at work, after which he relaxed and lazily enjoyed the remainder of his day. "You know," says the magnate, "if you were to work a full day, you could buy a bigger boat." "And then?" "Well, then you could hire more workers, and catch more fish." "So?" "Well then, you could buy more ships - eventually you'd have a fleet of ships." "And after that?" "Why, you could move to the big city, get yourself a big house, and sell your fish there, where you'd make even more money." "And then?" "Well, you'd put aside some of your profits every year, and within a short time, you'd be able to retire." "Yes? And then?" "Don't you see it yet?! Then, you could move to a quaint, small village, and spend the rest of your days fishing and relaxing and doing what you really want to do!"

The riches promised by R' Yochanan - a'ser bi-shvil she-tis'asher/give tithes and you will be wealthy - do not necessarily mean, says Ma'or Eynayim, that you'll be blessed with big bank accounts and fancy cars. What it does mean is that you will experience the beracha of, "Who is rich? One who rejoices with his portion!" R' Yochanan derived from the Torah's wording that tithe-giving influences its giver to feel more positive about the blessings he already has in his life, and the ability to feel happy with what he has. While this blessing may not have the razzle-dazzle appeal of a big stash of bills, it is a rare quality in men, and one who acquires it is truly fortunate.

Kaballists explain that each of the phrases of the Birkas Kohanim alludes to different blessings that are bestowed upon the blessed. The words, "May Hashem lift His countenance to you," they say, contain the blessing of Osher - wealth. Perhaps, then, this explains Hashem's answer to the angels. "How can I not bless the Jews with wealth - i.e. with the ability to derive joy from what they have and to be happy with their lot? For I wrote in the Torah, 'And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless Hashem your G-d,' yet they bless Me even over an olive-sized piece of bread - by being scrupulous to recite Grace even over a less-than-satisfying portion, they demonstrate

precisely this quality, that one should thank Hashem for everything he has, even if it's less than "optimum." It is therefore only appropriate that I indeed bless them with the joy that the "true blessing of wealth" brings.

Have a good Shabbos.

*This week's publication was sponsored by R' Zalmen Deutsch, in memory of the beloved members of his family who perished in the Second World War.*

---

Text Copyright &copy 2002 Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Project Genesis, Inc.**