

The Use of “Blessings”

I chose the spiritual aid, “Blessings,” for my three-day participation of prayer in the Jewish religion, for several reasons. First of all, visiting a local Synagogue in the Portales vicinity was not a viable option, since there are none in existence as far as I am aware of at this time. Secondly, eating “kosher” foods was certainly out of the question, since that included the exclusion of meat mixed with dairy products and pork. You see, our youngest daughter, T- , turned 15 on Saturday, and she wanted to go out for pizza to celebrate. And though, I am quite conscious of the fact that I am not an expert on what is “kosher,” pizza certainly sounds like it would fall outside the guidelines of that sacred category.

Furthermore, even if the other two selections had been practical possibilities, I think I would have chosen “Blessings” anyway; because while surfing the web to understand my options better, I found an article on the BBC website titled *Prayer in Judaism* that really caught my attention and pricked my heart. I initially noticed the section under the statement, “*Jews, like other people of faith, pray in many different ways.*”¹ The writers went on to say, “*They pray so that their hearts can reach out to God . . . to express and exercise their beliefs . . . to share in the life of a worshipping community . . . , (and) to obey God’s commandments.*”² Since all of these statements were ones in which I could relate to my own personal prayer life, I felt an immediate, somewhat unexpected, connection to Judaism.

Later in the article under a different section, I read, “Prayer doesn’t just do the things that the words say . . . it changes **us**.”³ [*Bold print used for personal emphasis.*] The writers of this article stated, “*Praying with heart and mind and soul takes a person into a state of being that is different from their everyday awareness . . . prayer enhances a person’s closeness to God . . . (and) prayer enhances a person’s closeness to their fellow Jews.*”⁴ I knew that all of these second set of statements could be related to the practice of Christian prayer as well, but I had not taken the time to stop and ponder on these exact purposes of prayer in quite some time. Thus, my interest in this article revived my desire to be extra thoughtful of why I pray, more intentional in how I pray, and additionally anticipatory of the results of my prayers. God would supply the perfect answers. So, because of the combined explanations listed above, I began my participation of “Blessings” on Thursday night.

I must say that from the very beginning, I could tell that participating in the Jewish “Blessings” was going to be quite challenging for me, even though I was excited about doing it. You might not think so; because as a Christian, prayer is of great importance to me also. However, the technicality of my using particular prayers at specific times turned out to be rather humorous for me and my family. You see, one of the very first prayers a Jew prays daily is upon awaking, and my kids thought the idea of that for me was hilarious, since I do not wake up very easily at all! So, the debate in our household was exactly when do I say the morning blessing : when I sit up (as the Blessing card from www.hebrew4christians.com illustrated), or when my feet hit the floor, or when I really am somewhat awake? I do have one advantage here - meaning that, I really do have my very own HEBREW at my house; because, thankfully my wonderful husband, D- , well, “*he brews*” the coffee for me each and every morning he is not out of town. Consequently, I chose to say the prayer “after first opening my eyes”⁵ and when I was somewhat coherent.

I really enjoyed the “Blessings” prayed over the different types of food prepared for each meal. The “Mezonot, Blessing” over grains, flour, etc.: “*Blessed art Thou, LORD our God, King of the universe, Creator of different kinds of nourishment*”⁶ was used at all three meals each day. However, there was one glitch in the routine on Friday. It was my dad’s birthday, so we went to lunch at Chilies in Clovis. My parents and I said grace before our meal, but I did not use the “Blessings” at that time. My reasons included the special circumstances of dad’s birthday, the inconvenience of trying to explain to my parents, and the practice of an unfamiliar custom in a public place - which, all and all, got me thinking, how very understandable it is that the Jews correlate eating meals with community. Their meals are almost like worship services, and only those who understand the significance fully participate.

¹ BBC, *Prayer in Judaism, How to Pray*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/worship/prayer_1.shtml.

² Ibid.

³ BBC, *Prayer in Judaism, Three ways to pray...and there’s more!* http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/worship/prayer_1.shtml.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Modeh Ani Blessing Card, Back Side, www.hebrew4christians.com.

⁶ Mezonot, www.hebrew4christians.com

I also used the “Shehakol Blessing”, a general blessing for food and drink,⁷ at every meal. The “Ha’Etz Blessing”, recited before eating fruits that come from trees,⁸ and the “Ha’adamah Blessing”, recited before eating vegetables or fruits grown in the earth⁹ were used daily as well.

However, the one that touched me the most in the meal category was the reciting of “Birkat Hamazon”, grace after meals¹⁰. Not so much because the actual “Blessing” is beautiful, though it certainly is,

“Blessed are you LORD our God, Master of the universe, Who nourishes the whole world in goodness, with grace, kindness, and compassion, He gives bread to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever. And through His great goodness we have never lacked, nor will we lack food forever, for the sake of His great name.

For He is God, Who nourishes and sustains all, and does good to all, and prepares food for all His creatures which He created. Blessed are You, LORD, Who nourishes all. Amen”¹¹

- but because, it is obvious obedience to the command of God in Deuteronomy 8:10.

This passage reads as follows in the New International Version of the Bible,

“When you have eaten and are satisfied, Praise the LORD your God for the good land He has given you.”¹²

The writer then goes on to say, in verses 11-14,

“Be careful that you do not forget the LORD you God, failing to observe His commands, His laws and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”¹³

I began to wonder why Christians do not have a similar custom. I also began to see, in a new light, the importance of thanking God after the meal when you are full and satisfied; because, if you consistently thank Him when He provides for the most basic needs in life, the probability is that you will thank Him for all that is above and beyond that. This specific Blessing puts you in the practice of acknowledging that “every good and perfect gift is from above”(James 1:17).¹⁴

The “HaGafen Blessing”, the traditional blessing over wine/grape juice¹⁵ never came into play, because I do not drink any fermented drinks – not even for my cholesterol. I do, however, use soap for washing my hands – and plenty of it – because I have OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder. So, the “Netilat Yadayim, traditional hand-washing blessing: “Blessed art Thou, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us about hand-washing”¹⁶ has special meaning for me. I got sufficient use out of this precise blessing. Furthermore, I did use some of the various other “Blessings” throughout my three day trial period. Nevertheless, the ones mentioned above were the ones that stood out to me the most and came to be the most meaningful by the end of the period.

There is one more group I’d like to mention before closing and that is the bedtime “Blessings.” I did find these to be very comforting to recite when trying to wind down from the hectic days of school, children, and chores. It was really wonderful to focus on God as the “Giver of Sleep” and “Peaceful Rest” through the “Bedtime Shema” and more.¹⁷ My favorite “Blessings” were 1) “Blessed are you, O LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who created day and night. You roll away the light from before the darkness, and the darkness from before the light. Blessed are you LORD, Who creates the evening twilight, and 2) “Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou has redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.” I think when you consider the words of the second bedtime prayer along with the words of the morning awaking prayer; the combination makes a lot of sense. It is like putting two and two together or coming full circle. I actually learned the second bedtime prayer as a child in a different format that started, “And now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep . . .” It just may have been adapted from this bedtime blessing, for I am certainly unaware of where and by whom it originated. I really liked the first listed bedtime blessing in this paragraph, because it is so beautiful and reflective. I hope to commit it to memory and continue to use it as a part of my Christian walk.

Finally, the only other items that really need to be addressed are 1) how uncomfortable it is to use the formal language of thou and thine, and 2) noticing that some of the “Blessing” were more about God, than presented to God – or

⁷Shehakol Blessing, Back Side, www.hebrew4christians.com.

⁸Ha’Etz Blessing, Back Side, www.hebrew4christians.com.

⁹Ha’adamah Blessing, Back Side, www.hebrew4christians.com.

¹⁰Grace after meals, www.hebrew4christians.com.

¹¹Grace after meals, www.hebrew4christians.com.

¹²The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1985), page 326.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1985), page 2375.

¹⁵HaGafen, <http://www.hebrew4christians.com>

¹⁶Netilat Yadayim, <http://www.hebrew4christians.com>

¹⁷Hebrew Bedtime Blessings, <http://www.hebrew4christians.com>

so it seemed. For example, in the Shehakol Blessing, it says, Who by His Word¹⁸ instead of Who by Your word. On reflection of the above statements, I concluded two things. 1) I do not think it would hurt me any to make sure that I approach God reverently even if my language is not as formal as these specific “Blessings,” and 2) I need to be even more grateful for Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. Because of Jesus, we have access to come before the throne of God personally (Hebrews 4:14-16)¹⁹. Entrance into the Father’s presence should never become a small thing.

Thank you for challenging me to participate in this activity. I have really enjoyed it, and I have learned a great deal. I do believe it has accomplished the goals of moving me beyond an “everyday awareness” of my daily responsibilities - to a closeness with God²⁰ enhanced by the supplementary spiritual aid of “Blessings.” Again, I give you my thanks.

¹⁸Shehakol Blessing, Back Side, www.hebrew4christians.com.

¹⁹The NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1985), page 2353.

²⁰BBC, *Prayer in Judaism, Three ways to pray...and there's more!* http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/worship/prayer_1.shtml.