

Giving Thanks with Firefighters

Category: Devarim, Ki Savo

Israelis were very excited when their firefighter delegation was sent to California.

What was so unique about this occasion, and what does it tell us about the meaning of gratitude?

Firefighters Dispatch

Just a few years ago, a delegation of Israeli firefighters arrived in California to help fight the wildfires that were raging in the state.

They came in response to the call of the governor of California, who asked that states and countries around the world assist them in overcoming the disastrous fires. Israel, obviously, was glad to come to the aid of its closest ally and dispatched a delegation which included ten fire-marshals with extensive firefighting experience.

The mission was reported widely on Israeli news and brought Israelis a great degree of pride, because this mission set a precedent: It was the first time an Israeli delegation of firefighters was dispatched to - of all places - the United States of America.

Before they left Israel, the Minister of their department wished them well and said that their mission makes Israel very proud. "Today," he told them, "you are representatives of the entire Jewish nation, and you will no doubt stand out with your skill, dedication and self-sacrifice."

Don't be an Ingrate!

This week's Torah portion opens with the commandment of *Bikurim*. In the Temple Era, when a farmer would see the first figs, dates or grapes ripening in his field, he would tie a ribbon on them to mark them as "first-fruits." When they were fit to eat, he would gather them in a basket and join his fellow farmers for a journey up to Jerusalem, where they would come to the Holy Temple and deliver

them to the kohen.

Then there was a special recital. The Torah describes an entire monologue, where the farmer thanks G-d for taking him out of Egypt and bringing him to the “land of milk and honey” – which is why he offers these “first-fruits” to G-d.

What is the purpose of the mitzvah of “first-fruits”?

Rashi explains it in simple terms: “You declare to G-d that you are not an ingrate!” (Tavo 26:3)

In the Rebbe’s words: “It represents the recognition that G-d is the one who provides the abundance of fruits and vegetables in your fields; therefore, you bring G-d the first and the finest of those fruits and thank G-d for all His kindness.”

Too Many Blessings

But the Rebbe asks a question: What is so unique about this specific situation? “A Jew already has a constant feeling of gratitude to G-d for providing him with everything he needs!”

To be more specific:

Every morning, we begin our day by reciting *Modeh Ani*, thanking G-d for returning our soul and granting us a new day.

We continue by reciting the Morning Blessings, the eighteen blessings where we give G-d thanks in much greater detail:

One blessing is called *pokeach ivrim*, where we thank G-d for restoring our eyesight. Our eyes didn’t function during the night, so when we wake up and begin to see again, we thank G-d for the blessing of eyesight.

Another blessing is *zokef kefufim*, thanking G-d for the ability to walk upright. Yet another blessing thanks G-d for providing us with clothes and the ability to wear them.

There is also a blessing, *hanoten laya’ef koach*, where we show our gratitude for our restored energy. Just a few hours earlier we were exhausted, and in the

morning, we are awake and refreshed. It's a fascinating phenomenon, but it's so normal that we often fail to acknowledge it.

There is the blessing, "Who directs the steps of man": When a baby takes his or her first steps, it's a cause for celebration, and the proud parents make sure to video it and post it all over social media. On the other hand, elderly individuals might lose their ability to walk, and when they regain their strength, they need a therapist to help them relearn the skill. So, when we take our first steps in the morning, it's a reason to thank G-d again.

Attending to your physical needs also has a blessing called *Asher Yatzar*. Whenever our bodies function properly, we thank God Who "created us with wisdom." Young people may not appreciate the 'miracle' which takes place within them on a regular basis, but everyone comes to an age where they recognize the blessing.

So we are occupied with blessing G-d all day!

Before we eat, we "give thanks to G-d for bread" - reciting *Hamotzi*. After we eat, we recite *Birkat Hamazon*. We thank G-d again before going to sleep, and essentially, ninety percent of the siddur is thanks and acknowledgments to G-d for all his kindness.

Furthermore, the Rebbe adds: "Non-Jewish nations who recognize G-d and His sovereignty also have traditions of thanking G-d before eating and so on."

That being the case, the question arises: What is special about first-fruits? Even the name Jew - Yehudi - means thankfulness ("This time I will thank - *odeh* - G-d.")

'Give' Thanks

The explanation is that it's about the deed.

The Rebbe explained that through bringing first-fruits, a Jew expresses his thanks not only in words, but in action; he collects his best and finest produce, and personally brings it to the Temple.

Every day, we *say* thanks, but with the first-fruits, we *give* thanks. We physically

demonstrate our profound appreciation for G-d's blessings.

Since the day Harry Truman directed the UN ambassador to vote in favor of a Jewish state, Israel has been extremely thankful to the United States. They mention it at every opportunity. Every Israeli prime minister has endlessly thanked the American president and the citizens of the United States for their financial, political and military support. Countless streets, squares and institutions in Israel are named for individuals who helped the State of Israel.

But that occasion was the first time - or so it seems - that Israel had the opportunity to thank America not only in words, but with actions. It was the first time that Israel had the opportunity to give a hand, and to personally take part in helping their great friend.

That is why they were so excited.

In our day to day lives, it's important to remember that *saying* thanks isn't enough. We need to *give* thanks. Words are nice, but they don't do justice. That is why there is a custom to give charity every morning before prayers; because telling G-d that we are thankful is not enough. We need to back it up with deeds. When we do a physical Mitzvah, like charity, Tefillin etc., we show that we are ready to go beyond words and actually do something.

Rosh Hashanah is now approaching. There is no better time to demonstrate our willingness to back up our words with our actions, and to show true gratitude.

There is a Chassidic custom to adopt a new Mitzvah or positive behavior every year before the High Holidays. With this extra effort, we tell G-d that we genuinely appreciate everything he does for us, and we hope that G-d will make an extra effort for us, and grant us a happy and sweet new year.

(Based on the Michtav Kloli for Rosh Hashanah, *Toras Menachem* 5751 vol. 4 pg. 209)