

**Parshat Bamidbar**  
**May 26, 2012**  
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So I was sitting in a restaurant the other night and I asked the waiter for some water – was there ever a simpler request in the history of mankind? “Could I please have some water?” But it appears that in 2012 – asking for water is *not* a simple request – as this led the waiter to ask me – “would you like sparkling water, bottled flat water or tap water? Fortunately I said, “tap water will be fine!” As I suspect had I made either of the other two choices – bottled or sparkling – it would have led to a series of further choices to be made. There is a world of water choices in 2012 – just take a stroll down the water section of the super market and you will see what I mean – that there is even a water section to the super market really says it all!

Bottled water has become the one highest selling of all the bottled beverages and is even threatening Coke and Pepsi - although don't shed too many tears as the two largest bottled water brands are now owned by... you guessed it, Coke and Pepsi.

Water, water everywhere....

This morning we read the opening chapters of the fourth of the five Books of Moses - *Bamidbar* - and we realize what a different time our ancestors lived in as they really had a hardship when it came to water. Our ancestors journeyed from one camp to another, *bamidbar*, in the wilderness, on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land and we are told that one of their stops was at a place called, *Be'er*, which means, “well”. Then the Bible says: “Assemble the people that I may give them water.” And once they are all gathered we read: “Then Israel sang this song: Spring up O well, sing all of you unto it.”

Imagine when the waiter had asked me if I wanted anything – instead of a simple request – I had broken into song. I suspect that few of us have ever been tempted to organize a choral response to a bottle of Dasani or sing out when rejoicing over a glass of Poland Springs - but I don't think it takes too much imagination to empathize with a time when water was a precious resource and having enough was an occasion for communal rejoicing. To our ancestors wandering in the wilderness, water was a luxury because it was scarce, and that is why they showed such unbridled joy when they came upon a well. There is so much we take for granted in this land of abundance. I remember back in the '70's when we were making those trips to the former Soviet Union to make contact with Refuseniks - and one of the things that we were smuggling in, one the things they were most appreciative of, were Jewish calendars. Calendars! The kind you get from the butcher shop or the Funeral Home! These were a hot commodity amongst the Refusenik community - and the Russian Authorities knew that and they searched our suitcases as we were going through customs and when they found some - we were apprehended and held incommunicado for 24 hours, interrogated and finally expelled from the Former Soviet Union - all because we had a Jewish calendar! We throw these things away! We take them for granted. Did you know that there are more than 600 million calendars distributed in every conceivable way ever year in this country alone? Yet, I was thrown out of the Former Soviet Union because of one, because of a calendar.

Someone once coined the phrase: "If diamonds were as plentiful as pebbles, we wouldn't stoop to pick them up." Usually we set a high price on what is rare and hard to get. What we get easily or for nothing, we tend not to appreciate.

If you read the memoirs of the early Jewish immigrants who came to this country from Eastern Europe, you will find them again and again characterizing this country as the *Goldeneh Medina* - and they often repeated the exaggeration to friends and family still back in the "Old Country". The phrase *Goldeneh Medina* - came from a popular belief that here in America the streets were "paved with gold". Not only did this lead to the disappointment of many a subsequent immigrant who arrived to find that not only were the streets of the Lower East Side not paved with gold - they were in fact as dirty and destitute as the one's they had left in Europe. This was, they would discover - not the land of "golden streets" but of "golden opportunity" - and many of those immigrants would soon depart the Lower East Side for nicer homes and streets thanks to the promise of this great land. But, didn't it occur to them that such an image of "streets paved with gold" - was ridiculous. Did it never occur to them that in a city that had golden pavements, gold would have no bigger value than stone? There would be too much of it. In King Tut's tomb in Egypt, you will find massive amounts of gold and only a few touches silver in the inlay. If you ask the guide at the Cairo Museum, he will tell you that this is because silver was rarer than gold in the time of the Pharaohs.

Three times daily we Jews recite a prayer that says: *V'al nisecha she'bechol yom imanu* "and for Your miracles O' Lord which are ever with us." It is, in my opinion one of the toughest prayers to wrap our heads around. The prayer for miracles - that makes sense - who wouldn't be moved to say a prayer in the presence of a miracle? But *nisecha she'bechol yom imanu* "for miracles which are constantly with us? Why would we be moved to be thankful for things we have in abundance?"

We are surrounded by blessings without appreciating them. When we are in good health and have nothing to *kvetch* about, we take our health for granted; when our meals are set before us day in and day out, and we are spared the pangs of hunger, we take that for granted too. We have homes that shelter us from the elements, where we can sleep in comfort and enjoy our families around us, and it is all so commonplace, that we seldom stop to think about it.

One of my favorite prayers is *asher yatzar* the prayer that is included in the opening pages of our Siddur, one of the first prayers we recite every morning - traditionally the prayer that is said upon leaving the bathroom. This is always good for a laugh when I teach this to my students - "You mean Judaism has a prayer for going to the toilet?" Not only is the answer yes, it is one of my favorites. If you take a quick look at it on the top of page 63 in our Siddurim - you will find this simple yet beautiful prayer of appreciation where we praise God for "fashioning the human body in wisdom, creating openings, arteries, glands, and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design. Should but one of them fail to function by being blocked or opened, it would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, healer of all flesh, sustaining our bodies in wondrous ways."

I love that prayer. But the thing I love most about it - is that we are supposed to say it every day!! When I visit people in the hospital - they have no trouble appreciating this prayer. In fact many people compose their own version of it in one way or another. An artery closes, a vessel opens, a tube gets blocked and our whole world comes to a crashing halt. Things we

do not think about - become of life threatening importance. Doctors and nurses are attentive, machines are hooked up to measure every change or development, prayers are recited, family gathers around with baited breath. One of my favorite discussions in the hospital is the inevitable one that follows anesthesia - as all await the resumption of normal digestive functioning after that system has been suppressed during surgery. The stomach is not something that turns on and off like a light switch - and so everyone waits for the return to normalcy - and it becomes the main topic of discussion amongst otherwise proper and polite people - what then is the question of the day? "Did you pass gas yet?" Telephone calls are exchanged... "Did papa pas gas yet?" The rabbi comes to visit - "How are you my dear friend?" "All will be well as soon as... I pass gas!"

Yes the hospital indeed becomes a time when we are attuned to the miracles that are with us every day - miracles that we too often take for granted. That is why I like this prayer - *asher yatzar* - so much. Not only because of its obvious beauty - but because of when it is recited. Not in time of crisis, not in the emergency room or the ICU - but every day when we emerge from our bathroom and we pause to appreciate a body that is working properly - when we stop to thank God "*al nisecha she'bechol yom imanu*" "... for Your miracles O' Lord which are ever with us."

Example could be multiplied, but they all come around to the same point, "If diamonds were as plentiful as pebbles, we wouldn't stoop to pick them up."

What a sad aspect of human nature. Would diamonds be any less precious, any less beautiful - if there were more of them? Except for those who speculate in the sale of diamonds, would it really make a difference to most of us who use diamonds as jewelry, what their value was? I think the real challenge in life - is to learn to appreciate the common as much as the rare - the every day as much as the exceptional.

There is a concept in the Talmud: *tadir v'sheayno tadir, tadir kodeimi* - "If you have the common and the exceptional - the common takes precedence." It is a concept that is applied for example when Shabbat and Yontif falls on the same day. Which is mentioned first when we light candles?.. We say: "*L'hadlik ner shel...shabbat v'yom tov.*" We put shabbat first - even though it comes every week and the holiday comes only once a year - we do not abandon our regular friend, Shabbat, in order to embrace the exotic holiday that comes but once a year. First we acknowledge Shabbat than we welcome the holiday - *tadir v'sheayno tadir, tadir kodeimi* - "If you have the common and the exceptional - the common takes precedence."

This is the brilliance of Judaism. If we were wise we would learn to value and appreciate the everyday things in life. Someone once said: "You must have enthusiasm for life's precious things, or life is not going to have a lot of enthusiasm for you." People who count life's blessings are so much happier and content. Those who are blind to life's everyday miracles are really blind to life's goodness and beauty in general.

It's like the story of the man who called a repairman for his washer/dryer, which had been specially designed to do everything connected with clothes. The repairman checked the mechanism for a while, tossed in a pair of socks, turned on the switch and the machine proceeded to wash, dry and fold them neatly. After which it flipped the socks across the room and into the left dresser drawer. The repairman turned to the man and said, "This works fine. What's wrong with it?" The man replied, "What's wrong with it!! I keep my socks in the *right* dresser drawer."

Yes, too many of us are indeed blind to life's everyday miracles - and this is why we celebrate a Bat Mitzvah - to force us to stop and realize the value of what we have – our every day blessing which we are in danger of taking for granted. It is not so much that this marks the occasion of some new blessing as much as an opportunity to count the blessings that are already ours and to realize that we indeed have so much already.

What in fact do we celebrate today – that a young woman learned to read the torah? Mastered her prayers? No – that is nice but quite honestly – not a miracle. The miracle is that she is at all – that that she is yours – part of your life, today and every day – that is worth a celebration.

In today's Torah reading, the Israelites complained about the things they didn't have, the things they deemed necessary for a happy life - the challenge, say our rabbis, is to see "*nisecha she'bechol yom imanu*" "... God's miracles which are with us always."

The things we should value the most are the things that make our lives livable, bearable and humane.

Someone has written such a blessing with which I will conclude. It is called "***May you have enough!***"

May you have enough

Enough happiness to keep you sweet

enough trials to keep you strong

enough sorrow to keep you human

enough hope to keep you happy

enough failure to keep you humble

enough success to keep you eager

enough friends to give you comfort

enough wealth to meet your needs

enough enthusiasm to look forward

enough faith to banish depression

enough determination to make each day better than yesterday.