

Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg's sermon on the 2nd day of Rosh HaShanah 5765 (2004)

Travel back in time with me - back 99 years ago, to the year 1905, when this congregation was founded. Travel with me to a community of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, such as Hoboken NJ. Follow me into one of hundreds of Jewish restaurants and cafes throughout the New York area.

We see a group of a number of men and women in their 20's, dressed in fashionable clothing of the early 20th century in the United States. But they are surrounding one man of the same age, who looks like he just got off of the boat from Europe. He's wearing an overcoat, and a hat, and he has an untrimmed beard. As you get closer, you overhear parts of the conversation: indeed, this man DID just get off the boat, and he is the cousin of one of the other, more American-looking men, who is introducing him to everyone else. All the others address the new immigrant in English, even though they know that he could not possibly understand any English. But from their accents, you can tell that these men and women are ALSO new Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Perhaps they arrived just a few months ago, or a year ago at most.

One of them picks up the hat from the head of the newest immigrant, says in English "what a nice hat!" - and passes it around to the others, who examine it, giggling. And now the waiter comes over, bringing a glass of tea, and sets it in front of the newest immigrant. You presume that his cousin must have ordered it for him.

The newest immigrant sits, apparently perplexed about something. The others say to him, "what are you waiting for? There's your tea! Enjoy!"

And the newest immigrant says, in an uncomfortable voice, "*Anschuldik. Mein kappel. Ich darf mein kappel.*" And the others say, "Oh! Yes! His hat! He won't eat his food unless he has his hat! Oh, yes! SO let's give him back his hat!" And one of them presents his hat to him, and makes a broad gesture of placing it gently on his head - but a little over to one side.

And the newest immigrant then picks up his glass of tea, and says: "*Baruch ato adenoy eloyheinu melech hoolam, she-hokol niyeh bidvaro.*"

And then all the other young men and women begin to applaud - as if they have just seen a brilliant comedic performance.

I've just described a scene from the movie "Hester Street," one of the classic films about the experience of Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the last century. While, technically, the scene that I described is fictional, We know that similar scenes took place every day. Historians tell us that a disproportionate number of those Jews who came to the United States came in part because they were eager to leave the trappings of Jewish religion behind in Europe. They had such zeal to become Americans, that they sent an unambiguous message to the newest immigrants: such traditional Jewish practices as wearing a head covering when you eat, or saying a blessing before you eat, were "Old world" customs, that would mark one indelibly as a "Greenhorn" - as someone who didn't truly belong in the "New World."

But now let's fast-forward to the early 21st century. Let's look at the great-grandchildren of those who greeted the new immigrant's spiritual practices with such derision. Perhaps one does transcendental meditation for a half hour every day. Perhaps one does yoga. Perhaps one ties a red string around her wrist, and studies Kabbalah with Madonna. Of course I have no desire to disparage any of these spiritual paths; different paths may work for different people. (Then again, if you want to study Kabbalah, perhaps you shouldn't do it with Madonna.) But who knows if these descendants know just how much spiritual depth their ancestors threw overboard into New York Harbor on their way to a new world!

People often ask me how I decided to become a rabbi. The answer is, it was a gradual process, punctuated by some moments of insight and discernment. One of those moments was when I first began to notice blessings over food as a Jewish spiritual practice. I had graduated from high school and was spend several months studying and working in Israel before I started college. I was spending Shabbat with a young couple from Morocco, who I had never met before. I arrived at their home at about 4pm, shortly before Shabbat. And in an example of typical Israeli hospitality, they greeted me and said, "You must be hungry." and presented me with a plate of spaghetti and tomato sauce.

So I sat down to eat. And I began to eat. Big mistake.

I felt the hand on my shoulder of the father of the family, who asked if I was aware that Jews said blessings before food, to thank God for the gift of the food. I responded sheepishly that yes, of course I was aware of that, I had just forgotten. But truth be told, at that point in my life, it probably wouldn't have occurred to me to say a blessing before food. That seemed to me to be something I might do before I would have a "Jewish" meal, like a Friday night dinner, or a Passover seder, or a meal at a Jewish summer camp. But a snack in the middle of the day, when I'm the only one eating? What would be the point of saying a blessing over THAT?

I listened to my host, as he explained to me in simple Hebrew that everything in the world belongs to God, and it is only through reciting blessings that we receive permission to enjoy God's bounty. Then something happened that I had never seen before. He reached to a bowl of fruit that was on the table and pulled out an apple. He spent a moment gazing intently at the apple. It seemed almost as if he was picturing the void that would be introduced into his life if this particular apple had never existed. He held the apple close to his nose and inhaled gently.

then he closed his eyes, and very slowly he said the blessing - *baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam borei pri ha-etz*. And then he opened his eyes, smiled, and took a bite.

And I decided, I want to see that again.

By the end of that Shabbat, I was especially attentive to all the blessings my host would make. (And you can imagine that my host was especially attentive to all the blessings that I would make!) This was not how I had ever seen or understood blessings before. Seeing my young host from Morocco meditating on those 10 words before biting into the apple - made me realize: the mundane act of eating is saturated in meaning. Where I saw a little inconsequential snack, my host saw a moment of holiness and transcendence, prompting gratitude. Where I saw something

insignificant, my host saw something of ultimate significance. Aha. So THIS is prayer, I thought.

I had thought prayer was for God - But this seemed to be not so much for God as it was for **us**. Only later would I learn that this is how the esteemed medieval sage Moses Maimonides would understand ALL of Jewish prayer: not as an effort to have any effect upon God, but rather as an effort to have a profound effect on the individual. Or in the words of Abraham Lincoln, made more famous by John Kerry's quoting them in his acceptance speech this summer: We don't pray so that God will be on our side. We pray humbly that we are on God's side.

As we are celebrating our centennial, you have noticed that the number 100 is on my mind. Each of my sermons on these high holidays are connected somehow with the number 100. In fact, one of the most extraordinary statements of Jewish spiritual wisdom focuses on the number 100. It's a statement found in the Talmud: *Hayyav adam levarech meah brachot bechol yom*. Jewish tradition prescribes that a Jew recite 100 blessings each day. In fact, the first Siddurim, the first prayerbooks, came into being a thousand years ago to assist Jews in keeping track of these 100 blessings. 'Counting our blessings,' quite literally. Blessings for food, but also blessings for such things as the ability to see, and the ability to walk. Blessings upon seeing shooting stars and rainbows, smelling flowers and spices, seeing friends, putting on new clothes.

So let's do the math. 16 waking hours. 100 blessings each day. That's about one blessing every ten minutes. That means: moments of awareness, moments of transcendence, punctuating every day.

I will be honest. 100 blessings a day is a lot of blessings. For me, 100 blessings every day is something to strive for, but I don't necessarily get there. But I do know someone who gets to 100 - every day. In fact, I walked to school with her three times this week. From my perspective, I was transporting her to school. But from her perspective, we were going on an adventure. There were flowers to smell, leaves of various shapes and sizes and colors to collect, people to wave to and to smile at. Walking to school was a series of unique moments that had never happened before, moments to be savored. I am of course, describing my daughter, who is about to turn 3. And I could have been describing her older sister at her age, or any number of students in our pre-school here at the synagogue. She may not verbalize the words of the blessings all the time, but she is certainly saying 100 blessings every day. And when I DO verbalize the words of the blessings, that is MY effort to see the world just a bit through her eyes - trying to re-create what it was like when I lived in a world of adventure every moment, when puddles were oceans, when dead leaves were beautiful objects of art. My daughter needs no ritual to keep her 'in the moment.' In fact, the rituals that my daughter needs are the ones to help her to make the transition to awareness of the future, to which she is often oblivious, and to the past, which she has often forgotten already. But I need the ritual to keep me in the moment.

No surprise that right in the middle of the word 'spirituality' is the word 'ritual.'

I also know that, as hard as I try to protect her, the time will come when my daughter will experience great pain and sadness. At times, the world will NOT seem like a playground, or an art museum, or a place of stunning beauty, but rather as a thankless place of pain, of difficulty, and of loss. And this is why my greatest prayer for both of my daughters is that they retain the

gift of awareness that was their birthright as young children. This is part of the reason that I want them to learn to say Brachot. Because if Jewish tradition asks us to strive to say one hundred Brachot, that means that there are already at least one hundred blessings in our lives that are already there. We just need to notice them.

People sometimes ask me: I want to add a new Jewish practice this year. I want to do something Jewish that I didn't do before. What is a good first step? Different rabbis would respond to this question in different ways. Some would say, study the Torah portion. Some would say, begin to observe Shabbat, or to observe Kashrut, or put up a Mezuzah in your home.

All of these are fine answers, and of course I recommend all of these *mitzvot*. But most frequently, my answer to this question is: as often as you are able to remember,

say Brachot, say blessings before you eat. Not just on Shabbat. Not just in synagogue. But at work, at school, in the park, on the ferry.

A few weeks ago, I had the distinct pleasure of taking my daughters on what can only be described as a child's equivalent of a pilgrimage to a sacred shrine. I speak, of course, of Sesame Place - the amusement and water park whose inhabitants are the characters from Sesame Street. But here's something interesting that happened to me. While we were walking around the park, a man wearing a Kippah came up to me and said, "Mincha's at quarter to six, right by the entrance gate." (Referring to Mincha, the afternoon prayer service.) Apparently he intended to assemble a minyan, a prayer quorum for the afternoon service, right there at Sesame Street, or as Naomi referred to it, "Davening with Elmo."

Yes, this was more likely perhaps to happen to me than to some of you, because I was wearing a Kippah too. (And because I am male - but I prefer for that to be the topic of a sermon at a different time.) And so before leaving the park, I gathered with the minyan for the afternoon prayers.

Now this was an act that had many different dimensions. It was, for example, a very public demonstration of Jewishness. And whereas I think that public demonstrations of Jewishness are wonderful, and essential, that's not the agenda I'm trying to push this morning.

(And that really is an issue that is irrelevant to brachot, because saying a blessing before you eat can be done completely incognito, without anyone noticing, and it takes not more than 6 seconds.)

More importantly, though, our minyan at Sesame Place was an intrusion of the spiritual into the material world. That is what motivates me to use it as an example today. For those who are used to having prayer, and Jewish ritual, take place only in a synagogue or at home, praying in other locations can take some getting used to. But when one is in the habit of praying regularly, regardless of the location, the nature of prayer changes completely. Jewish prayer, and Judaism in general, ceases to be a merely a refuge. It ceases to be compartmentalized in one narrow segment of one's life, and it begins to be a lens through which one's entire day is understood.

The great theologian Max Kadushin noticed that Jewish prayers tend to be organized in series, in recurring patterns. And almost always, a series of blessings will begin by focusing on something

concrete, something that can be immediately perceived in the natural world. Then, after a blessing is said thanking God for that natural phenomenon, the series continues with abstract historical or theological concepts. We always start out, however, with something concrete. We let the MATERIAL lead us to the SPIRITUAL. And we can do the same in our lives - allowing the material to lead US to the spiritual.

Rabbi Wayne Dosick writes, regarding Brachot before food: “If this were offered as a business deal, you would grab it before the ink could dry on the contract. Your investment? Ten words recited in five seconds a day. Your return? A link to the Jews of the generations and to every Jew in the world today; the Jewish language on your lips; a daily reminder of your humanity; a daily expression of gratitude to God; [and if you do it in the context of a family,] new family ties and closeness. What a marvelous return for such a small and simple investment!”

So how do I get started? Inside your machzor you will find a card that looks like this..... It includes the texts of a number of brachot. If you're feeling daring enough to try a Jewish spiritual practice that is thousands of years old, then you'll want to take this card with you and carry it around with you.

Consider it your gift, from thousands of years of Jewish tradition.

This new year of 5765, may you be blessed not only with happiness, but with awareness and gratitude. And may the blessings in your life number into the hundreds every day!