

# Parenting in the Parsha

## פרשת עקב

### Happiness *Bentch*-marks

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את-ה' אל-יך על-הארץ הטבה אשר נתן-לך:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the L-RD your G-d for the good land which He has given you.

והיה עקב תשמעון. אם המצוות קלות שצאדם דש בעקביו תשמעון

If, even the lighter commands which a person usually treads on with his heels (i.e. which a person is inclined to treat lightly), you will listen to...

- Rashi

I've started to look at life differently. When you're thanking G-d for every little you - every meal, every time you wake up, every time you take a sip of water - you can't help but be more thankful for life itself, for the unlikely and miraculous fact that you exist at all.

- A. J. Jacobs

How do we raise happier children? Or, more precisely, how do we raise our children to be happier adults? Ours is a very depressed and unhappy society. In fact, in the United States, we spend around \$71 billion a year to treat depressive disorders. And, while clinical depression is a very real medical phenomenon that must be taken seriously and treated appropriately, the broader depression in society is due to a deeper cultural issue.

Psychologists have long noted the paradox of Western Society, where people generally rate their overall economic and social well-being very high and yet rate their overall satisfaction and joy in life rather low. In Eastern cultures, by contrast, people generally rate their economic and social well-being comparatively low, yet they rate their overall happiness rather high. There seems to be an inverse relationship between how well-off we are and how happy we are! Perhaps it is not how much we have that makes us happy, but how much we appreciate what we have that brings satisfaction and joy.

AJ Jacobs, an accomplished author, recently published a book, *Thanks a Thousand*, that detailed his attempt to identify, locate, and thank all the people who make his morning cup of coffee possible. The book is a humorous look at the very serious topic of gratitude and appreciation as he sets out to personally thank the first one-thousand people he identified whose work and efforts allow him to effortlessly enjoy his coffee each morning.

That book was actually an outgrowth of an earlier project that Jacobs had undertaken and documented for publication in *The Year of Living Biblically*. In that earlier work, Jacobs, a non-observant Jew and agnostic, took it upon himself to attempt to live for one year adhering as closely as possible to the precepts laid out in the Bible. Jacobs largely does not avail himself of the wealth of *Torah she'b'al peh*, and we would more closely associate his practice with the *tziddukim* or *karaim*, yet he learns some profound lessons about religion and life that resonate with us as well. One of those lessons involves the value of gratitude and the way to become a more thankful person.

Jacobs notes how he began to engage in daily prayer and especially in thanking G-d for every little part of his day, and how that, in turn, made him truly appreciate life and all its blessings. Jacobs discovered the power of *modeh ani*, of *tefilah* and of *brachos*.

Generally speaking, we do a decent job of training our children to recite *brachos*, to start their day with *modeh ani*, and to *bentch* after their meals. But, we do a poor job of educating our children to understand and appreciate the meaning of what they are doing. Hashem did not did not instruct us to *bentch* after each meal because He is in need of our *bentching*. Rather, *birchas hamazon*, like all of *tefilah* and *brachos* is more for us than for Him. If we make *brachos* and *bentch* properly by pausing for a moment to consider and appreciate what we have, then we are changed for the better through our *brachos*. If we train our children to pause and appreciate what they are blessed to have, they will grow up to value all that Hashem blesses them with.

What should you do as a parent? Help your child through the process of considering and thinking about all that went into the bounty he enjoys. Help him to consider the myriad things that had to go just right for there to be food on his table and a roof over his head. Take your children to farms and orchards where you can marvel together at the miracle of where their food comes from, and discuss it with them at your table. Open your child's eyes to the wonder of all that he is blessed with, and help him to understand that the *brachos* we make are an expression of that wonder. Do so, and you'll raise a happy adult who appreciates what he has.

**Good Shabbos,**

*Rabbi Yisroel Gottlieb*