

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Yitro 5781

In our religious parlance, it has become rather common to pepper our conversations with the expression of BARUCH HASHEM, "Blessed/Praised be Gd", when we feel grateful for some condition, event, or happening, as in: "Baruch HaShem, everyone is healthy"; "Baruch HaShem, I'm doing quite well"; "Baruch HaShem, the wedding plans are coming along nicely." Often, it is also said in response to the question, "How are you?"

In essence though, what are we actually professing when we utter such an expression?

As popular as this religious phrase is today, it is of vintage origin, harking back to Biblical times. It was first said by Eliezer, Avraham's loyal servant, upon realizing that Gd answered his request to find a suitable wife for Yitzchok (B'reishit 24:27). And in our parsha, Yitro also, upon hearing the miraculous event of the Splitting of the Sea and the victory over Amalek (Zevachim 116b), exclaims, BARUCH HASHEM, Who rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh ..." (18:10).

These sources raise not a few questions.

If we are to understand the phrase as an expression of gratitude, then the modi-

fier - BARUCH, appears somewhat imprecise. TODA LAKEIL, "Thank you, HaShem", or the like, would seem to say it better. And if the word means exactly what it says, "Blessed is HaShem", Gd certainly does not require our blessings. Moreover, the Talmud (B'rachot 54a) derives from Yitro's BARUCH HASHEM, that one must recite a blessing upon seeing a place where a miracle occurred even if - much like Yitro - one was not present at that event. But if you did not witness the miracle, why say a blessing at all, much less BARUCH HASHEM?

An even greater question though emerges from this strange and disturbing Midrash (Sanhedrin 94a): "It is to the discredit of Moshe and the 600,000 [Jews who experienced the Exodus] that they did not say, BARUCH HASHEM, until Yitro came and said [these words], BARUCH HASHEM. But did not the Moshe and the People sing the AZ YASHIR in the aftermath of the Splitting of the Sea? Was this not a magnificent praise of the Almighty? Why fault them because they failed to utter BARUCH HASHEM?"

Of course, to this last question, a number of answers have been proffered. However, let us suggest a very different approach based upon a remarkable analysis by Rav Soloveitchik into the purpose and meaning of b'rachot in general (D'rashot HaRav, pp. 1-37). In that essay, the Rav demonstrates that the phrase, BARUCH HASHEM means to praise Gd and not to bless Him. And as

to the question of why should Gd need man's praises, the Rav responds: "Although it rings heretical to assert, man must provide "assistance", as it were, to the Master of the Universe. Man must "help" Gd to reveal His presence in the world." In other words, by exclaiming BARUCH ATA HASHEM, whenever we recite a blessing, we are testifying to the actual immediacy of HaShem's involvement in our lives. In the Rav's dramatic depiction: "When one recites a b'racha, he is in essence saying, 'Master of the Universe, You are hidden behind a cloud; no one sees You. Yet, as I drink this glass of water, I reveal Your presence. The very fact that I can eat, that my body absorbs food ... the creation of food itself, is testimony to Your presence.'" When we address Gd with the words, BARUCH ATA HASHEM, we are affirming Gd's very presence before us; as if to say, 'Where are You, Gd? You are right here with me! How do I know? Because Your presence is evident in this water that I am about to drink!'"

To praise Gd then, in the Rav's formulation, is to perceive and experience the reality of the Divine in the everyday, to feel His presence concealed in the ordinary, in the mundane. Not just at prayer or in the performance of a mitzva, but also to sense and experience His closeness at work, in the market, at the dinner table, in the bedroom - to detect His presence everywhere! If so, we may submit that

not only via the bracha recitation, but every time we exclaim BARUCH HASHEM, we are also acknowledging and recognizing the omnipresence of the Almighty in all that we do. In a word, to praise the Almighty by uttering BARUCH HASHEM is to genuinely believe that HaShem is right here by my side, on my shoulder, as it were, enveloping me in His bountiful love. And the more we utter that simple phrase, the more we become acutely conscious and aware of His manifestation in our lives. Indeed, we are revealing His greatness and glory in the here and now!

With this insight, we may address the questions we posed earlier. Eliezer says BARUCH HASHEM and in so doing confesses that HaShem was directly involved in the extraordinary events that enabled him to discover Rivka for Yitzchak. And insofar as the difficult Midrash is concerned, the explanation might be something like this: True, Moshe and the People sang and thanked HaShem for the supernatural and spectacular miracles that took place. But what about the day after; did they understand the message of the miraculous and take it forward into their everyday lives? The Torah's narrative subsequent to the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea tell a different story. The People murmur and grumble. Rashi brings the Midrash (Sh'mot Rabba 26:2) that explains why HaShem allowed Amalek to attack Israel. "I am always among you and ready for all your needs,

and yet you say, 'Is HaShem in our midst or not?' I swear by your lives that [as a lesson] the dog [Amalek] will come and bite you."

Amazing though it sounds, the People, even after experiencing the Almighty shattering the laws of Nature on their behalf, failed to take to heart that these overt miraculous events were meant to educate and teach them to acknowledge the small and ever-present miracles that attest to HaShem's presence always and everywhere. In a word, they did not understand the importance of professing BARUCH HASHEM as a constant spiritual refrain in their lives. And Moshe, sadly, was unable to convince them to do so.

But Yitro got it! Although not a participant in the miracles, he understood its message. Just the mere report that wondrous and astonishing miracles took place would be enough to convince him that HaShem was involved in the affairs of man - every day and everywhere. And to accent and forever implant this spiritual reality in the hearts and souls of all, Yitro proclaimed, BARUCH HASHEM!

When we can live our lives with the firm belief that Gd is ever-present in all that we do, when we can declare that SHIVITI HASHEM L'NEGDI TAMID, "I have set HaShem before me always..." (T'hilim 16:8), then we become enriched with a spiritual perspective that can transform everything - how we think and how we

act. "When we feel the presence of the Holy One Blessed Be He, our thought processes become clearer, our emotions more finely attuned, our senses sharper, and our resolve more encompassing." (D'rashot HaRav, p. 11) Indeed, can any experience match that incomparable intimacy with the Divine?!

All it takes are two words to be said frequently - and with conviction and feeling: BARUCH HASHEM!