

Blessings Everywhere

The talmudic sages established brief blessings that make everyday events and perceptions into opportunities for spiritual awareness.

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

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Beyond the prayers of synagogue and home, which could be planned because the times for them were fixed, [in ancient times, as now] there were the events of everyday life that evoked blessings, often unexpectedly. Indeed, though often hard, the workaday world was conceptualized not as a daily grind but as an opportunity for prayers that celebrate creation and our human place within it. Still today, the performance of commandments like illuminating a home with Shabbat candlelight, for instance, evokes the words "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the world, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to kindle Shabbat lights."

But God's presence was likely to become evident not just in the moment when a divine commandment was being performed but at any time or place, like the breathtaking surprise of coming across a desert landscape or a redwood forest, for which one says, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who created the universe." The thinking behind these blessings that celebrate nature--not just its extraordinary manifestations but even such ordinary beauty as a tree in blossom--is especially instructive.

North American culture divides human activity into simple oppositions. We are either at work or at play, on vacation or on the job, in school or at recess. We instinctively treat prayer, therefore, as what you do when you are in synagogue (or church) but not in the office, the garden, the playground, or the car. Judaism takes just the opposite point of view. Though not all of life is holy, the holy can come bursting through the everyday at any time.

Jews were therefore to be ready for such occasions by reciting appropriate blessings for happening-upon the sacred: a rainbow, a flower, thunder and lightning, an ocean, a wise teacher, hearing good news (or even bad)--all of these occasions evoke a blessing from Jews, who know that prayer is an inherent part of life, not something reserved just for specific days of the week or year and for certain places but not others.

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