

Judaism - Berakah

As someone who identifies as an Agnostic, I admit that practicing a spiritual aid used in Judaism was fairly difficult for me. This is because I have nothing to adapt the spiritual aid to for my own religion. However, at the same time it was perhaps easier for me to do so as I had no feeling of “betraying” my own religion by using a practice of another. In this way, I could do so fully in the way the aid was intended without having to adapt it to accommodate my own personal beliefs. Essentially, my lack of belief as well as my lack of disbelief in any particular religion has made it both more difficult and easier to use a spiritual aid.

The Jewish spiritual aid I decided to try was the blessings, or berakhah. Researching the blessings, I was initially quite confused. There are quite a number of different ones to use at various times of day and in various different scenarios, also not helped by the fact that I cannot read Hebrew (the first decision I ended up making was to recite them in their English translation). I was also confused on what exactly was the point, so to speak, of the blessings. Soon, though, I did learn that the blessings are to “acknowledge God as the source of all blessings,” (*Wikipedia*). However, figuring this out did not mean that I fully understood the implications of what this acknowledgement meant. After all, as I said, though I do not disbelieve in God I also do not believe in him.

This however did not stop me from attempting to do the blessings to the best of my ability, though I first had to decide which ones to use. There are three types of blessings, the first done before doing something enjoyable, the second before performing a mitzvah (commandment), and the third before special times and events. The sheer number of different blessings immediately showed me that I would be unable to use them all, especially considering that I did not have the time to memorize the blessings themselves and when to do blessings like most Jewish people do. I also knew this because there are certain acts that, as a non-Jew who does not attend a Synagogue, and an Agnostic in general, simply would not make sense for me to partake in. For example, I would not be able to do the Sabbath blessings, the Synagogue service blessings, ones for holidays, ones for weddings, or ones for reading the Torah.

With this in mind, I chose certain blessings I could do (sometimes an entire “type” of blessings). I chose them from a comprehensive list found on a Jewish information site (*link provided under References*). I printed out the ones I knew I could perform and took these blessings around with me wherever I went for three days (September 7th to 9th) in order to make sure I remembered not only when to do the blessings, but also what to say. I even made a daily agenda to help me remember which blessings to say for the more time-oriented ones, such as waking up in the morning and when bathing.

On the first day that I used the blessings, I forgot to do many of them when the situation arose, though I did remember to do the time-oriented ones. For example, at lunch time I forgot that there was a blessing to do before eating fruit and ate an orange before doing the blessing. Because of this the first day was somewhat hectic, constantly double-checking that I knew when to do the blessings and still forgetting to do some of them and admonishing myself for it. The first day was also quite strange for me, as I was making blessings to/for a God that I do not necessarily believe in. More so than that however was that I was speaking to a God that I have not spoken to except in passing moments of pleading when I was at low points in my life for many, many years. To me, it was like speaking to someone you used to know in elementary school but grew apart from, then having a chance meeting with them at a café. Therefore I made no actual spiritual connection when doing the blessings, merely speaking them as if I were having a conversation with myself mentally.

The second day went by much more fluidly. I was able to recite many more of the blessings than the day before when I was supposed to, though I had to go over the list of them multiple times so as to not have a repeat of the experience from the day before. I also made the conscious decision to connect to some form of spiritual entity/force, if not God himself, as I did the blessings. To do so I relaxed and spoke more as if I was speaking to someone else, and not just to myself. Though this initially made me feel awkward, I quickly became accustomed to it and doing so became much easier as the day wore on.

By the third and final day I knew what I was doing. I only missed one blessing (one for smelling spices, doing so immediately instinctively when I was seasoning my pasta), and used a number of extra ones that I did not do on the previous day. For example, I did one for self-acceptance, giving strength, and meeting needs. Speaking to “God” had also become much easier, and I did so in a relaxed, happy way while also maintaining a sense of gratitude. Awe and reverence had not come as is typically wanted for the blessings, though. My beliefs are still the same as before and I simply could not be in awe of and reverent to something that I am unsure exists (amongst other personal beliefs about the Judeo-Christian God).

Partaking in the blessings of the Jewish people was a very interesting and fulfilling experience. For one, it helped me understand better the lengths that Jewish people go to in order to show their thanks and love to and for God. I was

given a better appreciation for the little things that many people take for granted, such as seeing natural beauty and eating food. Giving a blessing for these things helps you focus more on them, which leads to the heightened appreciation. I found that this heightened appreciation also led to heightened pleasure of these things, which I had not expected. Being able to derive pleasure from these little things also led me to be just a little bit happier, even if just for a moment, but these moments would add up during the day and result in me being happier throughout. This happiness is what I derive a spiritual pleasure from, as to me much of what this sort of happiness is, is one that makes me feel at one with the world on a spiritual level. Perhaps this is me connecting with God, or to Brahman, or to the spirit world, or maybe something completely different or nothing at all. Either way this was a very enlightening experience that I will remember and can easily look back to in order to help me appreciate life just a little bit more.

References

"Berakhah." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Aug. 2013. Web. 10 Sept. 2013. List of blessings: Parsons, John J.
"Hebrew for Christians Hebrew Blessings Pages." *Hebrew for Christians*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Sept. 2013.