# Thinking about Thanking: Thoughts on Parashat Bemidbar, May 23, 2009

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The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During this period, the old generation who had been slaves in Egypt died out, and a new generation grew up. The wilderness was the training ground for developing a confident and free Israelite nation.

Yet, it seems that bad news is news, and good news isn't as memorable. When we think of the Torah's account of the wilderness experience, we remember the Israelites' incessant complaints about food and water; their murmurings against Moses; the rebellion of Korah and his group. In spite of the fact that God provided for their needs in a miraculous way, the Torah seems to underscore the ingratitude and grumblings of the people.

Yes, there certainly were some complaints, and some rebels, and some disgruntled individuals. But all told, the Israelites were amazingly good! During a span of forty difficult years in limbo, there actually were very few incidents of complaining and rebellion. It would seem that most of the Israelites were grateful and happy for most of the time. Although the Torah doesn't focus on the vast "silent majority", they certainly were there--and they were the mainstay of the nation.

The long period in the wilderness taught the Israelites to show gratitude to God for His many kindnesses to them. As individuals and as a nation, they could not fulfill themselves without developing a deep sense of appreciation--not just for God, but for Moses; not just for the leaders, but for their fellow Israelites. The spirit of gratitude shapes the spirit of a nation; it imbues people with humility, with thoughtfulness, with genuine appreciation for the wonders of life. Perhaps the lessons of the wilderness were best encapsulated in the Dayenu passage in our Passover Haggada: we recount God's mercies on us, and are astounded by the overflow of goodness.

Recently, a class of second-graders in a Jewish Day School--including a child of our Congregation--was given an assignment by the teacher: write a short prayer that you would want to say to God. Most of the children asked God for things they would like to receive. Our young Congregant, though, wrote his prayer in three

words: Todah, Todah, Todah. For a second grader to have this sense of gratitude and appreciation is remarkable--and it is a lesson not just for his classmates but for adults as well. We need to focus less on asking for things we would like, and focus more on saying thanks for what we have.

There is no shortage of problems in the world, and there is no shortage of "bad news". Yet, we need to remember that most people are good most of the time. We need to foster the spirit of goodness, kindness and communal solidarity. We need to thank God for all the good that we enjoy. A basic ingredient for living a decent, happy and meaningful life is to be able to say sincerely and regularly: Todah, Todah, Todah.

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Angel for Shabbat