

DEDICATED TO THE PROMOTION OF TOWNS COUNTY

OPINIONS & COMMENTARY

How to Earn Your Blessings

By Yonatan Hambourger and Tzali Reicher



Echos from Sinai
"Torah for Everyone"
Rabbi Yonatan Hambourger

Why do we bother working if G-d is the source of all blessings? And when we do work and succeed, why do we thank G-d for what we clearly accomplished ourselves? The tension between these two ideas can feel confusing, and it's something people have been grappling with for centuries.

It's a question that comes up when people consider that if everything is predetermined and ultimately up to G-d, then we are left to wonder why we should bother with all the hassle and struggle of working.

The Torah offers a clue in Leviticus: "Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day shall be holy, a day of complete rest to G-d." That phrase, "shall work be done," is in the passive voice, and it's not just a random choice of words. It hints at something deeper: even during the week, when we're out there working, our effort alone isn't what gets the job done.

Of course, that doesn't mean we can just sit back and wait for blessings to fall into our laps. Imagine a farmer who spends all his time praying for rain but never bothers planting seeds. No amount of rain will make crops grow if the fields are empty.

This dynamic – a mix of effort and divine blessing – is baked into everything we do. In both our personal and professional lives and relationships, success and positive results are always a blend of your input and factors beyond your reach.

There's a story about the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years that drives this home. Each day, they were sustained by manna from heaven, a miraculous food that appeared like dew on the ground. But here's the interesting part: the manna didn't land neatly inside their tents. Those who had the strongest faith found it close by, requiring minimal effort to gather. Those who struggled with "trust issues" had to search farther, putting in significantly more work to collect their daily portion.

Why didn't G-d just make it easy for everyone and drop the manna right into their bowls? It wasn't about convenience; it was about teaching a lesson. They had to do something – they had to show up, even if only to stretch out a hand. The effort itself wasn't what brought the manna, but it was the necessary act to receive the blessing.

And that is how life works. Whether it's landing a new job, building a business, or even raising a family, success is rarely the result of effort alone. Sure, we hustle, strategize, and give it our all, but there's always an element of unpredictability – a deal that falls into place, an idea that clicks, or the right opportunity at the right time.

Take starting a small business as an example. You can put together a great business plan, invest your savings, and work endless hours. But no amount of planning can guarantee success. Maybe you meet a mentor who shares a game-changing piece of advice, or a chance encounter leads to your first big client. Those moments feel like something greater than yourself at work.

At the same time, there's a balance to strike. Sitting around waiting for blessings doesn't cut it. You have to plant the seeds, so to speak. But just like the Israelites in the desert, the point of our effort isn't to "make" blessings happen. It's to create a channel through which blessings can flow. This isn't about undermining hard work – it's about reframing it. Our efforts matter, but they're not the whole story.

So why thank G-d when things go well? Because, at its core, success isn't just about what we do. It's about recognizing that we're part of something bigger – a partnership between our efforts and a force beyond us. And acknowledging that partnership doesn't take away from what we've achieved; it adds meaning to it.

At the end of the day, our work isn't just about getting results. It's about showing up, doing what we can, and leaving room for something greater to play its part. Like the Israelites gathering manna, we're tasked with putting in our share of the effort – not because it's all up to us, but because it's how we open the door for blessings to come in.

Yonatan Hambourger is a rabbi and writer serving spiritual seekers of all persuasions on behalf of Chabad of Rural Georgia. Tzali Reicher is a rabbi and writer serving communities throughout the regional South. You can reach them at y@tasteoftorah.org.

Letters to the Editor

Addressing Rumors

Dear Editor,

Since moving to Blairsville in 2006, I have been involved in one way or another with Humane Society's Mountain Shelter. For the last 10 or so years I have been on the Board of Directors, and now I am that body's Secretary. I am very proud of the Shelter and the work that we do on behalf of the homeless pets of our community.

The Board is aware that lately there have been some unkind and untrue comments in social media circulated by a small group of individuals whom we believe are influenced by a disgruntled former employee. For those spreading these false rumors, perhaps our community would be better served if instead of making malicious attacks, you volunteered in our organization. Your derogatory comments do not benefit anyone.

The Mountain Shelter Board of Directors is a group of dedicated volunteers whose only concern – and I mean ONLY concern – is the well-being of the homeless dogs and cats of Towns and Union County. We do not receive any compensation for our service; on the contrary, we volunteer hundreds of hours of our time to help the animals of these two counties. In addition to the Shelter, we operate two Thrift Stores whose purpose is to raise money to support the Shelter and the animals in our care.

Next year, along with this community, we will celebrate our 40th year of serving Towns and Union Counties. As that anniversary approaches, the Board has been hard at work refining our vision for the future of animal rescue. We have started a major reorganization to ensure we are able to meet the needs of our community now and in the future. We look forward to an outstanding 2025, when we hope to expand the Shelter to better serve our community and the ever-expanding population of homeless animals.

We want to thank our generous community and those who support us. We survive on donations and could not do what we do without your support. Your donations benefit the homeless dogs and cats in our care. Thank you for supporting us and them!

Ruth Shannon
Secretary,
Humane Society's Mountain Shelter Board of Directors



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The Wrong Side of History

We have strange ways of marking time, and I've long believed that we might do better. For example, we begin the year in the middle of winter. January 1st is not linked to any terrestrial or sidereal event such as a solstice or alignment of the stars.

It's an arbitrary assignment linked to Julius Caesar in 45 BC and Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. To add to the confusion, our calendar is so inaccurate that we have to make an adjustment every 4 years in February.

Nevertheless, the calendar works because we universally agree that it works, and we have faith that in x number of days it will be January 1st again. It's almost like a fiat currency.

So it is that every year about this time, as we approach Christmas knowing that Christ was probably born in March and New Year's Day knowing that every other living thing at our latitude thinks the year begins in the Spring, we become reflective. We look back on the events of the year and try to put them into perspective. How were they significant and what do they imply about the future? What should I resolve to do differently next year?

Therefore I was thinking, as one does this time of year, of ways to convey the essence of the year we just experienced. It's almost inevitable that we do this because our brains are difference engines designed to distill and average, categorize and pigeonhole and peg. Since this was an election year, my reflectiveness stretched back a few additional years and my thoughts were beginning to circle around a set of related words: Drama, hyperbole, histrionics, theatrics, grandstanding, sensationalism, outrage, tantrum. In a moment of inspiration, I asked my favorite Artificial Intelligence model to create an image that illustrates how western civilization has become addicted to drama, and how we magnify so many events far out of proportion.

The AI produced a scene depicting a crowd of people circled around a single broken wine glass. The people in the crowd were portrayed as shocked, grieving, and angry. There were network cameras and reporters. All that was missing was the people taking selfies with the tragic scene in the background. Apparently, AI has advanced to the point of "understanding" some important things about our society.

It was easy to add the headlines that might accompany such a tragic event: X says "Oodles Symbols Found in Ritualistic Wine Glass Slaying." MSNBC reports "Trump Threatens to Imprison Winemakers." CNN, "The Implications of Trump's Wine Tariffs." The Daily Mail, "Tragic Wine Incident Reveals Biden Family Financial Ties to Winemaker." NPR, "The Wine Gap – How marginalized communities are denied access to better wines." New York Post says "Wine Crime Sharply Up in Dem-Run City." The Daily Mail again, "A-List Celebrity Sparks Outrage with Comments on Wine Trade." The Epoch Times, "Iranian Drones Target Wine Glass in Major City." And good old Fox News: "AOC Slams Top Republican's Reaction to View Hosting Comments on Wine Spillage."

Reporting now from Outside the Box, at the end of the day, it is what it is. That's not a win-win situation going forward. But if you circle back to the new normal, and pick the low-hanging fruit outside the box, it can really be a game changer. Otherwise, you'll be on the wrong side of history, which is not unprecedented.

In other news, your package is out for delivery. Thus, we have a concise list of the most overused and meaningless phrases of 2024, and a bit of hyperbole to spice it up. I can't wait to see how many "likes" this collection will get on Facebook.

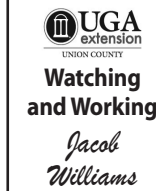
Towns County Community Calendar

First Monday of each month:	School Board... HS/MS Media Center	6:45 pm
Every Tuesday:	Storytime for Children... TC Library	10:30 am
First Tuesday of each month:	Hiaw. City Council... City Hall	6 pm
	YH City Council... YH City Hall	6:30 pm
Second Wednesday of each month:	Board of Elections... Elections Office	4 pm
Third Monday of each month:	Planning Commission... Temporary Courthouse	6 pm
Third Tuesday of each month:	Commissioner's Mtg... Courthouse	5:30 pm
	City of Young Harris Planning Commission...	
	Meeting Room in City Hall	5 pm
	TC Water Authority Board Meeting	6 pm

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Winter Tree ID

In the winter time, deciduous trees can become much trickier to identify because the trees don't have any leaves on them. However, with practice tree ID is still possible, you just have to learn to look for the right characteristics. Without leaves to go by things like bark, tree structure, and location are going to be very helpful in figuring out what kind of tree you're looking at. Lets' talk about some of these features and how you can use them to identify trees.



Jacob Williams

For starters I should clarify that I am talking about native trees in this column. These are trees that you might see while on a winter hike in the woods. If we added in non-native trees, then ID is more challenging because the options

are much wider. One helpful tool to remember for tree ID is MAD BUCK. This acronym stands for Maple, Ash, Dogwood, BUCKeye. If you find a tree that has opposite branching, it is almost guaranteed to be one of these four. Opposite branching is a pattern where the side branches and leaves come out directly across the stem from each other.

Bark comes in various patterns which can be helpful hints. Some trees have bark that forms ravines that travel up the tree. Some hickories and poplar fall into this category. Others have bark that looks like it's peeling off the tree. White oak, sycamore, birch, and shagbark hickory have peely bark. Some bark looks like pieces of a puzzle fit together. Dogwood, persimmon, and sourwood fit in that category. Smooth bark is not as common, but is found in American beech. Some trees will have thorns, like black locust, honey locust, and devil's walking stick.

Looking at the buds on the tree can help with ID. Oaks are the only trees that will have multiple terminal buds. That means at the end of a branch there will be three or more buds popping out. Beech trees have thin, pointy buds. Beech trees will also exhibit marcescence. This is where leaves die but do not fall from the tree until spring when the new leaves grow and force the old leaves off. Some red oaks will also do this when they are young.

Overall tree shape helps with ID if you take a few steps back from the tree and look at it for a few seconds. Poplar trees are going to be very straight and tall. Most sourwood trees grow at an angle. Dogwoods are going to be smaller, and most frequently found along a tree line. Some trees like sycamore, river birch, or maple like to grow in wet soils, so you'll find them along streams. Upland in drier soils you'll find more oak, hickory, or ash. Tree location is more of a guideline for ID.

The ability to identify trees can add some interest to a hike or give you an idea what use that tree have. If you have questions about winter tree ID contact your County Extension Office or email me at Jacob.Williams@uga.edu.

Christmas Gifts

Christmas brings back many memories to each of us. Christmas brings memories of various gifts of which I received through the years. I can remember getting stockings stuffed with all kinds of goodies. For example, I love tangerines to this day because my grandmother used to give them to me at Christmas. And I remember getting those candied orange slices at Christmas. I also remember getting those soft peppermint sticks at Christmas each year. (Did you know you can still get those candied orange slices and peppermint sticks at Foodland?) I also remember getting those Ice Box Fruit Cakes at Christmas each year. My mother made those things, and I would make myself sick eating them. I still have a sweet tooth for those kinds of sweets.

Christmas has always been a special time for my family. My grandparents celebrated Christmas by decorating Cedar Trees and by announcing the phone with a special greeting. The day after Thanksgiving my grandmother would greet telephone callers with "Christmas Gift" instead of hello. She told me that as a youngster she would go with large groups of people to serenade their neighbors. The group of people would begin the serenade by saying "Christmas Gift," and then the group would sing a Christmas Carol to their neighbor. The neighbors would respond by tossing hard candy to the group after the song.

Just after the turn of the century my Grandfather's family experienced some hard times. My grandfather was only about 4 years old when his Uncle joined the Army and went to fight in WWI. Then the influenza epidemic came through North Alabama and two of my Grandfather's Aunts died while in their teens. Next, his youngest Uncle was accidentally shot while playing with an old pistol. These problems placed a strain on the marriage of my Great-Great Grandparents, John and Martha Cummings. I don't know exactly what happened, but John left his wife of more than 20 years and ran off with another woman. They run off to Missouri and raised another family. All of this was bad and created hard feelings. My Great Grandmother never recovered from this divorce.

Some of John's sons never forgave him for the destruction of their family. He came back for a couple of visits, but, a couple of his sons would have nothing to do with him. But, time has a way of healing many sore spots, and as the years went by John became more and more feeble. He made things right with my Great Grandfather Lon, who was always close to his father even though he couldn't understand why John had left his mother. So, one Christmas Lon invited his elderly father to come home and spend some time with his family.

Lon invited the whole family for Christmas dinner. Some came and some refused. There was still much bitterness among some of the boys. Lon's oldest daughter, Mabel (Papa's sister), had an idea. She bought her Papa a brand new pair of overalls and asked everyone to bring a gift for the old man. She gathered all the gifts and stuffed them into the overalls and then sewed the leg openings together so the gifts would not fall out. John was so old he had trouble seeing, but, he knew the overalls were new, so he tried to put them on, but, he could not get his leg into them.

So, he turned them upside down and reached his arm into the legs and began pulling out his gifts. The old man soon had about 10 gifts lying at his feet. Papa said he had tears running down his face and he was laughing at the same time. His grandfather got more than he bargained for that Christmas. He received the gifts and the forgiveness of his family. I think that is why Papa loved Christmas. He was able to experience, firsthand, the true meaning of Christmas.



Mickey Cummings

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