

ON PRAYER AND BLESSING

We've reached the third installment of our High Holyday series on
"Touching Holiness."

On Rosh Hashanah we talked about being part of a sacred community.

Last night we came to understand "When is God."

Today we look at Prayer and Blessing.

L'chi Lach, to the land that I will show you

Lech Lecha and I will praise your name

L'chi Lach to the place that I will show you.

And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing, *L'chi Lach*.

So Debbie Friedman set God's first words to Abraham in music.

And if we wanted to sum up everything God asked of Abraham,
and maybe everything God asks of us,

we could use the same words that she used, the same words the Torah uses:

h'yeh b'racha--be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2)

It can be a struggle for us to fulfill that charge, to carry out that command,
even to get our heads around the concept.

But as we noted yesterday, struggling with God is something Jews do.

We're in good company—it was also a struggle for Abraham.

According to the Midrash, God tested him ten times.

And even the Rabbis say, he didn't pass them all.

We saw it in the Torah portions we read last week.

Abraham sends one son into the wilderness to die with his mother.

The other, he offers as a human sacrifice.

In the ongoing struggle between the sanctity of human life on one hand and
the perceived demands of a mystical covenant on the other,

a struggle that is as current as today's headlines,

it is permissible for us to say that Abraham

didn't always make the right choice.

But today is not Abraham's day to stand in judgment. It is ours.

Eventually, Abraham did become a blessing.

What about us?

What kind of blessing have we been to those closest to us?

And to the world around us?

What kind of blessing are we becoming?

Whichever God we may or may not believe in makes no difference here.

The question remains.

People use the word blessing in many different ways,

so let's try to understand it, or at least what we mean by it.

That may not be as easy as it sounds.

A nurse once told a colleague of mine who survived the Holocaust that he was “blessed.” “No,” he insisted, “I was lucky.”

That is no small difference of opinion.

In one view he was saved by God’s Providential loving care.

In the other, it was just random.

This rabbi believed it was luck, nothing more.

Nevertheless, he made it his business to make his life a blessing.

Sometimes people use “blessing” with a grain of salt.

In certain parts of the country, when they say “bless her heart,” it doesn’t mean exactly that.

And if you hear someone say,

“My mother in-law passed away. It was a blessing.”

Okay, but what exactly do you mean by that?

From the Buddha to the Rabbis of old to Martin Luther King Jr., many great teachers have looked at suffering as a blessing.

There happen to be extensive Talmudic debates on this.

On the one hand, suffering clarifies what is most important in life.

That can be a blessing.

On the other hand, there are other, less painful ways to learn.

The discussions are deep and probing but the Rabbis reach no consensus.

So on we go.

Whatever our level of Hebrew, we probably know the words for blessed—*barukh*, and blessing—*b’racha*.

We may know them but we are not sure of their origin.

They may come from the word *berech*--knee,

because we bend the knee when we say certain blessings.

They may come from the word *bereicha*—pool, as in an overflowing spring

because we can perceive that is how blessing comes to us.

The word *barukh* itself is a passive participle, suggesting that

we receive continuous blessing--*beracha* just by being alive.

So we see—this idea of blessing is not a simple one.

For this morning, though I’d like to use it in the sense of favor from on High. Blessing is being in the presence of that which we understand to be Holy.

It can come from above, it can come from within.

It can come from almost anywhere.

However we define it, we can say that unless we are, like the word *barukh* itself, ongoing and actively, giving and receiving blessing, our spiritual selves will atrophy.

If we are going to live a consecrated life,

we need to dedicate at least part of life, as God said to Abraham, to being a blessing.

But in order to do that, to extend blessing to others,

we must first be able to receive it ourselves.

We go through a lot of prayers during the High Holydays.

Many of them are there to remind us just how blessed we are.

Which may or may not register while we are listening.

We may be overwhelmed by the number of them.

They aren't always easy to decode.

We may be thinking about how unjust life can be.

We may be hungry.

The authors of the *machzor* were aware of all of this.

But it was their position, still and *davka*—especially and in spite of everything—that blessing remains ours to receive and to give.

If it is a struggle for you to find on that place while you are here in shul,

I have a story for you.

As you may know my family visited Kenya this summer to do some work

at the Talia Agler Girls Shelter, named for our late daughter.

Since we were there on a Shabbat, we made plans to attend

Friday night services at the one synagogue in Nairobi.

One of our hosts, Simon, whose wife Edith runs the Shelter,

announced that he wanted to come with us.

Simon is a successful businessman and active in his community.

He and Edith are Kenyan by birth, Roman Catholic by faith and

Kikuyu by tribe.

It would be his first ever visit to a synagogue. “Wonderful,” I said.

Friday evening came and we walked through the city.

The synagogue is a lovely building in a landscaped compound.

It makes a nice impression but as soon as we entered, I was worried.

The attendance was sparse, 20-25 people at the most.

Israeli expatriates made up most of the regulars,

and there were a handful of tourists like us.

Mindy was immediately dispatched to sit on the side in the women's section.

There was no rabbi or cantor and the service was led by the

President of the congregation.

Now as we know here, Presidents (and other laypeople)

can lead a fine service, but this one was dry and mechanical.

It seemed, more than anything else,

driven by the desire to finish as quickly as possible.

My family has experience with these kinds of services and maybe yours does too.

But this was Simon's first time. I felt, unfairly I know, but still, that somehow the entire weight of Jewish history was on my shoulders. You would feel the same way, wouldn't you? Of course you would.

First impressions are lasting ones and an experience like that

should be as positive as possible.

It was an uphill battle. Even though the official language of the country is English,

the service was entirely in Hebrew, and of course Simon didn't know a word. And again, there was no *freilichkeit*—no enthusiasm, no joy in the *davening*. I did my best to explain the meaning of the prayers as I pointed to the English translations in the book. Simon's normal countenance is smiling and genial but he wore a poker face throughout. I was flying blind.

When the service ended he had questions, a lot of them. What did the menorah stand for? What was the origin of the ark? What exactly was the Torah? Could he see it? Could I open it? Could he hold it? Could I take a picture of him with it? Yes to everything. The regulars and the rest of the tourists had long since left. It was us and the custodian. Finally we were done.

As we walked out, I asked the question I had to ask. "Well, what did you think of the service?" His answer, and I quote, was, "I felt the presence of God." It was all I could do to keep my jaw off the floor.

Now believe me, it was not my hushed and frantic running commentary that enabled him to feel God's presence. It was all him. His heart, his mind, his soul. It was his inner space and his inner ear.

He listened for what the Bible calls the "still small voice." (I Kings 19:12)

And he heard it.

He felt the Presence of God because he made himself Present to receive blessing. Though he didn't understand a single word.

The moral of the story of course is, if Simon can do that there, we can do it here. In spite of all the obstacles, of all the conundrums and contradictions, in the liturgy and in life.

If we can make ourselves Present then we too will feel Presence--and Blessing.

On this day of days, on any day.

I know that listening for the still small voice is a challenge.

We are so bombarded with distracting noises that we miss out on blessings that are there for the taking.

This, btw, is why we have Shabbat.

One day each week we are given the gift of permission to unplug and be Present.

In this age of information overload, we desperately need it.

It is also why this day—Yom Kippur—is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*—the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

Today there are no external distractions whatsoever--not even food and drink.

We are here to feel the Presence, and the Blessing, so that like Abraham, we in turn might *heyeh beracha*—become a blessing to others.

FYI, we have scheduled a dedicated meditation session for later this afternoon.

And all are invited. But between now and then,

I give everyone permission to disengage from the specific words of the *machzor*,

to meditate, to listen for the still small voice, to try to feel the presence of God,
and to contemplate how we might become greater blessings,
to those near us, and to those far from us.

I'm going to let you in on a secret.

When I'm not leading services, that is what I like to do.

Listening to the prayers and music with one ear and trying to be

Present with breath and consciousness with the other.

You might want to give it a try.

Something else that gets in the way of blessing,
both giving and receiving, is sin.

It is why we ask to be cleansed of it.

If we wanted to be clinical we might say that sin is behavior that is
oppositional-defiant to God.

Or, if you prefer, at variance with the spirit of the universe.

It keeps us distant from Blessing and Blessing distant from us.

To receive blessing we need to be in a place of closeness and of unity

Sin creates distance and duality, with us here and God there.

There is a long list of sins in the *machzor* but I want to return to one
we mentioned last week. It is in a way a meta-sin, the sin of cynicism.

We are all, to some degree, cynics

and it is almost impossible for us to be otherwise.

We use our God given intelligence to think critically.

When we do, we see through things. And when we do that, we become cynical.

It a survival skill--and we couldn't get through life without it.

But it is one thing to be able to detect falsehood. It is another to appreciate Truth.

To detect falsehood requires intelligence.

To appreciate Truth requires wisdom.

We all know which is in shorter supply.

It has been much remarked that we live in an age of information overload.

There are countless articles telling us how to cope with it.

Which of course only add to the overload.

But how do we cope with wisdom underload?

it is much harder to find a prescription for that.

I think one of the things we can do is develop a mature faith.

Mature faith is comprised of many things,
including humility, learning and service.

These together can lead us to wisdom.

And, here we go again, prayer can help too.

There is a recent book on the subject by Ann Lamott.

It has a simple title, "Help. Thanks. Wow."

According to Lamott, those are the three essential prayers.

We have plenty of "Help" and "Thanks" in the *machzor* and
we can return to those another time.

But for today, if we are going to receive blessing,

we also need to be able to say “wow.”
 To do this we need to let go a bit of our cynical and egocentric selves.
 If we are going to be a blessing, the same applies.

Our ego puts I-me-mine at the center of the universe.

And our cynicism fortifies the ramparts.

But if we are going to develop mature faith, we need to say wow--

A wow of something besides “Wow that was a great play.”

A wow of something besides “Wow she’s beautiful.”

A wow of something besides “Wow, how important I am.”

We’re talking about

a wow of wonder that leads to humility,

a wow of realization that leads to contrition,

a wow of acceptance of obligation that leads to becoming a blessing.

A teacher of mine likes to say that Judaism has two foundational teachings:

1) There is a God and 2) It is not you.

Wow. We have a new year in front of us to make this understanding our own.

So may we be blessed as we go on our way.

L’chi Lach, to the land that I will show you

Lech Lecha and I will praise your name

L’chi Lach to the place that I will show you.

And you shall be a blessing, and you shall be a blessing, *L’chi Lach*.

G’mar tov and *Shabbat shalom*.

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