

Be a Blessor

There is a story concerning the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. One evening, Perlman was in New York to give a concert. As a child he had been stricken with polio and so getting on stage is no small feat for him. He wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. Perlman labors across the stage slowly, until he reaches the chair in which he seats himself to play.

As soon as he appeared on stage that night, the audience applauded and then waited respectfully as he made his way slowly across the stage to his chair. He took his seat, signaled to the conductor to begin, and began to play.

No sooner had he finished the first few bars than one of the strings on his violin snapped with a sound like a gunshot. At that point Perlman was close enough to the beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt while he replaced the string, to begin again. But that's not what he did. He waited a moment and then signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off.

Perlman now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn't possible, he had to rearrange the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together.

He played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony right through to the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. And then they rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had been witness to an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity.

Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. "You know," he said, "it is the artist's task to make beautiful music with what you have left."

The underlying message here is one of gratitude. The Hebrew term for gratitude (*hakarat ha-tov*) translates as "recognizing the good." Many benefits come to us every day, but most of us find it easy to overlook them and instead focus on what we lack. This trait is an invitation to sensitize ourselves to the good and to the gifts that are certain to be present in our life at every moment, even if at the same moment there happen to be difficulties.

Alan Morinis, Mussar teacher and author of Everyday Holiness, writes, "When you open yourself to experience the trait of gratitude, you discover with clarity and accuracy how much good there is in your life. Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours. If you've lost your job but you still have your supportive family and health, you have something to be grateful for. If you can't move around except in a wheelchair but your mind is as sharp as ever, you have something to be grateful for. If you've

broken a string on your violin but you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for.”

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for Judaism, *yahadut*, from the name *Yehuda*, or Judah, shares the root with the word *l'hodot*, which means “to give thanks.” In other words, we are a people, who by our very name are encouraged to express gratitude. If there is nothing else we do Jewishly in our lives, we should at the very least show our gratitude to others and to God for all they have done and continue to do for us. Thanksgiving is actually a Jewish holiday that occurs every single day.

This summer in my 3-session Lunch and Learn course on Mishnah, we explored some of the Jewish blessings of gratitude. The most common of all these blessings is the *bracha* over our food since it's said multiple times a day. What we learned from the Mishnah is that when we say a blessing of thanks, such as over bread, we become more alert and aware of many things that we may have taken for granted before. In addition, by reciting the traditional *baruch atah adonai* formula, we are reminding ourselves that God is behind it all.

Just two weeks ago we read *parashat ki tavo*. This parsha is filled with blessings. The very last blessing is perhaps the most simple blessing in this section of the Torah. It says, “You shall be blessed in your comings and your goings.” This is clearly not the most erudite blessing there is. Basically, you shall always be blessed. Blessings, as we know, can be simple, yet meaningful, like the *bracha* we say over bread or wine or Torah. Or they can be profound and intimate, like receiving the *birkat kohanim*, or priestly benediction under the *huppah* or in front of the open ark. They can also transform our mundane activities into sacred encounters such as when we wake up and go to sleep or eat a snack. They can elevate one's connection to another person or to God. They can express a whole range of emotions. Blessings have the power to truly transform our day.

Thankfully, the rabbis created a system to allow this to happen. You see, back in biblical times people would go directly to the priest and the priest would serve as the intermediary between the people and God. If someone wished to express gratitude to God for something, they would tell the priest and the priest would prepare a sacrifice for God on the person's behalf. The smoke rising into the heavens from the alter would be the person's show of appreciation. As a vegetarian, I am extremely glad that slaughtering animals on the alter is not part of my job description. It wasn't pretty. But it worked for that time.

Once there was no longer a priest after the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis understood that if someone needed to express a blessing, they should speak directly to God. There were no more intermediaries. Each individual had a new responsibility. Every man and women, in essence, became their own priest, their own emissary to God.

And this is what the High Holy Days are really all about: speaking to God from the depths of our hearts about what we are grateful for and what we are sorry about. And perhaps even more importantly, this is a time when we confront each other and do the same. No one does this for us. There is no priest. And no one on the bima can act as anyone's agent. This is all in our domain. The rabbis intended this act of blessing and offering prayers to be facilitated by everyone.

I imagine that many of us recite blessings daily. Some not so often and perhaps a few of us might never really think about it except in shul. Now expressing our gratitude to God through blessings and telling our loved ones how thankful we are of them is very important. Giving praise to where praise is due is a worthy endeavor. I mean, who can be against saying *modeh ani*, or thanking God for the gift of life when we wake in the morning?

However, saying a blessing because we received something special is only one side of the coin. The other side is bestowing a blessing upon someone else.

Think about it for a moment. How many of you here blessed another person today? Was anybody around someone who sneezed? What do you say when someone sneezes? "Bless you" or some even say "God bless you."

The Torah and our tradition is full of different ways to bless other people. We say *Birkat ha-gomel* when someone overcomes a perilous experience such as overcoming an illness. We bless them back to health. We say *Tifilat ha-derech* when someone is about to go on a journey. We say a blessing to our children at the shabbos table. We say a blessing to soldiers as they get deployed. We say *Eishet Hayil* to our brides. But do we really say them? Are we blessing other people? Are these prayers--and others from our hearts--waiting desperately for us to say them aloud to other human beings?

For this High Holy Day season, let us all give thanks and show our gratitude whenever we feel we've received a gift. It can be as simple as saying the blessing over bread, or thanking God for life when we wake up in the morning. But I'd also like us to take it up a notch. I want to challenge all of us to do something different.

I challenge you to be blessers. Trust me when I say that giving a blessing to someone can be a moving experience. There is a connection you make with that individual in that short time, which Martin Buber explains as being an I-Thou moment. God is present in that space between. So give someone a blessing. It can be offering an intimate blessing to someone you care about. It can be one that I mentioned earlier. You can start really soon too. Elevate your post service conversations with a blessing. Don't worry. You don't need to speak in Hebrew or Aramaic and get too spiritual. You don't need to put your hand on a head or even touch anyone. Just speak from the heart about how they are a blessing to you, to their loved ones, to their community. I'm telling you, it's really an amazing thing to be able to offer a blessing to someone else.

So shmooze with someone about their children or grandkids, their new home, the Seahawks, this service, whatever it is. But then take it up a notch and be a blesser. Or call someone this week and tell them what a blessing they are in your life. It's profound to feel that someone is blessing you. They will not forget this sacred experience.

As this New Year begins, let us all pledge to ourselves that we will re-engage with his sacred Jewish value of expressing gratitude through blessings. Furthermore, may each of us be a blesser. Think about the way you can uplift other people with just a few words and how desperately we need more of this in our world.¹

Shanah Tovah.

¹ inspired by a sermon delivered by Rabbi Sydney Mintz, 2014