

You Shall Be a Blessing – Rosh Hashanah 5775

Rabbi Michael Safra

A colleague and teacher, Rabbi Steve Sager, calls them “Elijah moments”, named after the anonymous, mysterious visitor who always makes a difference in people's lives. I was in my office and reflecting on all the bad things that are going on in the world: A commercial airplane gets shot out of the sky; rockets fly over cities in Israel; anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe; Islamic extremists are advancing and killing and maiming those in their way, including American journalists; in America, the bonds that hold our Jewish institutions together are cracking as people are beginning to question, rather loudly, “Why do I need to belong?” I was feeling a little depressed and powerless.

Just then, an elderly couple appeared without an appointment. I had seen them before. About 12 years ago, their daughter was having complications with her pregnancy. Another time, an elderly parent was having surgery to remove a tumor. Coming from the Former Soviet Union, they had virtually no Jewish education; but they wanted to pray; they wanted a blessing. I had taken them into the Hayman Chapel, opened the ark, recited a short prayer, and invited them to touch the Torah. They put some money in the *tzedakkah* box and disappeared. And now they were here again because they had new troubles, and they came to me because, they insisted, “my prayers work.”

I call it an “Elijah moment” because I gotta tell you, I’m not sure I would say that my prayers “work”. There are people who will bless your money or offer to bring your prayer to Israel by plane or by fax. But that’s not me. But the experience got me thinking about the power of blessing, what the philosopher J.L. Austin calls a “Performative Utterance”¹ – you say something and it effectively creates a new reality, in this case a reality where they were not alone because God would help them through tough times. Why were my blessings so powerful for them? In a word, I think the answer is RELATIONSHIP. I had invited this couple into a relationship with their tradition and a relationship with God ... and without their help, I’m not sure I would have known I could do that.

The power to make those connections is not unique to rabbis. In a little bit, we will recite one of the most significant lines in the liturgy, in Unetaneh Tokef: “וכל באי עולם יעברון לפניך כבני מרון”, Every creature on this earth - not just Jews and not just humans - Every creature passes before God as a flock of sheep, one by one.” Rosh Hashanah affirms God’s sovereignty over the entire universe, but in spite of God’s transcendent power, God creates a relationship with each one of us as an individual, one by one. That’s a very empowering message because it means that I matter, and I am never alone. And that’s what worked for that elderly couple. They needed help with the language, but in their moment of need, they felt a connection; they reached out and they felt God’s Presence reaching back, and it was very uplifting.

Under the leadership of Dr. Louis Nagel and our Education Department, we are developing a congregation-wide theme called “Count Your Blessings”, based on Rabbi Meir’s suggestion in the

¹ Jack Bloom

Talmud that a person should recite 100 blessings every day.² I want to talk today about what it means to bless, to be blessed, to be a blessing.

But first, you may have heard the story of the man walking through the woods on his way to visit a friend when he stumbled and his *kippah* fell off of his head. He bent over to pick it up and stood up to see a bear standing in front of him. He froze in fear. He was trembling and staring as the bear, inexplicably, stood up and placed a *yarmulke* on his own head and began to pray.

The man thought to himself, "I am saved! My luck, I have found the only Jewish bear in creation!" He breathed a sigh of relief and offered thanks to God. And then he heard the end of the bear's prayer: "*hamotzi lekhem min ha-aretz.*"

Blessings give us language to express our relationship with God, our tradition, and the world.

There has been a lot of talk about the Pew Study, which came out in October and suggested that many Jews are having trouble making connections: with community (69% of American Jews do not affiliate with synagogues); with prayer (88% of Jews surveyed attend services less than once or twice a month, and 65% say they do not even attend a few times a year, as on the high holy days); with God (most American Jews believe in God, but at a far lower percentage than the general population). It is one of the great challenges of our generation; people are searching, and yet they feel less and less connected.

I read an article in Tablet, which in many ways was typical, about a woman who decided after more than 20 years that she and her family were dropping their synagogue membership. Her kids went through the Hebrew School; she had paid dues; but it no longer "spoke to her." She had attended. She waited. And nothing happened. I read the article and felt badly; her synagogue had let her down, and her solution was not to join another synagogue but to leave the affiliated community entirely. We can accept the criticism; I know there are times when our own synagogue, by most standards a very active synagogue, fails to touch every individual. But I was troubled by this woman's language: nobody reached out, the service or the sermons didn't move her, the rabbi wasn't personable, and she appeared passive. Relationships are reciprocal. Sometimes synagogues are better equipped to reach *back*; I wish she had been able to initiate a conversation. God also seems absent at times. But we have tools to reach out and initiate the relationship ourselves.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that "The essence of Judaism is the awareness of the *reciprocity* of God and man." "You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God and you will walk in His ways and observe His commandments," says Deuteronomy, "And the Lord has affirmed this day that you are a treasured people." God is *relational*. Community is *relational*. That is what it means to bless. We are called upon to initiate the relationship. A blessing, a *bracha* is a conversation. We have blessings for practically every experience.

² Menachot 43b.

“*Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh haolam, Praised are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe*”....

- When you see shooting stars, the Grand Canyon, a beautiful sunset: “עושה מעשה בראשית, who creates the wonders of creation.”
- When you see a rainbow: “זוכר הברית ונאמן בבריתו וקים במאמרו, Who remembers the covenant, is faithful to His covenant, and fulfills His word.” It alludes, of course, to Noah.
- When you hear thunder: “שכוהו וגבורתו מלא עולם, Whose power and might fill the earth.”
- There are blessings for *mitzvot*, like the one we just recited for Torah study. Some people see commandments as a burden, as if we are being forced. But the *bracha* says, “אשר קדשנו במצותיו, Thank you for sanctifying us with Your *mitzvot*.” The commandment is God’s way of reaching out to us, and we are invited to reach back:
 - “להדליק נר של שבת” – To light the Shabbat candles”
 - “לקבוע מזוזה” – to affix the *mezuzah*”
 - “לישב בסוכה” – to dwell in the Sukkah”
 - “לשמוע קול שופר” – to hear the sound of the Shofar.”

There are blessings upon seeing great scholars or heads of state or individuals with disabilities; for hearing good news and even bad. We can bless so much more than just food.

Sometimes, of course, there is a conflict between the *mindset* of blessing, which can be spontaneous, and the traditional *brachot*, which are formulaic and have to be learned. You don’t have to memorize every blessing or carry a list in your pocket, although I checked and there are multiple apps for that. But we can and should challenge ourselves to learn. I have created a new blog on the synagogue website, which features weekly posts of new blessings to consider; and Dr. Louis Nagel is incorporating a new “blessing of the month” feature in the Scroll. Spontaneous prayer is great, but sometimes it helps to have the language.

When I was in rabbinical school, I was teaching a third grade class on the weekends and we visited the Hebrew Home in Riverdale New York. The kids were cute, as you can imagine, and I remember one of the residents approaching a student – ready to pinch his cheek – and saying, “You look so nice and smart. Tell me, do you know your *brachos*? Do you know your blessings?” The child nodded, and I thought to myself: What a nice way to measure a person. She didn’t ask if he knew long division. She didn’t care if he turned his homework in on time. She asked if he knew how to express gratitude; she asked if he could initiate connections, if he knew how to bless.

And God is not the only object of blessing. The Torah commands *kohanim*, “כה תברכו את בני ישראל, So shall you bless the people of Israel.” The Priestly Blessing, the *duchening*, is an important feature of our service, “May the Lord bless you and protect you; May the Lord cause his spirit to shine upon you, May the Lord lift His face towards you and grant you peace.” The *kohanim* cover themselves

with the tallit in humility, as they are merely God's agents. But they teach us that human beings have the power to invoke God's name.

I offer this same blessing to my children on Friday night just before Kiddush. Dr. Rachel Naomi Reman describes how it felt to receive that blessing from her pious grandfather when she was a little girl.³ He didn't just recite the words:

He would begin by thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically mention my struggles during that week and tell God something about me that was true. Each week I would wait to find out what that was. If I had made mistakes during the week, he would mention my honesty in telling the truth. If I had failed, he would appreciate how hard I had tried. If I had taken even a short nap without my nightlight, he would celebrate my bravery for sleeping in the dark. Then he would give me my blessing. ...

"These few moments," she writes, "were the only time in my week when I felt completely safe and at rest." Many years later, Reman told her mother how much those blessings had once meant. She asked her mother why she had never blessed her in the same way. Her mother looked very sad, and then she explained: "I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel. ... I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud."

"I never had the wisdom to do it out loud." The blessing is our opportunity to reach out, to extend the hand. How often do we miss the chance? We may think it is obvious, but there is something powerful in the words: "May you be blessed." What a way to tell someone that you love them, that you care.

You don't have to be a *Kohen*. You don't have to be a rabbi. Any one of us can bless. The Hasidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz taught that Aaron was chosen as the first to deliver the priestly blessing because of his ability to find goodness and love other people. But we all have that ability. We can begin on Friday night: Tell your children, tell your spouse, tell your parents why you love them; reflect on the week that passed; and offer a blessing for the week to come. Use the blessing to strengthen the relationships that matter most.

We Jewish people trace our history back to the moment when God called to Abraham and instructed him to leave his homeland, לך לך, and travel to a place that God would designate. Abram was probably scared, but God promised he would not be alone. "I will bless you, ואברכך," God says, "And make your name great." What's more, God adds, "והיה ברכה, You will be a blessing. All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you." A midrash has God telling Abraham, "Up until this point, it has been My responsibility alone to bless all human beings. But now I am sharing; I am giving you the power to bless, and to *be* a blessing through your actions."

Again, it is reciprocal. If I visit someone in the hospital, if you reach out to a friend who has suffered a loss, if we participate in Mitzvah Day or some other project to help others in need, if we invite

³ Rachel Naomi Reman, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, pp. 22-24.

guests into our homes to share in the beauty of Shabbat, we become a blessing. We bring God's blessings into the world. And we benefit, because, as the Rabbis teach, "In the act of giving to another, the giver often receives more than the one who accepts the gift."⁴

We have a new program, Shabbat Around B'nai, which is based on this principal. You are going to be asked to host Shabbat dinner and to invite friends; and then those friends are going to be asked to "pay it forward," to host another Shabbat dinner and to invite other people. Our goal is to expand the web of relationships. It's the pyramid scheme of blessing. We're here to help, and you can imagine how hosts and guests, and the community as a whole will be blessed.

It reminds me of a story of a traveler who stayed over the night with an old friend. And in the morning the host demanded \$300 as payment. The guest was more than a little surprised. "What do you mean I owe you \$300?" he asked. "Well," said the host, "Did you enjoy a good meal?" "Yes." "Was the bed comfortable?" "Yes." "Were you warm?" "Yes." "Well then, it's only fair that you pay for my services. I'll tell you what. Why don't we go over to the rabbi and see if he can resolve this little dispute."

So they went to the rabbi and he asked the same questions: Did you have a good meal? Did you sleep in a bed? Was the temperature controlled? And the rabbi concluded, "I think the host is correct. You owe him \$300."

So they left the rabbi's study and the guest reached for his wallet and the host stopped him. "It's not necessary," he said. "I just wanted to show you what a *yutz* our rabbi is!"

It's not about the rabbi. It isn't just the professional. Every single one of us has the ability to be a blessing. To quote Rabbi Jack Bloom, "We are at one and the same time the recipient[s] of blessing, the conduit[s] of blessing, and the source of blessing." "והיה ברכה, You shall be a blessing" – that is the essence of Judaism.

As Abraham's descendants prepared in haste to leave Egypt, the broken Pharaoh left Moses and Aaron with a final request: "וברכתם גם אותי, Please, bless me." Perhaps not surprisingly, the Torah doesn't tell us how Moses and Aaron responded. But God's promise seemed to have come full circle. The Children of Abraham had become the People of Blessing. And such has been our destiny throughout history.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we contemplate our deeds from the past year and our relationship with the Creator and Judge of all the earth, may we gather the courage to bless. Let us express gratitude and initiate a connection with the One who provides for our needs. Let us express appreciation and love for the ones who matter most. Let us shape our deeds, that they become blessings for the people in need who are counting on us. Shanah Tovah, May our year be filled with blessings that are too numerous to count.

⁴ Orah LeHayyim on Ki Tetze, Green loc 2150.