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Blessings - Yom Kippur 5777

Comedian and Talk Show Host Joan Rivers was famous for starting her performances with the phrase: Can We Talk? What followed were private confessionals, exasperating stories and snippets from her daily life. Today I can't help feeling a little bit like Joan. Can we talk?

This last month has been a doozy for me. It began with a midnight call from my mother, that my dad was on his way by ambulance from one hospital to another. She had taken him in with symptoms of pneumonia (which he had) but of a more pressing nature was the fact that he was having a massive heart attack. I stayed up half the night, unsure if he would survive. Thank God, he did, but his condition was still very serious. So after Shabbat I flew down to Orlando to be with my family.

When the plane landed I turned on my cell phone to let Debbie know that I had arrived safely. She replied immediately. Her text said: "Glad. Call me when you can, we have a situation here." I thought to myself: "No you don't, I'm the one with the situation. I'm the one with his father in ICU not knowing if he'll live or die." But I immediately called her back and heard that while I was in the air, Jonah was making a left turn into Portillos, when a car sped through a red light, totaled his car, and he was taken to Lutheran General Hospital in an ambulance. Then she said that the ambulance ride was more of a precaution than anything else. It turned out that he was a little banged up, but the airbags did their job.

As I got off the phone I turned to the woman who was sitting next to me during the flight. We honestly hadn't spoken a word to each other in 3 hours. I said to her: I took this flight so I could see my father who's in the ICU after a major heart attack. And that was my wife back in Chicago telling me my son was taken by ambulance to a hospital after being in a car accident. My dad is stable. My son is okay. And I'm a lucky man. But I'll tell you, I'd be really happy if I didn't need so much luck.

This past week, dad had a setback. I rushed down to Florida again. I got to the hospital after he had pulled through another surgery, just in time to experience my first hurricane. Had “Matthew” followed his expected path, I don’t know if I would have made it home, still. But once again, my luck held. I have to tell you, these last few weeks I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about blessings.

As it happens, during this same time my Torah study class (9:30 – 10:30, Friday mornings, Open to All,) we’d just reached the beginning of the story of one of my favorite biblical figures, Joseph. When we first meet Joseph, the Torah introduces him as a conceited, little brat; a boy who’s been spoiled by his father, who tattles on his brothers, and has dreams about ruling over the rest of his family. But the Torah also tells us that Joseph is blessed. And from the way his story ends, with Joseph as the second most powerful man in Egypt, who saves his family from famine, that judgement appears to be true. But if we take a closer look at Joseph’s story and see how he got there, we’ll find that everything’s not quite as straightforward as we might have imagined it to be.

In fact, from the moment Joseph shares his dreams of success and power with his family, his life takes a tailspin. His father sends him off to check on his brothers, but they’re not where they were supposed to be. But after a chance encounter with a man (who the Midrash suggests is an angel) he’s put back on the right path. Surely he’s blessed. But what happens to Joseph when he finds his brothers? They beat him, throw him into a pit, and rather than leave him there to die, they sell him to a band of traders who take him to Egypt where he’s sold as a slave.

No worries though. Even though he’s now a slave, Joseph is still blessed. Everything he touches turns to gold. His master is so impressed that he leaves him in charge of everything in his home. His master’s wife is so impressed that she wants to sleep with him. But when he refuses, she makes a false accusation and Joseph ends up in prison.

No worries though. Even though he’s now a prisoner, Joseph is still blessed. Everything he touches still turns to gold. The prison warden is so impressed he leaves him in charge of everything. And when two of Pharaoh’s servants have strange dreams, he is on hand to explain their meaning, giving credit not to himself, but to God. What does Joseph ask for in return? Only that, when the

cupbearer is restored to his position of honor, he should mention Joseph to Pharaoh.

Now I want to pause from this story for a moment to consider the trajectory of Joseph's life from the moment of his dreams, from the time he learned that he was blessed, till now. Joseph starts off as his father's favorite child and is then thrown into a hole in the ground by his brothers; clearly a downward trajectory. From this pit he's dragged off to Egypt where he's sold as a slave, enduring both physical and spiritual descent – he's going down. As a slave, he's falsely accused of a crime and thrown into Pharaoh's dungeon – another physical and spiritual descent. All this leaves us to wonder; could things possibly get any worse?

The Torah gives us the answer. When the chief cupbearer was restored to his position, he “did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.” (Gen. 40:23) Not only is Joseph a criminal, locked up in Pharaoh's dungeon for a crime he did not commit, not only is he a slave, he is a forgotten man, living in a foreign land. Tell me, can life get any worse than this? At this point you'd be excused from thinking that, if this is what it means to be blessed, maybe I don't want to be so lucky.

What is a blessing? What does it mean to be blessed? Webster's Dictionary defines it as: “Something promoting happiness, well-being, or prosperity. A boon.” But that's certainly not the case here. Clearly Joseph's life has moved in the opposite direction. Perhaps checking out the meaning of the Hebrew word *Brachah* might give us some insight.

One of the secrets of Hebrew is that every word can be broken down into a three letter root word which forms the basis for word families. Words with those same letters share similar meanings. So *Brachah*, or Blessing, comes from the three letter root word *Ba-ray-kh*, which is formed by the letters *Bet*, *Reish* and *Khaf*. And the word *Ba-ray-kh* means “to kneel”. Hmm. So how do we get from happiness, well-being or prosperity to kneeling? Is there some kind of a connection between these two ideas? Perhaps there is.

A story: In the introduction to Rachel Naomi Remen's book, [My Grandfather's Blessings](#), she tells of a childhood encounter with her grandfather who, rather than bringing her a book, a doll or a stuffed animal like he usually did when he visited, brought her a cup filled with dirt. This proper 4-year-old girl, growing up in

a Manhattan apartment building had never been given a gift like *this* before, but she knew that she was not allowed to play with dirt, so she tried to give it back. But her grandfather wouldn't take it. Instead, he picked up her little teapot, filled it with water and told her that if she remembered to put a few drops of water into the cup each day something magical would happen. She promised him that she would.

Rachel was a good little girl, and she kept her word. Every day for the first week she remembered to put water in the cup, but nothing happened. During the second week she became a bit resentful of this "gift". And by the third week, she would sometimes forget to water it during the day, and had to get out of bed and water it in the dark. But one morning she woke up to find that there were two tiny leaves poking out of the dirt that were not there the night before.

She writes: "I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted. "And all it needs is water, Grandpa?" I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No," he said, "all it needs is your faithfulness." She concludes with an observation made years later. "This was my first lesson in the power of service."

The power of service. Was it the water that brought the plant to life, or the dedication of a little girl who day by day, drop by drop, kept her word. Brachah – Blessing – Kneeling. What does it mean to be blessed? To Rachel Remen it means to see yourself in service to a greater purpose, or, to kneel before a greater power. What is blessing? **To see that life has meaning beyond yourself; but to also know that *you* still have a vital role to play;** that a little girl who "faithfully" pours water into a cup of dirt creates life. And by doing so she can *be* a blessing and she can *feel* blessed.

Many of us think of blessings according to Webster's definition, as happiness, well-being, and prosperity. And then we look around at the circumstances of our lives and wonder what we've done wrong, why *we're* not blessed. In our country today there are millions of people: White, Black, Hispanic, Moslem, Christian and Jews who feel that they've been victimized or forgotten. They all have stories just like Joseph's, and they're mad. They're mad at the system, mad at the politicians,

mad at each other, even mad at God. How come “they” are blessed, but “we’re” left out in the cold, they say. Someone’s to blame, they say.

What does it mean to be blessed? For those who insist on using Webster’s definition as their standard, I would suggest that despite the hardships, the inequities, the unfairness of daily life, everyone who lives in this country, every one of us is blessed. When you take a look around the globe you’ll find people every bit as deserving, people, who through no fault of their own were born in South or Central America, in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, in Haiti, Syria, North Korea, who would trade their right arm to be blessed with the good fortune of our birthplace.

And if we were to judge by the standards of history, tell me what noble king or vicious tyrant would not have given his kingdom to live as a pauper in our land, to enjoy the treasures we take for granted: Pantries, refrigerators and freezers in our homes, Supermarkets filled with delicacies, heating in the winter and air conditioning in the summer, cars to take ourselves wherever we want to go, planes to take us across the globe in hours without the need for an army, closets filled with clothes that can be laundered in hours, communication, entertainment, education, doctors who know how to cure. I could go on and on, and so could you. Friends, there is no doubt that there is reason for even those who feel they are the least among us to see that they’re incomparably blessed. But we don’t always feel that way, do we?

Remember Joseph? What was his secret? How did he endure the reversals of life, and still praise God? How did he accept the unfairness and still know that he was blessed? Instead of measuring his worth by what he had, or by what others did, he valued who he was and what he did. He lived with integrity; he gave his all. He acted, not from a sense of ego or pride, but rather from an understanding that he had a role to play in a bigger picture. The picture might not be clear to him today, but he would play his part and do it well. For Joseph, rather than looking for blessings as external gifts, He understood that to be a blessing and feel blessed comes from within.

In the book [The Path of Blessing](#), Rabbi Marcia Prager describes the results of this outlook: “Imagine if at every moment we each embraced the world as the *gift* that it is: An apple is a *gift*; the color pink is a *gift*; the blue sky is a *gift*; the scent

of honeysuckle is a *gift*. Hidden in *every* experience is a *gift*, obligating us to heart-filled *appreciation*, to songs of *gratitude*. We are called, not merely to notice casually now and then that something is special and nice, but to deepen a profound and sustained *gratitude*. Indeed, the more we acknowledge our *gratefulness*, the more we temper our tendency to be users, despoilers, arrogant occupiers.”

Friends, there are too many users, despoilers and arrogant occupiers in our land; and too few kneelers. What does it mean to kneel? Rather than looking at life and seeing what we’re owed or deserve; it is to wake up each day with a sense of appreciation and even awe, to realize that life itself is the greatest gift we could ever possess. One who nurtures that sense of gratitude will come to see that every day can bring a blessing.

This is what Joseph knew at every moment, every stage of his life. He could not control the circumstances that he faced, they were beyond his control. But God had blessed him with a spirit of gratitude, and he lived each day giving his best, being and feeling blessed.

This past month I’ve learned this lesson first hand, during the days I spent with my father in the hospital. His situation was, and still is precarious, yet he is full of gratefulness. Rather than railing against God for his heart attack and setbacks, rather than complaining about the rough path he needs to follow and the physical hardships he must try to overcome, rather than spend his days crying over the precarious nature of life, dad is full of gratitude: for his family and friends, for his doctors and nurses, for Fox News, for hospital food, for voices on the telephone, for being able to open his eyes, and for being alive. If you asked my dad about the unfairness of life right now, he’d set you straight. He’d tell you that life is sweet, it’s a blessing. Every day is a gift, seize it. Don’t wait for tomorrow, do it now.

Blessings, this room is full of them, grasp hold of one for yourself. As God said to Abraham: Be a blessing, and you will always feel blessed. Amen.