

My Favorite Things – Parashat Ki Tavo

Hang onto your hats, because this morning I'm going to do something that I rarely do while giving sermons, something I generally try to avoid doing publically at all if I can help it – I'm going to sing. The tune, if I can stay on pitch well enough to make it recognizable, will - I hope - be familiar to you but the lyrics, you'll notice, have been changed. You see, in honor of her 79th birthday, the actress Julie Andrews made a special appearance at Radio City Music Hall for the benefit of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) where she wrote these new words to her iconic show-stopper from the *Sound of Music*, "My Favorite Things" And they are so good, and also so relevant to this particular moment on the Jewish calendar, that I just can't help but share them this morning (although I've eliminated a verse or two for the sake of brevity). So here goes:

Botox and nose drops and needles for knitting,
Walkers and handrails and new dental fittings,
Bundles of magazines tied up in string,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Cadillacs and cataracts, hearing aids and glasses,
Polident and Fixodent and false teeth in glasses,
Pacemakers, golf carts and porches with swings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

When the pipes leak, When the bones creak,
When the knees go bad,

I simply remember my favorite things,

And then I don't feel so bad.

Hot tea and crumpets and corn pads for bunions,

No spicy hot food or food cooked with onions,

Bathrobes and heating pads and hot meals they bring,

These are a few of my favorite things.

When the joints ache, when the hips break,

When the eyes grow dim,

Then I remember the great life I've had,

And then I don't feel so bad.

Most of us won't be surprised to learn that Ms. Andrews received a standing ovation for this performance that lasted well over four minutes and that she was entreated to indulge the crowd with multiple encores. To be sure, the audience was probably charmed by Ms. Andrews' wit and humor as well as inspired by the experience of hearing a living legend sing onstage just months before her 80th birthday. But I imagine, too, that Andrews' fans were moved by the deep wisdom and insight of her words, the essential message that remains when you pull back all the cleverness and shtick of this playful parody. "Then I remember the great life I've had and then I don't feel so bad." Would that all of us be able to maintain such equanimity and perspective as we hit the inevitable setbacks and indignities that are part of the human experience.

“Al tashlichenu l’et zikna” – we say during the *Sh’ma Kolenu* prayer of the High Holidays which we will once again recite this evening at our annual Selichot services – “Do not cast us off in our old age.” While this line specifically invokes God to protect us as we grow older, we can also understand it more broadly as speaking to the general experience of living with vulnerability – when we feel weak, when we are sick, when money is tight, when we feel alone; when our bodies don’t work as they should, when we’re depressed or anxious, when we struggle with addiction; when our families fall apart, when our careers stagnate, when we struggle to find our place in this world – at all these times, God, don’t abandon us but rather let us feel the strength of Your presence. Do not forsake us but rather see our essential goodness and value.

Of course, it’s not only God Who can hopefully help to carry us through some of life’s more difficult and unpleasant moments. We, too, have the opportunity to face the circumstances of our existence as Andrews does – with resilience, humor, and an eye towards recognizing the good – or we can allow ourselves to see only that which is painful and limiting and impossibly hard. In this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, we read what is called the *tochecha* – or great rebuke – a long list of all the blessings that will come to the Israelite people should they follow God’s commandments as well as the curses that will plague them if they turn from God’s ways. The casual observer will notice that the curses far outnumber the blessings in this litany and that they are terrifying in their specificity – we will be stricken with consumption, fever and itch from which we will never recover; there will be drought, famine, theft, and enemy attack. We will be scattered across the face of the earth and our children will be made slaves. We will live in fear, day and night, with no assurance of survival. Commentators throughout the ages have posited that the skewed ratio of curses to blessings is because humans tend to be motivated more by threat than by reward, and Moses is simply trying to urge right behavior. But I

wonder if the excess number of curses in our *parasha* is perhaps for another reason too. It is so much easier to notice what is hard than to recognize all that is good.

Tonight we join together for Selichot services, the official beginning of the High Holiday season. Coming on the Saturday night just before Rosh Hashanah (unless, as it is this year, there are fewer than four days between Saturday and the holiday in which case Selichot is pushed back one week earlier), these late-night penitential prayers mark a further intensification of the spiritual preparation for the holiday season which began a few weeks ago with the arrival of the Hebrew month of Elul, the month immediately preceding the High Holidays. Since the beginning of Elul in mid-August, we have been blowing the shofar each weekday morning and adding Psalm 27 for the Season of Awe into our liturgy; we've been turning our hearts and minds towards repentance so that when the holidays arrive we will be at least somewhat prepared. Our energies deepen further tonight, as we enter this last sacred week before Rosh Hashanah arrives.

The High Holidays are a time for taking stock of our behavior, but they are also a time for taking stock of our lives – What has changed in the past year? What do we hope might change in the year still to come? How are we doing when it comes to our families, our friendships, our work, our health? Are we where we would like to be in life and, if not, what might it take to get there? If we are discriminating and honest, there are probably elements of our lives that are not quite what we would wish for them to be and there's no shame in hoping for different in the year to come, in working for the changes we wish to realize. And yet if we are discerning and wise, there are also countless elements of our lives that are just as we had hoped for – or at least nearly so – elements we can tend to overlook or take for granted.

How easy it is for the curses to seemingly outweigh the blessings. When, in truth, it is usually very much the opposite.

Julie Andrews' parody is brilliant because it doesn't whitewash the indignities of aging; it doesn't pretend that they don't exist or that they're not, from time to time, quite difficult. Rather, it places these challenges in their proper context – that of a long and happy life well lived. And when we think about the original version of the *Sound of Music* song, we see that it does quite the same. Dog bites and bee stings and sad feelings are, unfortunately, a part of life but they can be mitigated by all the good – warm mittens on a cold day, crisp apple strudel straight from the oven, beautiful raindrops after a storm, the promise of an unopened brown package tied with string. The rabbis call this particular virtue of gratitude *hakarat hatov* – recognizing the good – and the very formulation of this phrase conveys a deep insight. Gratitude, in the Hebrew language, is not about actually getting something good; it's rather about recognizing the good that is already ours. No matter how dire or difficult our circumstances, it is always possible to find something for which to be grateful.

And so it begins tonight! As we join together for Selichot this evening, as we gather in prayer over the next many days of this sacred High Holiday season, may we remain ever attuned to the particular joys that our ours, our own personal blessings that mitigate against the curses of daily living. “When the joints ache, when the hips break, when the eyes grow dim. I simply remember the great life I've had and then I don't feel so bad.” Even when there is pain, there is still so very much abundance too.

Shana Tova – wishing you a very happy (early) new year!

Shabbat Shalom.