



CONGREGATION  
B'nai Torah

## The Curse of Blessings

Rabbi Joshua Heller

Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5780

There are some shows where every episode is the exactly same. They are never getting off the island. That is, if it's Gilligan's. Of course, if it is Survivor, they are getting voted off the island one-by-one. If it's CSI, someone is dead before the credits, Jerry Orbach shows up, and you know that by the end of the hour the most famous actor in the episode will be revealed as the one who did it. Every episode is the same.

Rosh Hashanah is a little like that. We're here today on the second day, but all of the prayers, all of the rituals, are basically the same as yesterday. Isn't it odd that we are celebrating a new year, with the same old prayers?

Let me start answering the question with a story by Mitchell Chefitz.<sup>1</sup> The original is breathtaking but lengthy, and I recommend it to you. For today, my telling will have to do.

Once upon a time, there was an officer, newly graduated, 20 years old. His uniform was immaculate, with brass buttons. His sword glinted at his side. But his uniform made him arrogant. He was cruel and callous. On his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, full of pride, the pompous officer was on his patrol. He stopped an old man along the way. He commanded the man, dressed in rags, "Step aside! I am an officer, step aside!"

The man would not step aside, and instead muttered "What am I going to do with you?" "Step aside! I command you!" The officer drew his sword, and as he advanced towards the old man, he stumbled, and the old man reached out to steady him. The sword flashed, and when the dust cleared, the officer's sword was embedded in the old man, who lay dying. The officer cried out: "Why did you not step aside when I commanded you?"

The man in rags waved the words away. "I am leaving you," he said, "and as I do, I put upon you the Curse of Blessings."

"What do you mean?" asked the Officer, now quite confused.

"The Curse of Blessings. Every day you must bless something you have never blessed before. On the day you do not bless something new, on that day you will die." The man in rags closed his eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> The Curse of Blessings: Sometimes the Right Story can Change your Life  
<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00T57NHAO>



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The officer was confused. He looked around, and when he turned back, the man in rags was gone. He scoffed. The Curse of Blessings? Ridiculous!

But then, as night fell, the officer felt ill, in a way that he had never felt before; his limbs felt cold and he knew, somehow, that his life was leaving him. He cried out, with “You are blessed, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who brings on the evening.” Even as life returned to him, he realized that the curse was real.

The next morning, he did not delay. As soon as he awoke, he offered words of blessing. “You are blessed that you allowed me to wake up this morning.” Each morning, he added a new blessing. He thanked God that he could get out of bed, that he could go to the bathroom. He blessed his clothes, his house. He ran out of furniture to bless. So, he blessed his relationships – his family and friends. He started to bless his fellow officers, who had, until recently, found him to be something of a jerk, but slowly grew to appreciate him in return.

The officer had to go farther afield to find new things to bless. He began to bless strangers, the clerk in the market, and the person who cut ahead of him in line.

As the years passed, his horizons broadened further still. He retired and travelled the world, blessing its sights and sounds, its smells and tastes. He blessed museums and pyramids, mountains and oceans. He blessed the desserts and jungles, the rains down in Africa<sup>2</sup>. Along the way, he blessed city councils and schools, scientists and their discoveries. They opened the way for him to bless the wonders of the universe.

Each day, his life was renewed. Almost 100 years had passed, and he realized that he was nearing the age of 120. Even Moses did not live longer than that, and he had certainly outlived all of his friends! He resolved that on his birthday, he would review the blessings of his life, but recite no new one. And review he did. The blessings of his body, of friends and strangers here and long gone, of the wonders of nature and the world. And, as evening fell, he felt, not a bitter chill, but a coolness falling over him. And he did not resist it.

As twilight fell, a familiar figure appeared beside him. It was the old man in rags, from almost 100 years before. “You!” the Officer exclaimed, “I have thought about you every

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon Bingo



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day for a hundred years! I am so sorry I harmed you. I know that I must do what's right." Please, let me end my life, and forgive me."

"You don't understand," said the man in rags. "You don't know who I am, do you? I am an angel who was sent a hundred years ago to harvest your soul, but when I looked at you, so pompous and proud, there was nothing there to harvest. An empty uniform was all I saw. So I put upon you the Curse of Blessings, and now look what you've become!" The officer grasped in an instant all that had happened and why. Overwhelmed he said, "Thank you God, for giving me my life, and for taking it in its time."

The man in rags cried out in frustration, "Now look what you've done, a new blessing!" Even as he said the words, life flowed back into the officer, and he and the man in rags looked to each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.

That's where the officer's story ends, but it is where our story begins.

When is the last time you noticed something you had never appreciated before, and offered a word of gratitude? When's the last time you said a **new** blessing? For that matter, when's the last time you said an old blessing?

No angel has cursed us, but do we die, just a little bit, on the day that we do not offer words of thanks? No heavenly power compels us, but do we not live a little more when we appreciate life?

This morning, I'd like to talk with you about what it might mean; if not to make a new blessing every day, then, at least, to make every day a new blessing.

We Jews claim to know a thing or two about blessings, but in fact, we tend to take them for granted. I know I do. Our tradition has given us a structure, a formula, a ritual, for that expression of appreciation. We call it the *beracha*. "*Baruch ata....*"

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe. It's the basic building block of our prayer, our spirituality, of our liturgy. It gives us a framework to express our appreciation of everything that we want and dream of. Our communal desires and requests, our gratitude for the things that sustain us, and our appreciation of the wonders of the world around us. It's like



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the little black dress of our spiritual wardrobe; it's the basic for any setting and then you accessorize it to go with the moment.

And there are **lots** of blessings in our tradition. If you've been paying attention since the very start of services this morning you've recited or responded amen to almost 40 of them: the morning blessings, thanking God that we were able to awaken, that we are free. Thanking God for the very universe itself, for the holiday. Then there are blessings over spiritual practices, blessings over the *Torah*, the *haftorah*, the *shofar*. You may be saying to yourself: the curse of blessings is that we have to worry about so many of them!

In fact, the Talmud tells us that we should offer *Meah Brachot*, 100 blessings a day. So, despite all this time in synagogue, you are only 40% of the way there. You think it is hard coming up with a blessing a day – try 100! I know I said there would be no math, but if you have 16 waking hours, that is a blessing every 10 minutes. If, like me, you have 20 waking hours, then you can relax- it's one blessing every 12 minutes.

The blessings of the synagogue liturgy can guide and illuminate our lives. There's so much inspiration in those words. If you only come on High Holidays, or even on Shabbat, you are missing out. If you come back tomorrow morning or evening, the weekday *Amidah* has 19 blessings. The first three and the last three are always the same, every day of the year, but the middle 13 are special, in a passive aggressive sort of way. We request the things that we want in life, by way of thanking God for them in advance. We relate to all the things that we want on a daily basis. We say prayers for wisdom, repentance, for health, for justice. There's a prayer for financial well-being. I know a few people who say a little prayer every time they swipe their credit card. Imagine offering a thank you once a day for the things that God has given you?

*Berachot* are not just something that happen in synagogue, not just the blessings that are part of the communal liturgy or set times for prayer in our homes.

There are also short blessings that we can take with us and integrate into our everyday lives. Not old forgotten words or ancient melodies, they are meant to come with us into the world.

There are *Birkhot hamitzvot* – the prayers over putting up a *mezuzah*, wearing a *tallit*. Sitting in a *sukkah*, waving a lulav. We include the words "*asher kideshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu*. It's not just about performing a Godly act, the words ensure that we make meaning, that we create



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intention in what we do. The words tell us that when we do those things, are relating to something bigger than ourselves, we are engaging with holiness.

But this is as good a time as anything to note, sometimes there isn't a formal *beracha*. Sometimes there is no blessing.

For example, there is **not** a blessing for one of the most important *mitzvot*, giving *tzedakah*, which is weird. It would be easy enough to write one: *Baruch ata.... asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al netinat tzedakah*. OK. I'm totally going to copyright that and watch the royalties come in. But no, the tradition that is we don't add to the ancient formulas ordained by the sages. But why didn't they write one? Maybe because your *mitzvah* only comes as a result of the suffering of others. Or maybe because to say a blessing, you need to know you have completed the act. We never know if we've given enough. If there are still poor people, is your *mitzvah* really complete? Even if there isn't a formal blessing, the door is still open for you to offer your own moment of appreciation, in English. Thank you, God that you have given me the ability to be your partner in helping those in need. May it be your will that my gift truly makes a difference in the life and dignity of those who have received it.

What would it mean if, every day, we chose some holy act to perform? Maybe we would undertake a ritual we hadn't tried in a while. Or, what would it mean if, every day, we found a new person, a new cause to help?

Then, of course, there are *brachot* over food. We might know *hamotzi* over bread, and *borei pri hagafen* over wine from Friday night. There are still others for grain –*borei minei mezonot*, *borei pri haetz* over fruit. *Borei pri ha'adamah*, over vegetables (as if I was ever going to eat those).

It's easy to be grateful for food when we are hungry. It's a little harder to do that when we are full. Jerry Seinfeld has a shtick about how weird it is that you get the check at the end of the meal. Before you eat, money has no value. "Bring me food! Money is no object!" After the meal, you have the pants unbuttoned, napkins destroyed on top of the mashed potatoes, and then the check comes. It's in a cover like it's a little book "this is the story of some people who thought they were hungry." We're mystified. What is this? How could this be? We're not hungry now, why are we buying all this food! Just as much, there is something special *birkhat hamazon*, and other blessings we say **after** we eat.



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The Talmud says that since heaven and earth belong to God, food is considered stolen until we thank God for it. With the recitation of a blessing, it becomes truly ours. What would it mean if, before every snack, to think about the long chain of events that came together to bring that food to your plate? Would the food taste better? What would it mean to thank God that you are no longer hungry?

But we aren't done with our food when we eat it. There's also a blessing to be said after you use the bathroom, expressing gratitude that everything came out ok! Even though it was written long before modern medicine, and the discovery of cholesterol and copays, it reminds us of what we hate to learn the hard way – that we have innumerable essential organs: pipes, tubes and valves. If just one were closed that were supposed to be open, or open when it was supposed to be closed, we would surely not be able to stand before God. When we use the house's plumbing, we are reminded to be grateful that our own plumbing worked.

Our tradition doesn't end there. If all you had were the experiences of the liturgy, the *mitzvot*, and the blessings over food, you'd run out of blessings in no time.

There are also blessings we say over experiences. There are blessings for natural wonders. Two years ago, there was a total solar eclipse. Such eclipses are rare; they may happen somewhere in the world every year or two, but in any one area its only every few hundred years. People flocked from all over the country to the areas where it could be seen in totality. In the midst of all this, there were those who asked what blessing to say. Everyone flocked to see the eclipse, and a few people even blessed it, but there are natural wonders all around us every day that we take for granted. If the sun set only once every 10 years, people would flock to see it. But it happens every day. Maybe if it is truly striking, we might pause or post a picture on Instagram. We are not commanded to say a blessing when we see the sunset, but every night, as part of the evening service, whether we saw the sun set or not, we say a blessing *ma'ariv aravim*- we recognize that God brings on the night.

And so, our tradition has blessings for a lot of things you might see. We have blessings for when you see unusual animals, huge crowds, people of unusual intelligence or appearance, powerful rulers.

And, if none of those work, there are catch-alls.

There's *Hatov V'hameitiv*, a blessing upon hearing good news.



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Then, of course, there is the classic, *shehecheyanu*. We say it the first night of every festival. When we purchase and wear new clothing. When we see a friend who we have not been able to be in touch with in over 30 days. It gets a little bit overused. Really only said for something that happens once a month, or once a year, or for something that is the first of many times. It's traditionally not said for a *Bris*, a *Bar Mitzvah* or a wedding. You don't say it at the drop of a hat, unless it is a new hat.

Still, having all these blessings, including *shehecheyanu*, forces us, like the officer in the Curse of Blessings, to seek out new experiences. If I'm going to get to 100 blessings, I need to get out more. Today is the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The rabbis say, we're supposed to say *shecheyanu*. How do we *shehecheyanu* again, when everything we do today, we already did yesterday. The suggested answer is to find a new fruit, something that is new in season, that we haven't had a chance to eat in a few months. Not only can we say the prayer over the fruit, we can add that blessing of newness. We are commanded to seek out new experiences and blessings. The Jerusalem Talmud (JT *Kiddushin* 48b) says that a person will be held accountable for any good thing that was put before them that they did not taste. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, as a frail old man, travelled to the Alps. His students asked why he was taking time away from his studies. He explained that when he came before God, the Holy One might indeed ask, "I made beautiful Alps! Why did you not go see them?"

Being attuned to a life of *brachot*, to blessing something new each day, forces us to broaden our horizons, to break out of our stagnation, and seek out and appreciate the new. Of course, not everything in life is good. Even things that seem like a blessing to some of us many not be a blessing to all.

You may have heard the story of the family who have many guests over for lunch second day of Rosh Hashanah. The father asks their 6-year-old daughter, "Will you say the blessing before the meal?" The daughter responds, "I don't know how." "You know what to say to God, just say what you heard mommy say last night!" The child has a glimpse of understanding, and responds, "Dear Lord, why did we invite all these people over?"

What happens when we have a day where what is new is really not good? What happens when there is no curse of blessings? Instead, we have, if you will, the blessing of curses. When we face a death, tragic or otherwise we say: *Baruch- Dayan Haemet*. We praise God who is the true judge.



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We are called upon to bless, even when we feel cursed.

There are other faiths that are dualistic, that say that everything good comes from God, everything bad comes from somewhere else, from demonic forces. We disagree. We recognize that at the best and the worst time in our lives, God is there. I've been present a number of times where someone was in the final stages of illness, or even at the moment of their passing. I've felt God's presence as intensely at those times as at any other.

Part of truly being grateful is being able to say thank you even on the bad days and being attuned to the imperfections of life. On this day, we remember the creation of the world. When you read the story in Genesis, on most days God says, "It was good." On the sixth God said it was, "Very good". On the second day, He didn't have anything to say. I don't like Mondays either. The point is, God never says, "It was perfect." If the world were perfect, there would be no room for us in it. There would be no stomach aches, but also no eating. No death, but also no birth.

It's easy to have gratitude for health, for wealth for life. It's hard to cultivate an appreciation for God's presence at illness, at want, at loss. When I look in the mirror and I see gray hairs and blemishes, it's hard to put my feelings in terms of a thank you. But maybe I can find a way to bless it. I can tell God that I've noticed it is there. That I'm living a little bit more today, knowing that I am one day closer to running out of blessings.

Maybe that's the lesson of blessings. Appreciation is not always enjoyment. Sometimes it's about being able to be honest with God about how we are experiencing the world. Blessing something new every day is not about claiming the world is perfect. It's not even about hoping the world is perfect, or that we will get what we want. Someone with an attitude of gratitude can find blessings among the curses of life. The officer in the story, should have been frightened of this thing that he'd become. But he was too blind to see it until an expression of gratitude changed his perspective. At first, his blessings only changed him. It took months, years, decades, but they also changed the world around him.

Our tradition tells us that we should make 100 blessings a day. That could be a full time job. Could you make 10, could you make 1?

Could you find a mitzvah to do with intention?



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Could you take a moment, before or after eating, to be thankful?

Could you take a moment to appreciate the beauty of a natural vista or renewed relationship with a person who has been absent from your life?

Could you find something new to be grateful for?

Could your gratitude lead you to greater happiness?

What new blessing will you recite today, on this second day of Rosh Hashanah, before the sun sets?

What new blessing will you recite tomorrow?