

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5784 **Curses, Blessings and Awe**

- Want to thank Rabbi Jill Borodin who pointed me to this story with me, along with some other ideas for this sermon.
- It's the title story of *The Curse of Blessings: Sometimes The Right Story Can Change Your Life*, by Mitchell Chefitz

There was an Officer of the Law, a recent graduate, proud as you can imagine, in his uniform of blue with brass buttons and gold epaulets. He wore a hat with a plume and a sword with a gold and ivory handle. He was as pompous as could be. He was arrogant and bold and callous. Every letter of the alphabet served only to demonstrate his authority and exalt his being.

One day he was walking his beat and heard a commotion in an alley. He ventured into the darkness, and there in the distance saw a man in rags. "Come forward," he commanded. "Come forward now!" But the man in rags did not come forward. "I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you, come forward!"

The man in rags did not move. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and spoke, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you." "Do with me?" the Officer of the Law mocked. "Do with me? You don't do with me! I do with you! I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you to come forward."

“Now I know what to do with you,” the man in rags said, and as he spoke, he drew his sword. “Now I know what to do.” Without further word he moved to attack.

The Officer of the Law drew his own sword in defense. “Stop that!” he ordered. “Put your sword down right now. But the man in rags did not stop. The Officer of the Law began to parry thrusts left and right. “Stop!” he said again, but to no avail. The Officer of the Law was forced to retreat.

When it seemed the man in rags would prevail, he lowered his guard, and what the Officer of the Law had intended as a parry became a thrust. His sword ran through the man in rags. “I didn’t mean that,” the Officer of the Law said. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Why didn’t you stop when I ordered you to? Why did you attack me?”

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 of the Law, now quite confused.

“The Curse of Blessings. Every day you must say a new blessing, one you have never said before. On the day you do not say a new blessing, on that day you will die.”

The man in rags closed his eyes. The Officer of the Law looked about for help. There was none to be found. When he turned back, the man in rags had disappeared. He was gone.

“It was a dream,” the Officer of the Law thought. “Only a dream. I imagined it.”

The time was late in the afternoon. The sun was setting. As much as the Officer of the Law tried to ignore his experience, he could not. The Jewish day ends with the sunset. The Officer of the Law felt his body growing cold and knew from the chill that his life was leaving him. In a panic, he uttered these words of blessing: “You are blessed, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has created such a beautiful sunset.” At once warmth and life flowed back into him. He realized, with both shock and relief, the curse had been for real.

The next morning he did not delay. He woke with words of blessing. “You are blessed that You allowed me to wake up this morning.” His life felt secure the entire day. The next morning he blessed his ability to rise from his bed, the following day, that he could tie his shoes.

Day after day he found abilities he could bless. That he could go to the bathroom, that he had teeth to brush, that each finger of his hands still worked, that he had toes on his feet and hair on his head. He blessed his clothes, every garment. He blessed his house, the roof and floor, his furniture, every table and chair.

At last he ran out of things to bless, so he began to bless relationships. He blessed his family and friends, fellow workers, and those who worked for him. He blessed the mailman and the clerks. He

was surprised to find they appreciated the blessings. His words had power. They drew family and friends closer to him. Word went out that the Officer of the Law was a source of blessing.

Years passed, decades. The Officer of the Law had to go farther afield to find new sources of blessing. He blessed city councils and university buildings, scientists, and their discoveries. As he traveled through the world he became in awe of its balance and beauty and blessed that. The more he learned, the more he had to bless. His life was long, and he had the opportunity to learn in every field.

He passed the age of one hundred. Most of his friends were long gone. His time was relegated to searching for the purpose in his life and the one source from which all blessings flow. He had long since realized he was not the source but only the conduit, and even that realization was welcomed with a blessing that sustained him for yet another day.

As he approached the age of one hundred and twenty, he considered that his life was long enough. Even Moses had not lived longer. On his birthday he made a conscious decision to utter no new blessing and allow his life to come to an end. Still he could recite old blessings, and throughout the day he reviewed them, all the blessings for his body and his possessions, for relationships that spread throughout the world, for the awesome beauty and balance of creation, and for the deep resonance, the pulse of purpose that pervaded his very being. But no new blessing passed his lips.

As the sun was setting, a chill progressed inward from his extremities. He did not resist it. In the twilight a figure appeared, the man in rags. “You!” the Officer of the Law exclaimed. “I have thought about you every day for a hundred years! I never meant to harm you. Please, forgive me.”

“You don’t understand,” said the man in rags. “You don’t know who I am, do you? I am the 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 of the Law grasped in an instant all that had happened and why. Overwhelmed he said, “You are blessed, my God, ruler of the universe, that You have kept me alive and sustained me so I could attain this moment.”

“Now look what you’ve done!” the man in rags said in frustration. “A new blessing!”

Life flowed back into the Officer of the Law, and he and the man in rags looked to each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.

Recognize the final words of this story as *shechiyanu*, that we said just a few moments ago:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיָּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.
*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehechiyanu v'kimanu
 v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of time and space, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this moment.

Blessings are life-giving. And blessings exist within curses.

So as a mourner after the unexpected death of my mother,
 I want to share with you some of the blessings I have received
 over the past few weeks.

The blessing of my father, brothers and sisters-in-law
 who are loving, kind, and were all truly present
 when we needed each other most.

The blessing of my children, whose presence in my life makes
 everything better.

The blessing of my mother's smile
 when she could finally stand up a bit straighter
 after her recent surgery.

The blessing of the time we spent together
 in company and conversation both before and after that surgery,
 a week prior to her fatal cardiac event.

The blessing of getting to meet
my mother's friends, colleagues, and students,
many of whom I hadn't seen in at least 20 years.

The blessing of seeing my mother
through the eyes of others who knew and loved her.

The blessing of close childhood and family friends,
who were so generous to me, and to my brothers.
They came to the hospital, brought us flowers and food,
and birthday treats for me while we were at my mother's bedside
round the clock for 5 days.

They cared for my little nephews,
opened their homes so we had places to stay,
accompanied me when I waited for the funeral home
to retrieve my mother's body,
and participated in the ritual of *shemirah*,
attending to her body until burial.

They hosted us for numerous meals,
including Shabbat dinner and shiva after the funeral.

The blessing of getting to say goodbye to my mother
in the most loving way possible,
to receive her final words to me,
to get to sing to her, pray with her,
confess so many ways I had wronged her,
and ask her forgiveness,
to give her affection,
and cry with her at a life cut short too soon.

The blessing of extended family and community—
I spoke in my eulogy for my mother
about the community my parents created for us when we were young,
and those same people came from near and far
to mourn my mother and to support us,
as well as my mother's siblings and our cousins from all over the
country—Atlanta, LA, Boston, New York and DC.

And the continued blessing of community—
there was the greater community in Greensboro,
a city just a bit bigger than Spokane,
with a Jewish community bigger than ours,

but still small by most standards.

The synagogue where my mother was a member, and the new young Conservative rabbi cared for us,
the Chabad Rabbi and the Reform rabbi both reached out to me,
my mothers' close Jewish community friends
sat with her in the hospital when we first found out her diagnosis
until we could get there.

And the continued blessing of our amazing Spokane community—
I am filled to overflowing with gratitude.

I'm sure if I try to name everyone

I'll leave someone out,

but here's a start--thank you to our mitzvah corps,

especially Mary Noble and Sue Glass

for arranging the shiva minyanim and meals

to all who have provided our food for the last many days,

set up and clean up, and came to visit during Shiva

and support me to say Kaddish.

Thank you to Rebecca Marquis who retrieved things from my office

I needed to prepare for these holidays, and to set up for shiva.

Thanks to our tremendous staff—

Samantha, Cicely, Ed, Zina and Naama

who all just stepped up to the plate

to make sure everything went smoothly in my absence,
and prepared for these holidays.

Thank you to Rabbi Elizabeth
for not only attending to the needs of our children,
but also stepping in for me in a professional capacity—
officiating Frieda and Shannon's wedding at the last minute.

Thank you to Meryl Gersh and Adie Goldberg,
who both took roles in officiating
and comforting mourners in our community
while I was in my own vigil and grief.

Thank you to presidents Karrie, Rachel and Meghan,
and our synagogue boards for being understanding
of my professional limitations at this moment.

Thanks to all who helped with Shabbat services while I was gone,
and Mindy for coordinating excellently as usual,
Marc for continuing to take on extra Torah reading.

Thanks to Rabbi Pam Wax, whose continued skillful leadership
of CEE morning services is a gift,
along with her willingness to support when needed.

Thanks to Pam Silverstein, Berdine Bender,
choir members and Steve Radcliffe,
who will continue to ensure our high holiday services are beautiful

and contain the *kavvanah*, the intention and focus
of our communal needs.

And with the great blessing of having Cantor Goldberg
as my partner on the bimah,
who will help carry me, and all of us
through this time of renewal and contemplation. //

And the blessing that all of you bring as well,
as caring witnesses to my life-changing events,
as well as one another's,
coming together tonight to appreciate the power of Judaism,
to celebrate the New Year, and to pray with hope for the future.

Psychological researcher Dacher Keltner writes in his book entitled,
Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder,
and how it can transform your Life,
that "Brief moments of awe are
as good for your mind or your body
as anything you might do."

Awe is the key to health and happiness.

Not surprisingly,

this is echoed in the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

(a plug for adult ed class I will teach later this year.)

“Wonder, or radical amazement,” Heschel wrote,
“is the chief characteristic of the religious man’s attitude
toward history and nature. ...

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines.
Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind.
Mankind will not perish for want of information,
but only for want of appreciation.
The beginning of our happiness
lies in the understanding that life without wonder
is not worth living.”

After tremendous research with people of all ages
and many countries around the world,
Keltner identifies 8 different aspects of life
that can create an experience of awe.

But ultimately he states:

“What commonly led people around the world to feel awe?
Nature? Spiritual Practice? Listening to music?
In fact, it was other people’s courage, kindness, strength, or overcoming.
Around the world,
we were most likely to feel awe

when moved by moral beauty.”

I have been surrounded by moral beauty
these past few weeks.

In my grief, I am filled with awe, gratitude, and blessings.

Birth and death are not within our control,
but, finding awe in everyday life,
and offering words of blessing—this is ours to do.

In the words of Rabbi Hanina, recorded in the Talmud,

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים

“Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for awe of Heaven.”

And in the words of a beautiful Sephardic poem for Rosh Hashanah:

תְּכַלֶּה שָׁנָה וְקִלְלוֹתֶיהָ

“May this year end, and with it, all its curses.”

תִּחַל שָׁנָה וּבִרְכוּתֶיהָ

“May the new year begin and with it, all its blessings.”

And let us all say, Amen.