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A Story 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 had 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."

"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 ended 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, God, 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 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, "I feel blessed, dear God, that You have kept me alive and sustained me so I could attain this moment of insight."

"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 the rags looked to each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.

("The Curse of Blessings" from *The Curse of Blessings: Sometimes, the Right Story Can Change Your Life* by Mitchell Chefitz, 2006.)

We come together this evening, this Erev Rosh Hashanah, ready to begin the New Year. We bring our hopes and our regrets, a desire to be forgiven, and perhaps a desire to forgive others. We examine our deeds carefully, noting where we have taken short-cuts and have been insensitive and impatient, selfish and arrogant. We set upon ourselves the task of doing teshuvah, turning back to our best selves and fixing what is broken.

This story, "The Curse of Blessings," reminds me of the Israelites leaving Egypt, leaving the bitterness of slavery. As they are fleeing they experience an extraordinary miracle – as the Egyptian warriors pursue them, they come up against a great sea in front of them. They have nowhere to go. And then, the sea parts and they walk through it, finding freedom on the other side. It's the ultimate moment of redemption.

That is, except for two people. A midrash imagines Reuven and Shimon walking through the sea with the other Israelites. The riverbed is wet and muddy, and Reuven and Shimon are disgusted by the mud. "This is just like Egypt!" Reuven mutters. "They had clay there, we have clay here," complains Shimon. The whole time, as they walk through the sea, they whine and kvetch and gripe about the mud, their eyes turned downwards, while the greatest of miracles was happening all around them.

Too often, like Reuven and Shimon, our eyes are turned downwards. We don't notice the miracles around us. We don't notice our blessings. We are too busy, we are too concerned with our own needs, we notice only how other people have harmed us.

In the "Curse of Blessings" the Officer of the Law was forced to say blessings or he would die. He was forced to look at and to carefully notice the world around him, and to bless each and every detail. This practice of showing gratitude opened his eyes – and his heart – and he drew people in, he brought them closer to him. He became known as a source of blessing, but he also became kind, learned, and in awe of the beauty in his world. He was the conduit through which blessings flowed.

The Talmud instructs us to say one hundred blessings a day. It seems to be reminding us that there is something valuable in noticing others, in noticing the world in all its beauty and with all its suffering, in paying attention, in feeling gratitude, and in expressing gratitude. When our eyes are turned downwards we become self-absorbed. Saying blessings – or even just letting families, friends, colleagues, or community members know that we notice, that we care, that we are grateful to them – makes a difference. It brings us out of ourselves, and it puts us into relationship with others. It turns a transactional relationship – where we're just trying to get something from someone else – into a relationship of deep appreciation.

Some of us are stuck in the past and some of us are stuck in the future. We tend to ignore the present, the world around us in this very moment. Perhaps it's too painful, difficult, or dull. Perhaps it makes us unhappy or angry. The act of saying blessings, though, the act of noticing and expressing appreciation, forces us into the present. It forces us into meaningful relationships. It moves us to think and to act differently.

This is a core piece of teshuvah. We can't change – or forgive or be forgiven – if we don't open our eyes to what is before us right now. We can't change if we don't confront the world as it is with all of its flaws, if we don't make a conscious decision to engage with it.

As Marge Piercy writes in "The Art of Blessing the Day":

Attention is love, what we must give
children, mothers, fathers, pets,
our friends, the news, the woes of others.
What we want to change we curse and then
pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can
with eyes and hands and tongue. If you
can't bless it, get ready to make it new.

At this Rosh Hashanah, let's open our eyes to the world around us. Let's force ourselves to live in the present. Let's figure out what we want to change, and then let's pick up a tool, and bless whatever we can. And if we can't bless it, let's get ready to make it new. L'shanah tovah – may it be a good year.