Rosh Hashanah 2nd Day Sermon 5782 | September 2021
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Stuck in the Middle with You

The rumor was true. There were extra vaccines for the volunteers. My eyes widened and my hands got a bit shaky as I fumbled through my wallet to get my insurance card and driver’s license ready.

I sat down in the chair, pulled out my phone, and took a selfie with the volunteer physician who was about to administer my vaccine. With my sleeve rolled up, I closed my eyes, and began to recite a blessing.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam, HaTov V’HaMeitiv.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who is good and bestows good.

As the words left my lips, I felt the pinch of the needle in my arm and the slow spread of warmth throughout my shoulder. It was one of the most meaningful prayers I have ever said in my life.

Before I made my way to volunteer at the vaccine clinic that day, I actually did some research on what prayer one should say upon receiving the vaccine, so that I’d be ready if there were any extras. And this may shock you – but it turns out that not all Jews were in agreement about what prayer to say. Which is funny, because, in my experience, the Jewish people always seem to agree about everything.

The big debate was between two prayers. Shehechiyanu, and HaTov V’HaMeitiv. And it all hinged on the question of who was being helped. Shehechiyanu – the prayer we say so often to express gratitude for arriving at a moment for the first time or the first time that year, is generally considered to be said when one individual is benefitting. Whereas HaTov V’HaMeitiv is more communal. So the central question was, is the moment of vaccination more of a joyous moment for the individual receiving the shot? Or for all of us together as a community? I chose to say HaTov V’HaMeitiv, and I guess in many ways this makes clear my view on the vaccination debate.

I do believe that getting the vaccine makes everyone a little bit safer. I do believe that each time a person gets vaccinated, all of us enjoy a bit of that blessing.

When I got back home from the vaccination clinic that day, I sat down in bed, with immense gratitude flowing through me.

And suddenly I heard familiar voice inside. A voice from my college-aged self. A voice asking, “How Dare You?”

A blessing for receiving a vaccine?
How *Dare I* utter words of praise to God at a time like this? A pandemic is raging through our world. Millions of people have died. Does this seem like an ideal time to praise the One in charge of it all? What kind of all-powerful Ruler-of-the Universe lets the innocent suffer? What kind of God allows precious life to be cut short at random? And what kind of person am I, to be *thank*ing that same God, for a shot in my arm?

This theology - this kind of frustration with the way of our world, is actually what led me towards Jewish Studies and rabbinical school. It was not my appreciation for our tradition, but my dissatisfaction with it, that started me on the journey towards being the Rabbi I am today. As a teen, and in my twenties, I was bewildered by people who would praise the almighty in a world full of suffering and pain. I wanted to know more about that.

No matter how much I’ve learned and changed, I’ve continued to keep this perspective top of mind as I believe it serves an important role of keeping us in check.

For example, I can’t be the only one who finds it a bit ironic that clergy, Jewish professionals, and lay leaders have been working tirelessly to find new and innovative ways to worship the Creator of the world / because the state of that very same world, which we say that *God* created, is in such disarray that we can’t gather together in crowds without significant risk.

What Chutzpah – what nerve we have, to continue to sing the praises of the Almighty at a time like this.

But what else can we do? This is the challenge that Monotheism presents to us. Many ancient religions told stories of multiple deities. And that made for an easier explanation of the bad. The good gods were trying to make the world a good place, but the evil gods always found a way to cause chaos.

We don’t have room for that in our Jewish theology.

The prophet Isaiah conveyed this sentiment in the following verses.

[Thus said the Lord] “So that they may know, from east to west, That there is none but Me. I am the LORD and there is none else,

“Yotzer or u’vorehchoshech, oseh shalom uvoreh et harah.”

I form light and create darkness, make peace and create evil — I the LORD do all these things. (Isaiah 45:6-7)

If there is only one God, then God is the source of it all. Not just the good, but also the bad.

The ancient rabbis who wrote our liturgy were uncomfortable with keeping this quote from Isaiah in our prayers as-is. So in the shacharit services – our morning prayers –, when we say the prayer that every single bat and bar mitzvah student at Congregation Beth Or knows so well, the “Yotzer Or” prayer, the ancient rabbis changed a word from the quote in Isaiah. “Yotzer Or u’vorehchoshech. Oseh
Shalom u’voreh at HAKOL.” “maker of light and creator of darkness, the maker of peace, and creator of all” They changed “evil” to “all.” Because evil is not exactly high on our checklist of things we want to mention when we are praising the Creator of the Universe.

As I sat there the night after receiving my vaccine, I wondered, was I following this trend of Rabbinic editing when I received my COVID vaccine? Was I willing to overlook so much suffering and despair so that I could praise the almighty in that small moment of joy, benefitting me and my community?

Had I lost my edge?

As I enter my seventh year in the rabbinate, has something in our world somehow erased my frustration with why bad things happen to good people?

I realized that night that the answer is “Yes.”

And I’ll tell you this. It’s not me. It’s you.

This is already my fourth Rosh HaShanah here at Congregation Beth Or, and my 7th Rosh HaShanah as a rabbi. In school I spent years learning from the voices of ages long ago. And, looking back, I took in those texts much more through my head than my heart.

But over these last six years, I have had the privilege of learning from THIS generation’s voices - you.

In the winter of my first year of rabbinical school, I taught a lunch and learn class on the Chanukah blessings. I presented on a peculiar fact - that even though the story of Chanukah is not in the Hebrew Bible, we still say in our blessings “v’tzivanu l’hadlik ner” that God has commanded us to light the Chanukah candles. How could this be if the Hebrew Bible never once mentions Chanukah? The class had a great discussion about Jewish tradition and authority. But towards the end of class, something happened that I will never forget for the rest of my life.

One of the attendees, a woman in her 90’s, shared that she was a holocaust survivor and she proceeded to tell the following story:

When she was living in a ghetto as a child during World War II, there was very little food to go around. And often, the food they had was too rotten to eat. So as Chanukah approached, they would save the rotten potatoes. When Chanukah arrived, they would cut holes in the potatoes, pour a bit of oil they smuggled in from the outside, put a wick inside the oil, and used the potatoes as a Chanukah menorah. That’s how they were able to sing the blessings of Chanukah during the war.

Her story was much more than an anecdote. For me, it was a redefinition of blessings that help me to this day. There I was, talking about the technicalities of commandedness. But through her story, she was telling me,
“That’s nice, young man, to think about the words we use in our blessings. It’s nice, young man, to study the small details. But out there in the world, sometimes we need our blessings to be more than a theological treatise.

We need our blessings to be words that soothe us. We need our ancient words to be a vaccine which protects us from hopelessness. And that kind of medicine is ineffective if it is taken in through the mind. It must be delivered directly to the heart.

In rabbinical school, when I studied the ancient texts, I digested them in my mind. But being alongside you, you have helped me bring the ancient wisdom of tradition into my heart. As the saying goes, the best way to learn how to swim is not by reading a book on swimming - It’s to dive into the water.

In his introduction to an article on blessings, Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein put it beautifully. “Blessings are a portal to the Infinite. They are the utterances and sentiments shared by us and our ancestors for thousands of years.”

I love this definition. Our ancient rabbis set up a formula for almost all prayers.

“Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha’olam.” “Praised are You, Adonai our God, King of the universe...”

Today, these words don’t have to function literally. Not many of us imagine God as a king on high. Not many of us imagine God the way God is described in our ancient texts and liturgy. Rather, the words are like a code. A code which opens the gates to all who have said these words before us, and all those who will say them after. A code that opens our eyes to seeing this very troubled world through a slightly different lens.

So in a year that is likely to bring more uncertainty than anything else, let’s make 5782 a year of blessing.

We can bring blessing into our lives by picking a moment when you’ll say a traditional blessing this year. It can truly be any moment because just as the internet’s got an app for that, well, Judaism’s got a blessing for that.

Perhaps you’ll pick a time as regular as eating a meal, or leaving the bathroom – yes, you heard that right - there is a Jewish blessing to be said after using the bathroom.

If that’s too frequent for you, choose something less common like seeing rainbow or hearing thunder. There are blessings proscribed for those moments too.

If traditional blessings aren’t your thing, maybe you’ll write or record your own blessings. The Talmud, and especially tractate Brachot, is full of beautiful sayings and compositions that Rabbis would
say at different times. If you are a creative type, perhaps you’ll pick up the baton passed on to us by our ancient rabbis and write creative blessings of your own.

Finally, I will quote to you from my bar mitzvah portion, Lech Lecha. After telling Abraham to go forth, God says to Abraham,

ואֶעֶשְךָ֙ לְגוֹי֙ גָּד֔וֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְך֔ וַאֲגַדְלָָּ֖ה שְמֶֶ֑ך וֶהְי ָ֖ה בְרָּכֶָּֽה׃

“I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.”

God makes distinct promises to Abraham in this passage in Genesis. God promises that from Abraham, a great nation will spring forth. God promises to bless Abraham. But then God says to Abraham, “You shall be a blessing.” If saying a traditional blessing isn’t your thing, if composing a blessing isn’t your thing, then resolve this year to be a blessing.

We can be a blessing this year by using our hearts a bit more when we are tempted to use our heads.

When we joust with folks across the dinner table or on social media platforms, we so often turn to logic. We so often try to point our inconsistencies in the arguments of others.

But guess what, all of us are inconsistent at times. All of us have our shortcomings. I know it’s not easy. I know people with whom we disagree can often make our blood boil. But maybe this year, we can try to understand who they are and how they feel. Maybe this year we can let each other reach our hearts instead of our heads. Maybe this year we can be blessings to each other.

To be a blessing you don’t need to rationalize. You don’t need to analyze theology. Rather, you can, in your own way, inject some understanding and compassion into this world.

I know you can do it, because I’ve been privileged to see it every day in the work I do. I see the blessings our wonderful congregation brings to each other and to this world every day, especially in these times of difficulty.

I’ll continue to struggle with the questions of philosophy and theology. I do believe that it is humanity’s job to not let God off the hook. I pray that we follow in the tradition of Abraham and continue to ask God how the Judge of all the earth allows for the diseases and other horrors of our world to persist. I pray we continue in the tradition of Jacob, to wrestle with God and the big questions of our world.

But this past year and a half of the pandemic, all of you, and perhaps my age, has changed me. It’s too exhausting to call God to task and wrestle with God all the time. In 5782, I’ll try to allow myself to shift out of that mode as much as I can. I’ll try to allow myself to feel what I felt so deeply at that
vaccination clinic. That despite the challenges all around us, despite the unnecessary suffering in our world, there is also room for blessing.

When we hang a mezuzah on our doors, it is traditionally placed on the *inside* of the door frame. Not on the front, sending blessing to those arriving, or on the back, facing those already inside our home. No, when it is possible, the mezuzah is placed *inside* the door frame facing the *threshold*. There is a beautiful teaching which tells us that the mezuzah is placed there because it is in that *liminal moment* when we are in need of the most blessing.

The word liminal is defined as “occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.”

**Before** we enter the liminal space, we are on relatively steady ground. We are standing in a familiar space. Once we are on the *other side* of the threshold, we at least have the benefit of hindsight. But the in-between: that transitional moment: THAT is when we need the most blessing.

The Coronavirus pandemic is here, and sadly, it is far from over. To borrow a line from the band, Stealers Wheel, “here I am, stuck in the middle with you.” We are in an enduring liminal moment together. We are already changed forever, but we are not yet on the other side of this pandemic.

So now, more than ever, we are in need of blessings.

In 5782, may we walk forward together. May we make room for blessings in our lives, and may we *be* blessings.

*Shanah Tovah.*