

"What a Wonderful World"

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One of my favorite musicians is Louis Armstrong. I love him not only for his beautiful music, but also for the inspiring man that he was. By all measures, he had a difficult childhood, and faced many obstacles throughout his life, both personally and professionally. The grandson of slaves, he also faced abandonment, poverty, and racial discrimination. And yet, through his music he spread optimism, joy, beauty and hope. By combining his hard work ethic and natural charisma, he was able to use his many gifts to try to transform the world he was given into a better place for those who would come after him.

But of all of his gorgeous songs, the one that never fails to touch my heart when I hear him sing it is "What a Wonderful World."

When I hear him singing that song it's as though I can feel his heart speaking. It's as though the ugly things in the world become fuzzier and harder to focus on as he zooms in on the small acts of goodness that can be found all around us, if we but pay attention.

Because when Armstrong sang this song it felt as though it was flowing from his soul, I was surprised to find that he didn't write it. "What a Wonderful World" was written by two Jewish songwriters, Bob Thiele and George David Weiss. The song was released in 1968, a tumultuous time in American history, a time of division and anger, a time when our country was at a breaking point. Thiele and Weiss wrote this song as a response to what they were witnessing all around them, and they looked to Louie Armstrong to be an ambassador of peace.

When Armstrong first sang the song, he was criticized by the younger generation who were angry and distraught at the bigotry, hatred and discrimination that was everywhere.

As he introduced a live performance of the song he responded to his critics by saying this:

"Some of you young folks been saying to me: 'Hey, Pops - what do you mean, what a wonderful world? How about all them wars all over the place, you call them wonderful?'

But how about listening to old Pops for a minute? Seems to me it ain't the world that's so bad but what we're doing to it, and all I'm saying is: see what a wonderful world it would be if only we'd give it a chance. Love, baby - love. That's the secret."¹

The power of what he had to say comes precisely because we can not separate the message from the messenger. The fact that he could still sing this song with such honesty after the life he had

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16118157>

lived, and the injustices that he had endured, is what enables us to feel, to understand, and to be moved by his words.

After all he had been through, he could still say “what a wonderful world!”

This song, and Armstrong’s take on it, reminds me of the *Birkot haShachar*, the morning blessings that are part of the Jewish daily prayers. The purpose of the morning blessings, the purpose of prayer, is to help give us a better perspective and the strength to face the stress and struggles of every day life.

I find that the best way to understand Jewish liturgy, our set service, is to just pretend that you are Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof. Imagine for a second that you are living not here in Sacramento, but in a small village in another century and another country. Life is precarious and difficult, your fate depends on the local magistrate and how much he likes the Jews. Each day you are faced with backbreaking work, unforeseen dangers that can erupt at any moment, and wondering if you’ll earn enough that day to feed your family. How does a person get the strength to get out of bed each day in a world like that?

For the generations who came before us, the daily service gave them that strength, and more. It helped them to not only bear the life they were given, but to find meaning in it, and beauty as well.

Our daily prayers remind us to count our blessings. The first words that are supposed to come out of our mouths each morning is NOT “Oy!” but “*Modeh / modah ani l’fanecha, Melech chai v’kayam, she-hechezarta bi nishmati b’chemlah, rabbah emunatecha.* - I offer thanks to You, ever-living God, that You have restored my soul to me in mercy: How great is Your trust.”

This is more than a fancy way of saying, “Thank God I didn’t die in my sleep!” It’s saying, thank you God for the blessing, the gift of simply being alive. This reminds me of the wise words often said by our past President Sy Opper, of blessed memory, when people asked him how he was doing. He would respond with a twinkle in his eye and say, “I’m glad to be here, but at my age, I’m glad to be anywhere!” Instead of complaining about the difficulty of aging, he found not only the humor in it, but the blessing of it as well.

After acknowledging the gift of simply being alive, the morning prayers continue with our giving thanks that our bodies are working, that we each have a soul, that there are miracles to be found each day, ranging from being able to get out of bed, to be able to see, to move, clothing to wear, to be free, to be created in the Divine Image, and yes, even giving thanks for being a Jew, in a world that does not exactly always appreciate our existence.

These are things that should be easy for most of us to say living here and now. But remember, you’re not you, you’re Tevye, Would these prayers be so easy to say then? Would they stick in your throat? Or would they help you look for the good? To find a light in the darkness? Would they help you transform a life of drudgery and difficulty into one filled with a sense of awe and wonder?

The world that created Tevye, the world in which many of our ancestors lived, was more often than not, cruel and harsh, it was anti-Semitic, and often capricious, and simply dangerous.

But, if these prayers could sustain someone living in Tevye's world, imagine what they could they do for us if we made them part of our daily routine!

In the Talmud² we are taught that "Rabbi Meir used to say: A person is obligated to say one hundred blessings every day!" One hundred blessings! As Jews we are given the task, no, we are given the opportunity, to look for 100 things, both big and small, everyday that are worthy of saying thank you for.

Imagine how you would feel each night, as you lay your head down to sleep if you did that. Would you feel exhausted and spent? Or would your life feel full and rich?

Our religion demands of us not only to begin the day with prayers of gratitude, but then throughout the day to continue to LOOK for the good, to RECOGNIZE it, and then to be GRATEFUL for it.

The founder of Chassidic Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov, taught: "Replete is the world with a spiritual radiance, replete with sublime and marvelous secrets. But a small hand held against the eye hides it all. Just as a small coin held over the face can block out the sight of a mountain, so can the vanities of living block out the sight of the infinite light."

We speak a lot about tikkun olam in Judaism, about healing the world, and righting the wrongs that we see. But if we want to heal the world, we must first see it as worth saving. We must see the good in order to be able to build on it. We must do as Louis Armstrong said and understand that the problem is not the world, but what we are doing to it. We must be ever mindful of the Baal Shem Tov's teaching and remember not to block the view that is right before our eyes.

We can choose to dwell on the pain, or we can choose to work to heal what causes that pain. We can be victims or we can be healers. We choose how we want to see the world.

Not too long ago, I was struck again by the importance of perspective.

As I'm sure you all recall, last May there was a horrific terrorist attack in Manchester, England, at the end of an Arianna Grande concert. For those of you who are not familiar with her music, her fans tend to be children, which made the attack all the more sickening.

Before the attack occurred, outside the exit of the arena, there were some homeless men thinking it would be a good place to ask for money as the concert let out. But instead, there was a loud explosion, chaos, screaming, and suffering every where they looked. Not knowing if that was going to be the last blast, or simply the first of several, what did two of these men do? They rushed in, to help, rather than fleeing to protect themselves.

² Tractate Menachot 43b

When asked why, one of them, Stephan Jones said: “Just because I am homeless doesn’t mean I haven’t got a heart, or I’m not human still. I’d like to think someone would come and help me if I needed the help,” he went on to say that he had been overcome by an “instinct” to pitch in.”³

Following the news reports of how these two heroes responded, some people set up online fund raising pages to help them. And the other man, Chris Parker, because of the reports of what he had done, he was able to reunite with his mother, who did not even know that her son was homeless.

The acts of love and compassion by these two men not only helped those immediately in front of them, but it inspired others to act with love and compassion as well, providing us with a little bit of solace as we grieved this senseless act of violence.

Each of us has a choice in life when we see the trouble and problems in the world. We can close our hearts, and say “there is just too much to be done for me to make a difference, I’m going to look out for myself,” or we can nurture the instinct to pitch in, to help, to heal, to repair.

The choice is ours.

But when we choose the latter, when we choose to help and to heal, we have the opportunity to set into motion a domino effect of good deeds. Just as if we choose to begin our day by giving thanks for even the smallest things, we set into motion the opportunity for us to discover there is much in the world not only to be grateful for, but worthy of our protection and our celebration of it as well.

I believe that if we see the foundation of the world, and the essence of humanity, as good, and as solid, then we can fix the suffering that is all around us, maybe not all of it, but certainly some of it.

Inherent in Jewish theology is the understanding that our task as human beings is to repair the world. With this comes the assumption that the world, and all that dwells on it, began in goodness, and that we are returning it to a state of wholeness and of blessing. *Tikkun olam* is simply *teshuva* on a global basis, returning the world to a state that is whole and unsullied. This is the essence of Rosh HaShanah. If each of us engages in *teshuva* – in repentance and repair, and begins the year again unburdened from the mistakes we made last year, then together, we hold in our hands, and in our hearts, the ability, and the power, to make the world better.

But it is not enough for us to find the good around us and to give thanks for it. That is only the first step. Our task is then is to ACT, to be partners with God in making this world whole again.

In Judaism, one of the purposes of prayer is to help us refocus each and every day, to put us back in the right direction, the right mind set to engage with the day, and with each other.

³ “They Went to Manchester Arena as Homeless Men. They Left as Heroes.” by Dan Bilefsky, New York Times, May 24, 2017

Prayer is only the beginning, it is only a tool, it is never the goal. Making the world right again, fighting hatred and discrimination, protecting and honoring the earth and all who dwell upon it, to paraphrase Louis Armstrong, nurturing the love that is in the world, THAT, that is the goal.

If we want the world to be a wonderful place, we must first be able to recognize and give thanks for the wonder that is in it.

I pray that in the year 5778 we find awe and wonder in the daily miracles that surround us, the beauty of nature, the comfort of a home, the satisfaction of a full belly, the love of our family and our friends. May we awake each day inspired to engage in acts of generosity and compassion, deeds of righteousness and justice. May we always remember to share our blessings with those in need, and to serve as partners with our Creator in healing the world and making it whole once again.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God’s will. Amen.