

# Barukh Hashem

## Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman

When I was a rabbinical student at HUC in Cincinnati I worked a lot with Hebrew texts, which meant I spent lots of time in the Hebrew section of the world class HUC Library. We are talking stacks and stacks of books, old books, rare books, new books, volumes upon volumes of Hebrew literature stored and catalogued without computers in its own archaic Hebrew card catalogue system. It's a great collection of books but for the uninitiated trying to do research, it's a nightmare maze of unintelligible Hebrew abbreviations, and vast stacks of books whose titles you can't decipher without at least three dictionaries! Meanwhile, the clock is ticking for the paper due, the test to prepare, etc.

Even now, some 10 years later, my guts tighten as I think of my first attempts at using that library. I, like many students suffered, we suffered, but not for long. Lucky for us, there was (and still is) Bernie, a small, hunched back, Orthodox Jew whose job it is to manage these books, and to help students find their way amongst them, and the wisdom in them.

Bernie saved my academic life more than once, but more than that, he gave me an essential life lesson; he taught me the importance of gratitude. Bernie is an unassuming man. He walks with a shuffle; his dress is formal – dark jacket, tie- but a bit disheveled. His voice is soft and a little squeaky. He always wears a large black kippah, tzit tzit trailing from his sides. I saw Bernie most every day for the 4 years I was in Cincinnati. “How are you doing?” I’d ask him. “How’s your family?”

Always, always, without fail Bernie’s answer would start with barukh hashem (thank God) I am well... barukh hashem (thank God) my family is well. “How’s work in the Library going?” barukh hashem, there is lots to do, some books are lost, but we are well.” barukh hashem ... As liberal Jews, we often shun this kind of open piety. It seems silly to us, or perhaps ingenuous, a reflex, not a reality. We might even find this public display of religiosity embarrassing.

For Bernie, it was, and I imagine it still is, a true expression of his gratitude for being alive, for having a family to be thankful for, for being the steward of so much sacred literature, for being able to help so many students. For simply being a human being created btzelem elohohim. When Bernie said (and says) barukh hashem, he means it. And my guess is that he couldn't care less what others think of his piety, because for him gratitude – continually blessing and thanking God – is the essence of his life.

Standing as we are on the edge of the New Year, it is natural for us to look both ways, back at what was, and forward to what will be. As we look backward to what was, we can't help but shudder, feel shock, dismay:

We can readily recall the surreal image of the airliners crashing into the twin towers.

The dismay and grief at their collapse and the horrible death toll haunts us still.

The first anniversary of September 11th is just 5 days away. Rosh Hashanah last year fell in the midst of our shock and grief over the tragedy we are still trying to come to grips with.

We've also been in the midst of a war that seems endless in its scope. Our relief at the early success in Afghanistan has given way to a growing realization that the war on terror has no end, and implications that go far beyond battle strategies and military contingencies.

Meanwhile, we've watched, day by day, as the crisis in Israel deepen, from one suicide murder to another – teenagers at a pizza parlor, moms with their babies eating ice cream, families celebrating Passover, all blown to bits. This for me, has been harder, even than 9/11 to cope with. And, if that is not enough, real, nasty anti-Semitism has raised its ugly head all over Europe. Synagogues have been torched, cemeteries desecrated, Jews walking to and from Shul harassed and even beaten, with little response from the authorities. How do we respond to this new reality? What do we do when what seemed like such solid ground starts to shake beneath our feet?

Of course, we must be vigilant. We must do whatever we can to protect our communities, our country, and ourselves. We must also, I believe, do whatever we can to help our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel. They need us more than ever! But that's not the sermon I want to give tonight. You don't need me to state the obvious.

Tonight, I am here to tell you that my friend Bernie has the key to one important way we can respond. What do we do? We start by saying, *barukh hashem*, thank God we are alive! Thank God we are here! Thank God we were not on one of those planes, or in one of those buildings, riding on one of those buses, or eating in one of those cafes. *Barukh Hashem!* Thank God we're here, the breath of life still flowing through us. (Take a moment and breathe... a good long breath)

It doesn't mean we are not scared. It doesn't mean we are not sad. We are! We are because we are human. Nevertheless, let's start the new year in gratitude for what is also true – *barukh hashem*, thank God we are alive!

In the weeks after 9/11 I, like many of you, was stunned and depressed. I didn't know what to think. I was worried about what might be. I was frightened. I felt all those things and more. The other truth was this: I was living in one of the most beautiful places in the country, my family was healthy and a great joy to me, I loved my work, even the view out my study window was amazing. In other words, I had a lot to be grateful for if only I could see it. And that is exactly what I started to force myself to do. I'd literally say to myself, "look at this day! Look how beautiful it is...look at my kids, how precious"... I'd embrace Laura my wife and think, what an incredible woman she is. I'd even hug my dog and thank God for her slobbery kisses. I forced myself to be grateful and it was forced gratitude, which brought me into the present, which is, even when it all falls apart, full of blessings, *barukh hashem!*

What's the big deal about gratitude? The big deal is this; gratitude, feeling it and expressing it is the key to happiness. It's that simple. Rabbi Ben Zoma, an ancient sage from the Talmud summed it up well when he wrote in Pirke Avot:

*Ezeh hu ashir? Hasameakh b'khelko.*

“Who is rich? Those who rejoice in what they have.”

That’s what gratitude is all about, appreciating what you have rather than focusing on what’s wrong, what’s missing, what’s out there that you want, but don’t have.

In this time of terror and uncertainty, being grateful for what you do have can put a stop to the fear and anxiety produced by focusing on what could happen. Gratitude is like your breath; focus on it long enough and you realize what a miracle it is just to be alive – barukh hashem. There’s another reason why gratitude is so important. It’s the perfect antidote to the insatiable material culture we live in, where there is always something new and different and better that we must have.

The Torah says lo tachmode, “Thou shalt not covet.” It’s number ten on the list. Have you ever wondered why God would care if we desired what others have? What does God care about our neighbor’s ass or donkey...? It’s not about God. It’s about us. God is doing us a favor.

God is telling us that if we spend all our time coveting what other people have, we’ll never, never be happy. We’ll always think we are too fat, or too thin, too dull, or too poor. Our homes will never be big enough, our cars fancy enough. What ever we are, as long as we are lusting after what others have, we will never have enough, never be satisfied and thus never be happy! Ben Zoma was right, Ezech hu ashir? Hasameakh b'khelko. “Who is rich? Those who rejoice in what they have.”

Sounds good, but feeling and expressing gratitude is not as easy as it seems, especially for us Jews. Recently I was on my bike in Annandel. It was a beautiful day and I was feeling inspired, so much that I had the impulse to yell out hallelujah! Or, “Praise God!”, or barukh hashem! What a day, what a place, what a time...wow my heart was brimming with feelings of gratitude and praise but...but I hesitated... me a religious person, a rabbi, an extrovert, I hesitated...

Eventually I did let it out but I felt more the hesitation in doing so than the hesed, the grace, of feeling and expressing gratitude. Since that bike ride I’ve spent a lot of time pondering what it is about us Jews that makes it so hard for us to feel and express gratitude. I am sure one could come up with many reasons. I bet more than one dissertation has been written on the subject. But for me, it comes down to one issue, what I call the k’vetch factor. Let’s face it, we might cringe at saying barukh hashem, but oy veh – now that is something we can all get behind.

Take my bike ride for example. It was a beautiful day, but...you never know...it could rain and...boy am I out of shape...that bike of mine, it was new two years ago but look at it now...oy, I feel a pain in my leg, a sprain? Could it be broken...oy veh...it’s probably cancer...”

K’vetching is a human trait but it seems to be especially well-cultivated in the Jewish community. As a matter of fact, we are experts at k’vetching. Not only do we excel at oy veh and what follows, we seem to almost take pride in our ability to tear things apart, to really go after

what's not right in our lives, in people around us, & especially in our Synagogues. Our tendency to k'vetch is illustrated colorfully through centuries of jokes, folk tales and legends.

Everyone knows the one about the two Jews stranded on the desert island who build three synagogues; one for each castaway, and one that neither of them would be "caught dead in."

Then there is the story of the Jewish grandma walking with her child on Miami Beach. She's walking along, happily, and unbeknownst to her, her grandson wanders too close to the sea and is swept from the shore by a rip tide. She sees what is happening to her grandchild and cries to the heavens "Ribono shel olam, master of the universe, save my grandson!" A miracle happens, and low and behold, a wave comes crashing to the shore, "splating" her grandson onto the beach. He is full of seaweed, coughing up sea water, covered in sand, but alive! At first, the grandma is overcome with joy, but then she realizes...and turning to the heavens, she shouts: He had a hat!

And just so you don't think k'vetching is a modern Jewish phenomenon, let me tell you about a midrash, an ancient Jewish legend which beautifully illustrates how much k'vetching can blind us to the good, the awesome, even the miraculous in our lives. Many of you are familiar with this tale. I've told it many times, because, like all good legends, it's meaning is ever relevant. It comes out of the book of Exodus and the story of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. You remember the story:

After the plagues Pharaoh finally relents and lets the Israelites go. At the last minute, Pharaoh has a change of heart and sends his army after them. The Israelites are caught between Pharaoh's army and the Sea of Reeds. Just when it seemed like all was lost, Moses raises his staff, the sea parts and you know the rest. What you don't know is what the midrash teaches. In the midst of this great miracle, two fleeing Israelites, Rueven and Shimon, missed it all together. Why? They were focused on the mud, from the bottom of the sea that was getting on their shoes.

The k'vetch factor: It's human nature. It's almost an art form in the Jewish community. It is also a real impediment to recognizing our blessings, to feeling joy and to experiencing happiness.

Before we move beyond the k'vetch factor, there is one other aspect of always seeing our glasses half empty, that is worth mentioning: What it does to those around us. What we often miss is that our bad attitude does not just affect us. In fact, such negativity is toxic, like a gas that emanates from us and poisons those around us. It's like second hand smoke. It's not just killing us, it's also hurting those around us.

Life is, and will continue to be, hard. We will always have a lot to complain about. The Buddhist's are right. Life is suffering. Nevertheless, finding happiness where we can – appreciating blessings – is within reach for most of us. It starts with finding a way to say barukh hashem instead of oy veh. It's all about being able to experience and express gratitude.

But what about when it all goes wrong? What about those times when it really seems like there is nothing to be thankful for? Even then, even in "the valley of the shadow of death," there is a place for gratitude and the healing salve it offers.

I recently had a coffee with Sylvia Boorstein and she told me this story: A friend of hers went to visit a man dying of AIDS. He was really sick, emaciated, weak, not long for this world. The friend enters the room, grasps the dying man's withered hand and says, "We had a lot of good times, you and me". The dying man turned his head so that he could look directly into his friend's eyes and replied, "We're having a good time right now."

What enabled this man, on death's door, suffering immensely, to snatch perhaps one last moment of happiness out of life? Gratitude, gratitude for his friend and the moment they were experiencing together.

Rosh Hashana is here. Why not embrace gratitude as a spiritual practice to really work on and in the year ahead?

According to Jewish tradition, we are to say at least 100 blessings a day! That's a lot of blessings. Why should God care so much about blessings? Does God need our blessings? Think about it. The extensive system of blessings & prayers in Judaism is not so much for God, but a gift from God to us! An ongoing, profound opportunity for us to recognize and express our gratitude for the world we live in and who we are as human beings, created in the divine image.

The first thing you need to know is Hebrew is not required! One of the most beautiful blessings I ever saw was a woman taking a silent moment before eating her sandwich at a deli. She sat there, perched over her pastrami, eyes closed, her being obviously in a state of prayer. She was radiant in her gratitude and it was beautiful to watch.

Try it. Try to thank God for your food, for your health, for a special moment in your day, for anything and everything that you can be thankful for. And don't just thank God, thank your spouse, your partner, your lover, your children, your friends, and the people you work with. Make it a spiritual practice-I mean practice!- expressing gratitude anywhere and everywhere you can. I promise you that if you do this you will be a better, happier person in the year ahead.

Why not start now? If you are here with a spouse, partner or friend, take a moment now and appreciate them. If you are by yourself, close your eyes and summon something in your life you are thankful for...

Why not start during this holy day season? You'll be spending hours in Temple. Why not see if you can begin to tap into the wellspring of gratitude our tradition offers right in the prayer book?

One prayer I have found to be most helpful in instilling gratitude in my own life, you'll find in the liturgy tomorrow morning. (I am sure you all will be hear tomorrow...) It's a prayer written some 2,000 years ago about going to the bathroom. It thanks God for the fact that the right things open and the right things close at the right times, noting that if they did not, we would die and thus, not be able to stand before God. It may sound silly, but when you think about it, even being able to go to the bathroom is something to be thankful for.

Any one who has struggled with even the most basic bodily functions can tell you what a blessing it is when things work the way they should, and how hard it is when they don't.

Being thankful for what's working, focusing on the health we have, even when we are really sick, is essential. To focus on what's broken in our bodies, what hurts, what's not right is like being hit with an arrow, pulling the arrow out and continually stabbing ourselves over and over again. The initial wound there is little you can do about. We can however, stop ourselves from inflicting more suffering by turning our minds away from what hurts to what's working in our lives.

I haven't seen Bernie for many years, but the lesson he taught amongst the stacks of Hebrew books in the seminary library has stayed with me until today. I haven't always lived by its truth, but I've never let go of the hope that it embodies, that through gratitude we can live lives of blessings, even amongst our suffering.

The New Year is here. Rosh Hashana, also known as Yom Hadin, The Day of Judgment, the day the great book of life is open, the day God decides whether we are inscribed into the book of life or the book of death, is upon us. Who shall live and who shall die, we have little control over. Nevertheless, I believe we have quite a hand in what's written in "the book", in as much as we decide how we respond to what happens to us in the year ahead.

Will we actually live or die? Only God knows. Will we choose life, even in death, finding meaning in what life brings us, feeling and expressing gratitude for whatever blessings we have? That, my friends, is up to us. We choose whether to say barukh hashem or oy-veh. We choose whether to see blessings or failures. We choose whether to emotionally and spiritually live or die. It's our choice.

May we choose life and be remembered for life in the year ahead.

*Zokhrenu l'chayim, melekh khafetz bachayim, v'katvenu bsefer hachayim, l'ma-ankha elohim chayim.*

Remember us unto life, O Holy One who delights in life, and inscribe us in the book of life, for thy own sake Oh God of life