

# Turn Toward the Blessing

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For 13 years now, I have begun my remarks on Kol Nidre night with something about the Chicago Cubs. How long it's been since they won a world series -108 years, the longest drought in baseball history. How being a Cub fan isn't about winning. It's about love and loyalty, patience and hope. But as the Cubs finished this regular season with the best record in all of baseball - 103 wins - I knew this sermon would be different. I began to fantasize about what I would say at this great moment in Cubs history. There were just a few things I didn't imagine in my fantasy.

- A. That the Cubs would play the first round of the playoffs against, none other than, the San Francisco Giants.
- B. That the Cubs would win the first two games, then possibly eliminate the Giants here in San Francisco, the night before Kol Nidre, possibly making you tonight less excited to hear me talk about the Cubs. :)
- C. Then there's C. I decided I couldn't finish writing my sermon until I knew the outcome of last night's game. I didn't bargain for it to last 5 hours, 13 innings, and end at midnight!
- D. And D. I didn't really fantasize that the next game, now even more decisive, would be played right now, on Kol Nidre night, while I am speaking.

So I'm just going to leave it there, and let us live in the unknown, but I will return to baseball at the end.

In the meantime, I thought I'd start with a lighter subject - The Election.

The other day, a friend, who I deeply respect, told me that she and her husband had begun making plans to move to Australia.

I stared at her, utterly confused by this unexpected statement.

She clarified, "You know, if the election goes the wrong way."

I stood there, pretty sure she was joking, but not entirely sure, and didn't know how to respond. She's not the first person I've heard say they will leave the country if the wrong person wins. But it upsets me, every time.

I understand that it comes from a place of fear and disgust, despair, and loss of faith -in our political parties, in our leaders, and, in the American people.

But to say you will leave the country if the election goes the wrong way, even in jest, to me, is to ignore the immense privileges we've been given. As my brother likes to say, being born an American citizen is like winning the lottery.

My mom told me recently of going to work out with her trainer, Keith, an accomplished martial artist in his 40's, who was raised in Trinidad. She arrived at Keith's studio and saw that the burly 6'5" man had been crying. Why? He explained, "This morning I became an American citizen. This is the happiest day of my life."

We could spend all night enumerating the things that are wrong with our country. Our politicians and our media are quite good at reminding us of them. We could also spend all night day enumerating the things that are right with our country - the freedoms we enjoy, the legal system we expect to be fair, the beauty of the land, the fact that November 8, we expect to go to our voting places, vote in private, not be threatened, and that no matter who wins, we will still have a peaceful, free country the next day, and next year too.

As with everything, there is good and there is bad. The question is which we choose to look at.

The Torah offers us a vivid metaphor for the good and bad of life. I find this metaphor so powerful that I wanted to make it the focal point of my sermon tonight.

As the Torah draws to an end, in Deuteronomy 27, God tells the children of Israel what they should do when they finally enter the Promised Land. First they are to write out the words of the Torah on large plastered stones. Then they are to perform a rather peculiar ritual. Six of the tribes of Israel are to stand on one mountain, Mount Gerizim, while the Levites recite a long list of blessings, good things which will take place if the people are faithful to the commandments. The other six tribes are then to stand on the neighboring Mount Eval, while the Levites proclaim an even longer list of curses, terrible consequences which will follow, if the people do not obey God and the commandments.

For many years, when I read this, I was so distracted by the reward and punishment theology, that I couldn't see anything else. I just don't believe that if you obey the commandments, only good things will happen to you, and if you disobey, that's when you get sick and punished. I also find it hard to imagine how the people could hear the blessings and curses, if they're standing up on mountain tops that are, in fact, 2 miles apart.

According to the next book of the Bible, the Book of Joshua, the actual performance of this ritual, when the Israelites entered the land, was indeed a little different. Joshua leads the people to Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval and they write the words of the Torah on plastered stones. But when the blessings and curses are recited, there's no talk of 6 tribes on one mountain and 6 tribes on the other. Rather, it says, "all Israel - stranger and citizen alike," "men, women and children," stood at the bottom together, surrounding the ark and the Levites. "Half of them **faced** Mount Gerizim, and half of them **faced** Mount Eval."

This is where I find the metaphor.

Imagine that you too are at the foot of these two mountains.

On one side is the mountain of blessings - of goodness and gratitude, possibility and hope.

On the other side is the mountain of curses - of anger and blame, disappointment and hurt.

Which way do you face?

The Torah is telling us we have a choice. **We** are not assigned to stand on a particular mountain. We get to stand at the bottom, look at both sides, and choose. In every situation, we get to choose which way we want to turn.

**Turn toward the blessing**, whispers God in our ear.

Yet sometimes it's so hard to do.

When we're feeling tired, overwhelmed, over-worked, in a hurry, insulted, unsuccessful, unappreciated, ... it's so easy to see ourselves as victim, as oppressed, as cursed. Someone asks, "How was your day?" "Bad," we respond, because that's all we can see. We are facing the mountain of curses.

But then there are people who endure terrible suffering, and somehow, still face the blessings. Our congregant, Marianne Strassman, who passed away this year, is an example for me.

Marianne was born in Germany in 1922. She was a 19-year-old nurse when she was sent, with her parents, to the Lodz Ghetto in 1941. When Lodz was liquidated in '44, she was sent to Auschwitz where she sat in front of the ovens for 3 days, before being put on another cattle car to a work camp, and then later, onto a 6-week march to Bergen-Belson. 1200 people began the march. 200 survived.

"How did you endure it?" I would ask her, repeatedly, in our visits.

"Well," she would say, in her thick German accent, "there were always good people. There were even good Germans, you know." One German soldier had fallen in love with her friend, Ilse, shaven head and all. And he would bring them food and help them stay alive. The soldier was eventually shot, but she and Ilse survived, both ultimately finding their way to California. Marianne spoke last year at Rosh Hashanah in the Round. I asked her to introduce Zichronot, Remembrances. She stood up, at age

93, and remarked at what a good life she had had. “Other than those 4 awful years,” she said, “I’ve had a very good life.” “I’ve always had lots of love and I was always able to help people.”

Marianne embodied the idea of turning toward blessing. She endured so much loss, in the Holocaust, and in her long life afterward. But she chose to face the mountain of blessings.

How does one **learn** this, or **teach** this? I ask myself, on an almost nightly basis. As I watch my middle schooler hit a roadblock in her homework and suddenly say she hates school, and she’s terrible at math. Or I read with my 6-year-old, who taught herself to read in pre-school and can do virtually anything she sets her mind to, but when I correct her on a word, she gets upset. She doesn’t see the 99 words she read beautifully on the page. All she sees is the one she couldn’t get. How do I help them turn from the mountain of curses to the mountain of blessings?

There’s a new movement in education these days, that focuses on this question, arguing that what really matters for learning and success is not innate ability, but mindset. “A growth mindset,” in the words of Carol Dweck, renown educator right here at Stanford. Don’t say, “I can’t figure this out,” she insists, “say I haven’t figured this out **yet**.” “That feeling of something being hard, that is the feeling of your brain growing. And when you make a mistake, and try to figure out another way, that is when you actually learn.”

What Dweck is teaching us is to **notice** when we’re facing the mountain of curses, when we’re telling ourselves we’re stupid or we can’t, and to use words to change our mindset. To use words to turn us toward blessing.

Judaism actually offers the same wisdom. That we can turn toward blessing using **words of blessing**. And it actually helps me a great deal.

I am not what you would call a “morning person.” My natural inclination is to lie in bed, think about how tired I am, and as the hour gets later, get annoyed with Scott and the girls for not getting ready on time. But with a

few words, I often change my mood. “Modah ani lefanecha,” I say in my head, still lying in bed. “**I am grateful**, for a new day of life. Thank You God, for restoring my soul to me, for a new day.”

Then, often still lying in bed, I say another prayer, *Asher Yatzar*, what some people call “the bathroom blessing.” It thanks God for the intricacies of our body, for the right things being able to open and the right things staying closed. Some say it every time they leave the bathroom. I just say it in the morning, and then I try to focus on some of the things that are working in my body - my brain, my breath, my blood getting to each place it needs to go, my eyes seeing, my ears hearing, my hands working, and I feel... grateful.

I continue with some other traditional morning blessings, by this time standing up.

Thank You, God, for making me in Your image.

Thank You, God, for making me a Jew.

Thank You, God for making me free.

I don't just recite the words though. I stop after each one and ask myself - What does it mean to be a Jew? Why am I thankful that I'm Jewish? How am I free? Who is not free? What can I do about it?

Saying these blessings, and reflecting on them, changes my mindset. This is why I keep doing it everyday. These words help me to turn from the mountain of curses to the mountain of blessings.

I do have other words too though. A lot of them live on little colored cards that I have shared with you over the years. (Lift up the good. Serve God with Joy. You never know when you're making a memory.) My favorite though is the one that comes from my dad.

Some of you have heard this story before, but I think it's worth repeating. I've described to you my morning mood as a 42-year-old rabbi and mom. Picture me now an unhappy sixteen-year-old, staying up til all hours doing homework, then getting up in the dark and cold of Chicago, to go to a

7:30am early bird math class my Junior year of high school. I was not fun to be with in the morning. I remember, one gray morning, getting in the car with my dad, who dutifully drove me to school everyday, and asking him, “Why do you do this?” Why don’t you make me walk, or have mom drive me some of the time? Why are you torturing yourself, driving me to school so early?

He answered ... “Sarah, I don’t have to do this. I get to do it.”

I don’t know how much his words meant to me then. But they mean everything to me now.

When I’m in the trenches with my kids, or with my work, feeling overwhelmed, annoyed, or just kind of blah, I try to tell myself, I get to do this.

When I’m sitting with someone who’s sick or in pain, I try to tell myself, I get to do this.

And often, when I do, something shifts, not just in me, but in them too. For maybe, when you **see** the blessing, you actually **become** a blessing. And then, all of a sudden, the other person can see it too. Because the blessing is suddenly sitting right there in front of them.

So my question to you, this Yom Kippur, is how can you turn toward blessing this year? In the way you look at your life, and in the way you live it.

What would it take for you to look back next Yom Kippur and say, “This year I turned toward blessing?”

For some of us, it may be something big - a change at work, a change in a relationship.

For most of us, it will probably be smaller things, but they count.

I’m trying to adopt a different mindset for my year ahead. Because I feel like every year I beat my chest for the exact same sins. For not having

patience with my kids, for not being appreciative of my husband, for not being a better friend, for not doing enough for Israel, for the poor, for the oppressed in our world. But these regrets are so amorphous. They don't translate into concrete action.

This year I want to appreciate my smaller turns toward the good - the individual moments - when I hold back from yelling at my daughters and turn to them with compassion, when I pick up the phone and tell someone I'm thinking of them, when I get the email asking for my help with a cause, and I say yes, rather than delete. When I see a person in need on the street, and I talk to them, and give generously. When I have the opportunity to speak badly about someone, and I refrain.

Each of these, on its own, is a small moment. Collectively though, they add up to a mountain of blessings.

"Turn toward the blessing," whispers God in our ears.

It turns out, people are hearing this whisper all over the world this year.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, a prominent Modern Orthodox rabbi in New York, actually rewrote the Ashamnu confessional in this spirit, and it's being sung across the globe this Yom Kippur. Instead of confessing, "Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi," this says "Ahavnu, Berachnu, Gadalnu, Dibarnu Yofi." "We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively." It is simultaneously a tool for looking back on our year and noticing the blessings, and a guidebook for the year ahead.

Rabbi Booth and I both plan to use this prayer over Yom Kippur, and we'll distribute the words a little later in our service.

But first, I need to end my sermon, and as promised, I will end with the Cubs.

I actually want to close with a reflection from last season. Through the wonders of modern technology, Scott and the girls and I watched every



game of the Cubs post-season last year, sharing a **text thread** with my parents, my brothers, Scott's parents, and Scott's brother and sister, all die-hard Cub fans. We exchanged giddy quips through the thrill of the wild card game and the Cubs' victorious first round against the Cardinals. And then... we exchanged curses, as we watched our team disintegrate, losing 4 excruciating games against the Mets.

An unexpected part of the experience though was that our girls got in on the texting action, quickly learning how to take our phones and type their own commentary on the game, often with amusing creative spelling.

I leave you with the last text of last season, written as the adults were wallowing at the mountain of curses.

7-year-old Chava, to the group: Let's get excited for next year, cuz that's when they'll win it :)

A few minutes pass. Then a text arrives from my Dad:

You got it right, Chava. Let's celebrate a great season and look ahead to an even better one. Go Cubs Go. Go Cubs Go. This has been the best Cubs season ever for me, because I savored it. It was unexpected and so much fun. Ending it by texting with you Chava made it almost perfect.

Turn toward the blessing.

Gmar Chatima Tova.

