

Prayer as God's Agenda, Blessings in Disguise, & Attitude Change

Rosh HaShanah Day 1: 5777/ 2016

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A few weeks ago, when I was walking towards the Temple Beth Ahm booth at "Marlboro Day," I bumped into a congregant, who approached me and said: "Rabbi, my sister is having surgery this week. Could you please **pray for her?**"

The previous night, another congregant, made the following comment when she heard the weather forecast: "**We better pray that** it doesn't rain tomorrow."

Oftentimes, when we refer to prayer, we speak in terms of "praying for" or "praying that", hoping that our prayers will enable us to achieve some positive outcome or avoid some negative outcome. When it comes to prayer, we usually think about prayers of request or petition. We may pray for the health of a loved one or we may pray for good weather. Or you may pray that your wife gets the job she wants or that your son gets married already! In other words, **we usually think about prayers as laying out our concerns before God.**

According to **Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel**, prayer is not just about us laying out our agenda for God; **prayer is also about God laying out God's agenda for us.** In other words, Jewish prayers express the values that God wants us to incorporate into our lives.

So, what is God's agenda for us in the High Holidays Machzor?

Part of God's agenda is revealed in the "***Al Chet***" confessional that we will recite repeatedly on Yom Kippur. For example, when we say, "***Al Chet she-chatanu l'fanecha b'tipshut peh,***" "For the sin that we committed before You with thoughtless, hurtful speech," we are expressing God's aspiration for us that we speak to others and about others with respect. Unlike the presidential candidates, whose malicious mud-slinging comments to and about each other have been filled with "*tipshut peh,*" God wants us to **do our best** not to hurt others with the words that come out of our mouths.

Another part of God's agenda for us in the Machzor is revealed if we look at the entire list of "Al Chet" confessions & consider what the totality of that "A to Z" (*Aleph* to *Tav*) listing comes to teach us. The underlying message is that **God wants us to admit our mistakes**. Unlike the presidential candidates, who always seem to have an excuse or explanation for their bad behavior, God wants us to be forthcoming about our wrongdoings. It's OK not to be right all of the time. Being able to admit that you are wrong is a Jewish value to which God wants us to aspire.

There is something else that we can learn from the totality of the "Al Chet" list as well: If you look at the grammatical construction of this list of wrongdoings, you may notice that every "Al Chet" is worded in the **first-person plural**. The "Al Chet" confession about "*tipshut peh*" is not, "For the sin that I committed with thoughtless, hurtful speech." The wording is, "For that sin that we committed with thoughtless, hurtful speech." From this we learn that God wants us to **value the importance of being part of a community**. Yes, I can pray alone on my own, but Judaism is not a religion that is meant to be observed alone on a mountaintop or at home by ourselves; Judaism is meant to be observed with other people. And when another person in the Jewish community commits a transgression, it is as if I transgressed as well, because we are all connected to each other, so we are all responsible for each other.

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh.

God's agenda for us is also evident in a recurring feature of the Machzor that can be found in the Siddurim that we use the rest of the year, as well. That feature is known as a "***b'racha***" in Hebrew (a "**bl**essing" in English.) Sprinkled throughout all Jewish prayers are "*b'rachot*" /"blessings," pronouncements beginning &/or ending with the words, "*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech ha-olam,*" with which we praise and thank God for what we have and for the opportunities that God grants us.

When we say a "*b'racha*" before the Shofar blowing, we are essentially saying, "Thank you, God. We offer praise to You for giving us the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of listening to the blasts of the Shofar on Rosh HaShanah."

At the beginning of the morning service, there is a whole page of blessings, known as "*Birchot HaShachar*," consisting of over a dozen *b'rachot* of gratitude. We gratefully acknowledge some of the many blessings that God lavishes upon us regularly—so regularly that we can easily **take them for granted**. In "*Birchot HaShachar*", we thank and praise God for bestowing upon us the ability to distinguish between day and night, for creating us in God's image, for giving us the capacity to see, for providing us with clothing and all of our daily needs. The list goes on. The **abundance of *b'rachot* throughout the prayer book is designed to nurture a mood of thankfulness and to cultivate within us an "attitude of gratitude."**

In the Jewish tradition, there are *b'rachot* for just about every occasion and situation, from seeing a rainbow to hearing thunder. There are not only blessings to be recited before or after experiencing something pleasurable, there are also blessings to be recited upon experiencing something painful. As Mishnah B'rachot teaches, "On rain & [other] good news say, "*Baruch ha-tov v'ha-metiv*" ("Blessed is the One who is good and who does good.") And on bad news (such as hearing that someone has died) say, "*Baruch dayan ha-emet*" ("Blessed [are You] the true judge.")

There is one blessing that I have always found to be particularly perplexing, because it seems to be simultaneously thanking God for something good and something bad. It's ***B'racha Acharonah***, the blessing that is traditionally recited after eating a meal that didn't include any bread. The conclusion of that blessing refers to God as "*Boreh n'fashot rabot v'ches-ronan*." "Creator of many living creatures and their needs."

What is surprising to me about this *b'racha* is that we seem to be praising God for creating the "needs" of living creatures: not just for creating living creatures, but for creating them/us with needs. ("*boreh n'fashot rabot v'chesronan.*") I understand the concept of thanking and praising God for fulfilling or granting our needs (as we do in *Birchot HaShachar*), but I have trouble understanding the concept of thanking and praising God for creating these needs to begin with. Wouldn't life be much simpler if we didn't have the need to eat when we were hungry or to drink when we were thirsty?! When God created us, why didn't God just create us with a self-sustaining internal nourishment system, so that we wouldn't have to need food or beverages?! It makes sense to praise and acknowledge God for being the Source of all blessings, but how is it a blessing to have needs?

According to Rabbi Yona Gross of Wynnewood, PA, **having needs may be considered a blessing** because the very lack of things that we need and don't have can **make us appreciate what we do have**.

A woman I know gave birth to a little girl who was deathly ill during her first 100 days of life. The baby was hooked up to IVs and machines, making it impossible for her mother or father to hold her close and assure her (and themselves) that everything was going to be OK. It was touch-and-go for a while. For over 3 months, both of the child's parents were in the hospital every single day, worrying and wondering whether or not their little girl would survive. A few days before their daughter was finally well enough to be released from the hospital, as the father held his child in his arms, he was filled with a sense of deep gratitude and appreciation. At that moment, he realized how thankful he was for his daughter's recovery & for finally being able to take her home. At that moment, he realized how much he and his wife had needed his daughter to survive this ordeal.

This harrowing experience had made him and his wife more appreciative of the gift of their child's life and health in a way that they might not have felt if they had been able to take their newborn daughter home right away. They probably would have **taken their daughter's life and health for granted**. As the parents conveyed to me, their experience of "need" and "lacking" ("*cho-sser*"), the memories of those horrific days when they wondered if their child would live or die, instilled within them a sense of gratitude that they might not have felt as deeply otherwise. In this sense, they believed that their child's illness was a **"blessing in disguise."**

In the months after their return home, they heard other new parents complain about sleepless nights and other challenges of parenthood. And they realized that they, too, would probably have had these complaints and 'sweated the small stuff' as parents, had their daughter not been so close to the precipice of death.

The idiom, **"a blessing in disguise,"** can also be expressed idiomatically in other ways. Another idiom that conveys a similar idea is, "Every cloud has a silver lining." And, in Hebrew, there is an analogous expression that can be found in the midrash, Sifrei D'varim:

"L'tovati nish-b'rah regel parati."

"It was a good thing for me that my cow broke her leg."

What a strange idiom. After all, what possible benefit could be derived from a cow with a broken leg? **Rabbi Gershon Schwartz** suggested the following interpretation: Perhaps such a cow would have a disfiguring mark on its body, in the location of the broken leg, that would set it apart and make it distinct. With this distinctive disfiguration, no one would be able to steal this cow and claim it as his own. In this way, the misfortune of the cow could work to its owner's advantage. That cow's broken leg was a cloud with a silver lining, a blessing in disguise. Sometimes, **what appears to be a curse, may actually turn out to be a blessing.**

And sometimes, **even when an event or situation initially feels like a curse, it is still possible to view it as a blessing.** Even if we are faced with an actual negative reality, we have the power **to view that negative reality in a positive way.**

According to the book, "**Happy for No Reason,**" by **Marci Shimoff**, when happy people confront negative events in their lives and realize that they can't change those events, they **change their responses to the events.** Consider the following example of how the same situation can affect two people in two very different ways... ..and only because their perceptions of and their reactions to the same situation are very different: Consider two people in two separate cars sitting in a **traffic jam**. You might have seen this before: One person is clutching the steering wheel in a death grip, scowling, yelling at the other cars, and probably cursing. The other person, in a car right alongside the first car, is listening to the radio, singing at the top of her lungs, and having a grand ol' time. **Same event. Different response.**

Reflecting a similar sentiment, I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "**A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather, a person with a certain set of attitudes.**"

Each and every one of us has the capacity to choose how we **respond** to the **events** in our lives. We can respond to negative **circumstances** with a negative attitude, or we can respond to negative situations with a positive attitude.

Six years ago (2010), my children & I were blessed to be able to travel to **Aruba** on an all-expense paid vacation with my mother. But, for the first few days of this trip, I certainly didn't feel or act very appreciative of this incredible gift. On the contrary, I let some relatively minor traveling-related mishaps get to me, resulting in an extremely overblown **negative reaction**. / The travel frustrations began with my getting lost on the way to the airport (no surprise for those of you who know about my sense of direction!) Then, I parked in the wrong terminal and had to shlep to the correct terminal with my 3 kids and our luggage. When we finally arrived at the check-in counter, it turned out that one of our bags was too heavy and I had to redistribute items from one suitcase to the next. Unfortunately, the bag that was empty enough to accommodate more 'stuff' had already been placed on the conveyor belt./ Then, once we arrived in Aruba, we waited & waited & waited for our bags to arrive at the baggage claim carousel & soon realized that one of our three bags was missing. The one and only baggage claim clerk in the airport then informed us that he couldn't locate our lost suitcase in the computer system; it had, apparently, never even been scanned into the system! Lovely. At that point, I lost it.. i.e. I lost my cool, as well as my luggage. Not a proud maternal moment. But it didn't end there. I remained in a negative mood for the next couple of days. Despite the gorgeous weather and room with a view, my response to the situation was shameful. Neither my kids nor my mother could stand to be around me. Honestly, I couldn't even stand to be around myself.

I started to experience my need for a turnaround after encountering a member of the hotel staff named, **Myrza**, in the elevator. While I scowled and stewed about my misfortune, Myrza smiled at me and asked how my vacation was going. I said, "Not so well. One of our bags was lost in transit." Myrza responded by saying, "**I'm so sorry for your loss.**" (PAUSE) **WOW!** These are words that you say to people who have, God forbid, experienced the death of a family member or friend. And, yet, here I was, on the receiving end of these words, brooding over lost luggage! (PAUSE) Hearing Myrza's words really helped me to **put things into perspective**. Here I was, on a beautiful Caribbean island with my family.....and I was moping about travel inconveniences!

At that moment, I realized that I was making a big deal out of nothing and that my **disproportionate reaction** to a relatively benign set of negative **circumstances** was the result of a very **bad attitude**. Fortunately, that situation turned out to be a **blessing in disguise**, because it forced me to reflect upon my unreasonable reaction to a trivial set of 'problems.' And that reflection ultimately led me to engage in the process of *teshuvah*, striving to improve myself. It happened to be the month of Elul, which was quite the appropriate time on the Jewish calendar to be introspective. And that period of self-reflection led me to the following epiphany: It was my choice to view my situation in a negative way and to respond in a negative way. While we do not have any control over the circumstances in our lives, we do have the power to choose how we will respond to those circumstances. Even when we are, in fact, faced with negative situations, we have the power **to approach those negative circumstance with a positive attitude.**

The **attitude adjustment** I underwent that summer proved to be invaluable just a few weeks later, when my son, **Ariel**, (who was 14 years old at the time), was diagnosed with **spinal meningitis** and I had to rush him to the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania (CHOP) on the day after Rosh HaShanah. Having to deal with an objectively negative situation that was exponentially more serious than the Aruba travel-hassle scenario, I did my best to maintain a positive attitude. It wasn't easy; but I did my best. That's all I could do.

One night, when Ariel had a brief reprieve from his incessant splitting headaches, we watched a movie together on my laptop. It was the 1942 film classic, "**The Pride of the Yankees**," about the life & death of **Lou Gehrig** (1903-1941). On July 4, 1939, after Gehrig had been diagnosed at the age of 36 with a fatal neurological disease & realized that he had to retire from major league baseball, he gave a farewell speech to his fans at Yankee Stadium. That famous speech opened with the following words, "Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth."

Even though he had just been diagnosed with ALS, which brought his baseball career, and, ultimately, his life, to an abrupt end, this is how Lou Gehrig chose to respond! Despite the **negative reality** he faced, Gehrig managed to maintain a **positive attitude**. He proclaimed, "I have been in ballparks for 17 years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn't consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I'm lucky." He then went on to say, "When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so you can have an education and build your body, it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed, that's the finest I know. So I close in saying that I may have had a tough break, but I have an awful lot to live for."

Wow! How is that for an **optimistic attitude in the face of adversity**?!

Now, if Lou Gehrig could feel like he was "the luckiest man on the face of this earth" when confronted with a fatal illness like ALS, we could certainly count our blessings. In the summer of 2010, Adi & I did not choose for Ariel to have meningitis. But we could choose, and we did choose, how we were going to react to this crisis.

Each one of us has **the power to choose our attitude** in any given situation. We can choose to deal with **problems badly** the way I did in **Aruba**, or, *l'havdil*, we can choose to approach **adversity** in the way that **Lou Gehrig** did.

I highly recommend making the latter choice, a choice that is consistent with the **agenda that God sets forth for us in the High Holidays Machzor**. It is highly significant that the building block of Jewish prayer is the *b'racha* (blessing). This comes to teach us that God wants us to aspire to appreciate what we have & to be grateful for the blessings in our lives, even when the blessings are not readily apparent to us. God wants us to strive to view the problems in our lives as "**blessings in disguise.**"

In this new year of 5777, let's strive to approach the major and minor bumps in the road of life with a **positive attitude**.

Let's try to **improve our outlooks when we face circumstances that appear to be dismal**.

When, God forbid, **clouds** loom overhead, let's try to find **silver linings** in them.

Let's do our best to look at negative situations that appear to be completely hopeless on the surface and respond by saying,

"L'tovati nish'berah regel parati."

"It was to my benefit that my cow broke her leg."

Perhaps there is a **"blessing in disguise"** to be found in these adverse circumstances.

Join me in striving to approach **both the good & bad** experiences of the coming year with a positive attitude.

Ken yehi ratzon.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateyvu v'Techateymu.

**May you all be written & sealed in the Book of Life
for a happy and healthy new year.**

Examples that were originally included in sermon, but edited out:

1) At one of her concerts, Neshama Carlebach told the following story about her father, **Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach**: In his first congregation, Rabbi Carlebach was given a lot of flack by the lay leaders of his shul for engaging in interfaith dialogue. This type of mingling with non-Jews was not considered acceptable for an Orthodox rabbi at that time. But it was because Rabbi Carlebach was fired from that pulpit job that he was able to concentrate on his music. If not for having that negative experience at his first pulpit, Rabbi Carlebach might not have had such a successful and fulfilling career as a musician, composer, and spiritual leader. The experience that seemed so negative on the surface ultimately resulted in a very positive outcome, not only for Carlebach, but also for the Jews of his generation and, most likely, for generations to come. It is Reb Shlomo's melodies that infuse our Friday night services with ruach here at Temple Beth Ahm, so, we too, are the beneficiaries of Carlebach's proverbial "cow with a broken leg, " "cloud with a silver lining," or "blessing in disguise."

2)

If this is an area in which you feel that you need improvement, I highly recommend that you read the book, **"The Ultimate Gift," by Jim Stovall.**

In the book, a man named **Red Stevens**, promises in his will, to bequeath gifts to his 24-year old **nephew, Jason**. But, in order to receive those gifts, Jason is required to complete a monthly assignment for a period of one year.

The gift that Jason receives after the 5th month is entitled, **"The Gift of Problems."** At the beginning of that month, Jason listens to the following pre-recorded message by his uncle:

"One of the great errors in my life was sheltering so many people—including you—from life's problems. Out of a misguided sense of concern for your well-being, I actually took away your ability to handle life's problems, by removing them from your environment."

"A bird must struggle in order to emerge from the eggshell."

"If we are not allowed to deal with small problems, we will be destroyed by slightly larger ones. When we come to understand this, we **live our lives not avoiding problems, but welcoming them as challenges that will strengthen us.**"

"Jason, I cannot turn back the clock and allow you to deal with each of the problems in the past that I eliminated from your life when I should have given you the opportunity to deal with them yourself... but now, I am left with trying to teach you the **value of problems, struggles, & obstacles....**"

"This month, I want you to go out and find people with problems in each stage of life. I want you to find a child, a young adult, a full-grown adult, and an older person—each of whom is experiencing a profound problem. Not only are you to find these four situations, but you must be able to describe... the benefit or lesson that is derived from each specific situation."

During that month, Jason successfully identifies four people, who **view their negative circumstances as “blessings in a disguise.”** This is how Jason tells the story of **Bill Johnson**:

“[Bill] spotted me walking toward my car, so he smiled and walked directly over to me. He told me that he was in the neighborhood doing odd jobs for people and (that) it would be a privilege to wash a car like mine. I asked him why he was doing odd jobs, and he told me that, through a series of corporate cutbacks, both he and his wife had lost their jobs and that they had three young children at home. Both he and his wife were doing anything they could to make ends meet. Apparently, they had gone through their savings and they were (getting by)... day to day on what they could pick up, doing these [odd] jobs.”

“I asked him what would happen if he didn’t make enough money, and he just smiled and told me that **there was always enough**, and that **the problem had created some interesting (positive) situations for their family**. They were (now) **spending more time together** than they had (in the past), and their **children had learned the value of money and work.**”

“Before he left, I told him that **I was sorry** for his situation. He just laughed that amazing laugh of his and told me that **he felt like he was the luckiest man on earth**, and in the whole world, he couldn’t think of anyone he would want to trade places with.”

The fictional character **Bill Johnson** is someone **who viewed the curses in his life as “blessings in disguise.”**

The stories of **Bill Johnson** and **Lou Gehrig** are truly inspiring. They teach us that it is possible to **view the problems in our lives as blessings in disguise**.