

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
 ASBI Congregation
 RH2 5782

Not a Shehechyanu Moment

My first big event since the arrival of Covid was a vaccination party at Rush Hospital. On January 27th Sara and I drove to Rush Hospital where we were ushered into a large conference room along with an ecumenical gathering of several dozen rabbis, ministers, imams, and priests. Rush hospital had selected a cross-section of Chicago's religious leadership to receive early doses of Covid vaccines so that we, in turn, could encourage our communities to embrace vaccination. Local press was there. Hospital administrators gave speeches. And, as you may expect, clergy were invited to deliver short remarks for the occasion.

One of the ministers chosen to speak walked up to the front of the room, looked out at all of us and said, "I'm standing in front of a podium with the largest live audience I've had in so many months...I'm not giving up the microphone so fast."

Sara and I had a different decision to make - what berakhah should be said on receiving a Covid vaccine?

When I moved to Chicago I learned the phrase "Shehechyanu moment." The phrase means, more or less, what you would imagine it means: a moment that inspires feelings of joy and gratitude that would motivate one to recite the blessing "shehechyanu v'kiyamanu v'higianu lazman hazeh" which the Talmud says should be recited upon hearing good news, making a significant new purchase that brings joy, or performing a mitzvah for the first time in a year (like hearing the shofar or taking ahold of a lulav and etrog). Famously, many eat a new fruit on the second night of Rosh Hashanah so that they can unambiguously recite a shehechyanu blessing with kiddush that night even though Rosh Hashanah in the Torah is a one-day holiday.

But the concept of a "shehechyanu moment" expands the purview of the blessing even farther. Many contemporary Jews have fallen in love with the shehechyanu blessing and, in certain Jewish circles it is now common to recognize a "shehechyanu moment" with a blessing of gratitude to God. I feel conflicted about these moments. As an Orthodox Jew I feel loyalty to the common Jewish practice, as it has evolved over the centuries which limits reciting any blessing to the very specific circumstances for which it was written. On the other hand, the Talmud itself seems to suggest that berachot were intended for common usage so that everyday life with its joys and minor triumphs and defeats, would be infused with religious meaning. The author of the halakhic encyclopedia, Aruch HaShulchan, writing at the turn of the 20th century, explains that many Talmudic blessings should be recited based on our subjective feelings. If our emotions are sufficiently engaged, we should recite a blessing. And, few moments in the past two years have seemed as unambiguously joyful as the moments when we and our loved ones were vaccinated.

But I don't think the right blessing for a covid vaccine is she'hechyanu and I think that matters a great deal. The Talmud pairs the shehechyanu blessing with another blessing, "hatov ve'ha'metiv" a blessing for God "who is good and who does good" which is a berakhah for good tidings that impact not only the one who makes the berakhah, but others alongside him or her. I make a sh'hechyanu when I wear a new suit for the first time. I make a blessing of "hatov v'hametiv" when a heavy rain brings a regional drought to an end.

With this background, we can see two things: First, we understand why most poskim, most scholars of Jewish law, have taught that the appropriate blessing upon receiving a covid vaccine is "hatov v'hametiv" since the vaccine protects the one who receives it and protects the broader community from further spread. And, we see why this halakhic detail signifies something quite important:

One of the most demoralizing elements of the past 18 months is the reluctance among so many to change our behavior to protect others. We have understandably prioritized the risks to our own health and safety but we all too often neglected the risks that our bodies could serve as a vector for disease that could harm others at greater risk. There has been confusion about which health measures were to keep ourselves safe and which health measures were to protect others. Public health - indeed, public life itself - depends on expanding the concern we naturally feel for ourselves until it includes others. The confusion about which measures were to help which people and when and how has been deadly.

The vaccine is good news for each individual who receives it, and the vaccine adds safety to everyone who lives in proximity to the vaccinated individual. It's a benefit that is shared and the berakhah should be "hatov v'ha'metiv."

But there is also a distinction between the feelings that motivate a she'hechinyanu blessing and the feelings that motivate a blessing of "ha-tov ve'ha'metiv." The feelings that warrant a she'hechinyanu blessing are the joy at attaining unambiguous personal milestones. The blessing of ha-tov ve'hametiv, in addition to being associated with a shared benefit, can also accompany positive moments with a bit more uncertainty.

מברכין הטוב והמטיב על כל שינוי יין מן הסתם אפי' אינו יודע שהשני משובח מהראשון כל שאינו יודע שהוא גרוע ממנו:

One recites the blessing of "HaTov v'ha'Metiv" on any new bottle of wine that is brought to the table and consumed at a meal. And, "even if one does not know if the second bottle is better than the first bottle so long as one does not know for sure that it is worse than the first bottle" one recites the blessing "hatov v'hametiv." Here too, the blessing is only recited when the wine is shared by two or more people. The berakhah, in this usage, retains its primary link to something positive that is shared by more than one person. But in this circumstance, the berakhah does not even follow something good. The blessing is recited when more than one person experience a change together. They hope the change will be for the better. But they don't quite know.

There was something so festive and joyous about the holiday season last year since the six different 50-person prayer gatherings in four locations represented the largest in-person activities most of us had participated in for many months. And, our holiday gatherings augured better times to come. One day, we imagined, we will see the newspaper headlines, "Covid is Over!" and we will rush back to shul and all celebrate that she'hechinyanu moment together.

This year, I fear that some are feeling disappointed that the normal holiday season that seemed to be in reach just 10 weeks ago, has been postponed for at least another year. I have found it helpful to adopt a policy of "doing what we can, when we can" in respect to the ever shifting pandemic landscape. We enjoyed praying together without masks for several weeks this spring when it was safe to do so, yet we quickly put our masks back on when the guidance changed. We may never get to a "shehechinyanu moment" where we can celebrate The Official End of Covid. But, we can say ha'tov v'hametiv, as circumstances change, hopefully for the better, and as a community.

The author of Sefas Emes, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Gur wrote that the spiritual potential of Rosh Hashanah is enabled by a unified community and, a unified community is the result of a community that has been spiritually cleansed by the season of repentance. *VaHebi Bishurin Melekh*, we will say in just a few minutes, a king was present in Yeshurun, *b'bitasef rashei am*, when the people gathered together. For Sefas Emes, our approach before God during this season is as a people who are gathered together as a predicate and as an outcome of repentance.

When Jeremiah recalls the way that we lovingly followed God in the desert, in another verse we will recite in just a few minutes during Mussaf, he also alludes to this unity:

זְכַרְתִּי לְךָ יְיָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרַיִךְ אֲהַבְתָּ כָּל־וּלְתֵיךְ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

“I remember the favor of your youth when you had the love of newlyweds and followed me in the wilderness.”

According to Sefas Emes, it isn't that we loved God like a newlywed couple, but rather that we loved each other as a newlywed couple, and God considers that as though we were similarly devoted to God.

Can you love someone else enough to say a berakhah when something good happens to them?

I believe this gathering together today is a “hatov ve’hametiv moment.” We are here, together, doing something together, reciting tefilot together. The ba'al toke'a - the shofar blower will say a “she’hechyanu” blessing on the annual mitzvah of blowing shofar. And it is nothing to take for granted to be standing here alive for another Rosh Hashanah. But today is also a tov v’hametiv moment. We are standing here together, experiencing something together, each one of us contributing, in a positive way to the experience that the other is having. We hope things get better. Most likely they will get better and get worse in the course of this year, but each new paradigm represents new ways we can be of service to one another.

My blessing to us all in 5782 is not only that we should have lots of these moments but that we recognize them, we pause to appreciate how we benefit from being together, even when things are not as they once were. . Every little way that we improve each other's lives is worthy of this recognition, and is a source of blessing to ourselves and to the community .