

Blessings and Transformation

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While our children were still attending brick-and-mortar schools, my youngest son began crying one night during our recitation of Sh'ma. It turns out that a child from his grade had approached him on the playground and told him that he was not white. He was upset because we had not told him that he was not white, and he wanted to be like the rest of his immediate family. I reminded him that he was multi-racial and had the best of so many different backgrounds in his heritage from African to Mayan to Mexican to European to Central American...the list literally continues for many people for him. I told him that it was okay that we did not look like each other because it was important who he was rather than how he looked. He seemed satisfied, and the tears stopped. The next night, there were more tears. Another child had stated that he was white. My child wanted to know if that was okay. We went through another discussion of outside appearance is not nearly as important as our spirit. We just wanted him to be a mensch. Many months later, and after too many news broadcasts, my husband and I are now needing to have different discussions with him and his older brother.

In some ways, life has become very complicated. In other ways, it is just the same as it has always been. The pandemic of COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the inequality of society within our country. America was founded on the principle that all humanity is created equal. Yet, when it comes to healthcare, job security and wages, we know that is not true. As people of faith, we cry out for the injustice of what is happening. In today's world, though, we need to do more than just cry out. We must take a stance. We need to be part of the solution and "not stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds." (Leviticus 19:16). Reform Judaism was founded on the principle of following the voices of our Prophets. We were and still are the movement of social justice and social action. So much so that there is an organization in Washington, D.C., called the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. As a former legislative rabbinic intern and as a rabbi, I have seen the important work that the RAC has done. Through coalition building and emphasis on action, the RAC has been at the forefront of supporting those bringing social justice into our world.

Our Torah portion this week is Naso II. In this parashah, Aaron and his descendants, the *kohanim* (the priests), are given instructions on how to bless the community with a blessing that is known as the *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Benediction. This blessing has become a part of our Jewish lives recited at life-cycle events, Shabbat, and holidays. The meaning of Naso, "lift up" or "to take a count," contains the spiritual essence of the one being blessed. There is an innate feeling of holiness to a moment when a blessing is offered with true intention, *kavanah*; a powerful and life-altering experience. The

words are inviting and provide a means of connecting with G-d both individually and communally on an emotional and spiritual level.

In Hebrew, the word for blessing is ברכה (bracha). The root of the word is ברך (bet-resh-chaf). It is the same root as the word for knee. The sages explain that just as we bend our knees in reverence to God, we bend our knees for certain blessings like the Aleinu to demonstrate extra emphasis on the holiness of the blessing or prayer being offered. When the Ark is opened and we bend our knees, we are also showing humility to the One Being as we try to become the conduits of God's blessings in our world.

Unfortunately, bending the knee recently has become used for other than offering a blessing. During sports games, it has become a sign of protest. While in Minneapolis, when some police officers bent their knees and took away the life of George Floyd, the meaning of root of the word for blessing was perverted. Instead of giving life and wishing holiness in the protection of others, those particular officers took away life. By kneeling on the neck of the victim, the juxtaposition of kneeling and blessing were changed. In reaction, the flood waters of injustice concerning hundreds of years of inequality surrounding the value of humanity in our country was released. Yet, in the marches and demonstrations that have followed, it has been heartening to see other police officers take a knee and join in offering blessings of healing to our world.

We are all conduits of God as we offer blessings to other human beings. As these blessings are bestowed, may there be more than just a moment of transformation. May the blessings we offer this Shabbat and at all times be a spiritual awakening and a blessing with G-d's favor and peace. Now is our time to act. Now is the time to bring blessings into our world.

May God bless you and keep you.
May God cause the divine light to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May God lift you up and grant you peace.
(Numbers 6: 24-26).

Shabbat Shalom-
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