

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775
September 24, 2014

So often we are told during the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, that we need to confront our transgressions, and to own up to those times when we have fallen short as parents, spouses, partners and friends. It is Jewish guilt at its best! As we evaluate our lives, however, it is equally important to recognize the good that we do and the ways in which we have been blessed. For in examining our blessings, we can explore new vistas in living a richer and fuller life. What is it that makes our lives worth living? What is it about who we are as human beings that we want to enhance this year?

In order to move forward, it is important to know the resources that we have at our disposal. If we focus only on our transgressions and simply promise not to do the bad stuff again, that is indeed valuable. But the term “teshuvah” means a shift or change in the direction of our lives not only away from the negative but also towards the positive. We have resources to help us in our teshuvah toward the better and we call these resources “blessings.”

According to the dictionary, a blessing is a special favor, mercy or benefit; alternatively a gift or favor bestowed by God, thereby bringing happiness. Typically when we consider our blessings, we turn to the blessings of good health, family, or friendship...and I don't want to minimize those. But tonight, as we enter a new year, I thought we might go a little deeper to understand how we are blessed at a more basic level. I want to discuss three blessings and how recognizing these blessings might help us to better live our lives. These blessings are consciousness of being

part of something beyond ourselves, the blessing of time, and the blessing of inner peace.

The greatest blessing that we have is that of being consciousness that we are part of something greater than ourselves. This awareness of our place in eternity and in the universe is what allows us all to live with purpose and meaning. Rabbi Akiva taught that “beloved are human beings, for humanity was created in God’s image. Still greater was the love shown to humanity inasmuch as it was made known to them that they were created in God’s image.” (Avot 3:14) Think about that teaching. It is wonderful news that we, and all humanity, are created in the image of God but the greater gift is being aware of that fact. For only when we are aware of our status as ones created in the image of God can we allow that fact to influence our behaviors. Armed with that consciousness, we can explore the implications of that reality and we can begin to understand what it means to live up to that blessing.

We are all familiar with the saying that if you don’t know where you are going, then any road will get you there. Having the capacity to understand that our lives are lived in a greater context than self-gratification and daily survival provides us with an opportunity to live with chutzpah! The knowledge that we are created in the image of God connects us with God’s eternal and pervasive influence over the cosmos. And the even better news is that all of us have a piece of that if we are willing to be conscious of it.

Pastor Rick Warren and Saddleback Church have changed the lives of millions with the simple thought that life has purpose and part of our mission on

earth is to discover that purpose for ourselves. My argument is even more basic, that the search for purpose and meaning in life begins with acknowledging the possibility of purpose; to allow ourselves the chutzpah to say what I do with my life means something not only to myself, my family, my community but to the universe. This type of audacious living is rooted in an awareness of the divinity within ourselves and an awareness of the challenge to live up to that divinity. We need to have the chutzpah to look in the mirror and say “what I do with my life truly matters” and then to live our lives in a way that mirrors that consciousness.

It is then that we can better appreciate our second blessing, the blessing of time. Now most of us think about the blessing of time in terms of life and death; that we are blessed with a given amount of time on earth and to make the most of it. That is an important concept because it provides a sense of urgency to one’s life. Other creatures are not aware of their own mortality; they are just alive, do what they do and die. As humans, however, we have the gift of knowing that we will die someday, which should incentivize us to make the best use of the time that we do have. But even more than this, we are blessed with the knowledge that we do not control the amount of time that we have.

In Ecclesiastes 3, there is that famous passage about there being a time to be born and a time to die; a time to sow and a time to reap, a time for this and a time for that. But lesser known is the next passage which says that God has played a cruel joke on us by letting us feel that we can somehow know when the right time is for everything in our lives while in reality God only knows. Is it always clear when is a time to speak out or to hold our peace? Is it always clear when we should keep and

when we should discard, whether that be old clothes, old habits or relationships? As a nation, do we always know when it is time to make war and when it is time to more vigorously seek peace?

A popular topic among folks my age is how much should we be contributing toward retirement and how much we should be spending to do things now while we are more active and healthy. When is it time to put a few extra dollars into the IRA and when is it time to take an Alaskan cruise? I will tell you that the most difficult moments I have as a rabbi is when I find out about a death or serious illness that occurs right after someone retires. The thought that after carefully saving and planning this wonderful retirement, that it could all go away in an instant is terrifying. But life is what is lived within that reality and in response to it.

The understanding that time is a gift but that the amount of our time or how to best use it is a mystery is itself a potential source of blessing. Not knowing for certain what our lives hold in store at any one time adds a sense of urgency to accomplishing what is most important. It also provides us with awareness that having had time is a blessing to be celebrated. When we look on the mirror and see this person who is not as young as we used to be staring back at us, our response should be to thank God rather than bemoan our fate. If we have wrinkles or thinning hair, at least we have been granted the time to acquire them and have experienced life so that we come by them honestly. I speak to as many congregants as I can on their birthday and there are some who decide to simply let the day pass but most, particularly those who have faced serious illness in their lives, know

better. “It sure beats the alternative” is the comment I hear most often and in itself that recognition provides blessing to our existence.

The blessing of this insight can cause us to live more purposely while also increasing the potential for our final blessing, that of inner peace and tranquility. How so? Because one who is at peace is more likely to feel free to live in the moment; to treasure each moment without worrying about the future or dwelling on the past.

The blessing that we will recite together tomorrow morning under the great tent created by our tallasim is known as the Birkat Cohanim or the Priestly Blessing. In our prayer books it is labeled the Birkat Shalom or the Blessing of Peace. God originally taught this blessing for the Jewish people to Moses and Aaron in the Book of Numbers. It is dramatic as it moves from verse to verse in length and intensity. It begins with a blessing for health, then for a sense of God’s Presence but then ultimately asks God to provide us with shalom; a sense of peace and wholeness in our lives.

Peace and tranquility stems directly from the understanding that we do not control everything in our lives. This frees us from the responsibility for everything that happens to us, for better or for worse. It allows us to accept life as it is rather than bemoan the fact that life is not as it should be. It also frees us to live in the presence of miracles, to be able to celebrate the most cherished elements of our lives; miracles like love, the ability to feel joy and life itself.

I found the following entry on the Chabad website from a Mrs. Shula Bryski:

“So my resolution is to try to retire from my constant absorption and worry. To close my eyes to fully concentrate on the beauty of music, to open my eyes to the wonder of these precious moments with my children when they are still young, to enjoy the magnificent scenery as I drive each day, to live in the here and now. It's not that I'll be naive, pretending that my problems don't exist. It's just that life is too short to dwell on them non-stop, when I could be dancing-really dancing-with my daughter in the kitchen.”

To be at peace is to be open to the possibilities of the present. It does not mean ignoring the challenges one faces but rather to do so with the serenity that comes with understanding that our best is all that we can do. Our lives deserve our best efforts. The ending words of the Vidui, or Confessional, that we will recite at Yom Kippur are accurate. If we engage in t'fillah- prayerful reflection; tzadakah- acts of righteousness and generosity; and teshuvah- a desire to move our lives in the right direction then that is all that God can ask of us and all that we can ask of ourselves.

Having pledged to do that, to live as best we can in the here and now, to live consciously and with purpose, and to make the most of whatever time we may have is to enjoy a life of blessing. And, conversely, those who live in this way bring blessing to the universe and provide sanctification to God's name. May the year 5775 be a year of blessing for us all!