

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner
Rosh Hashanah, 5782

Temple Beth Or
September 6, 2021

Overflowing Blessing

I. What Makes You Smile

What makes you smile? Not that snap-a-picture smile when someone commands: “say cheese.” Not the nice to meet you smile; or the “see you later” smile. Think for a minute about what really makes you smile.

Perhaps a sunset...



- An irresistible Dog



- A curious toddler:



Cute babies make most of us smile – but nothing like the smile that is on the face of the rabbis who are her mother and father.

Conjure up your own personal image of what makes you smile – perhaps it's the satisfaction of hitting that 100th workout milestone, the summer cabin your family has returned to for years, or the people that you can count on to lift you up no matter what.

You can't help but smile reflecting on those times.

Let's go deeper, beyond a smile that comes from a cute image, or a poignant memory. When does a smile come instantaneously to your lips? I call it "smiling out loud."

This summer I had an occasion where I found myself "smiling out loud." It was at Dorothea Dix Park at the blooming of the sunflowers. Walking the rows of bobbing blossoms, I found myself grinning from ear to ear. It was clear that those flowers were waving directly at me. I wasn't the only one smiling under that canopy of golden blossoms. Wharton organizational psychologist Adam Grant calls those moments when we share in outright elation "collective effervescence."

Grant espouses: "We find our greatest bliss in moments of collective effervescence. It's a concept coined in the early 20th century by ... Émile Durkheim to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor,

colleagues in a brainstorming session, cousins at a religious service or teammates on a soccer field. And during this pandemic, it's been largely absent from our lives.

“Collective effervescence happens when...(*exuberant joy*) spreads through a group. Before Covid, research showed that more than three-quarters of people found collective effervescence at least once a week **and almost a third experienced it at least once a day.**” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-group-emotions-happiness.html>).

Collective effervescence is smiling from your head to your toe at a concert or sitting quietly in the presence of awe. It shines through the glow of candles ushering in this Holy Season. It weaves invisible threads drawing us in, despite this virtual space, creating *HaMakom* the place where God dwells in the shared ritual that binds generations.

Collective effervescence made a comeback this summer – at our URJ summer camps that created safe spaces for our youth. Two months ago we celebrated our first Seniors gathering in a year and a half. You could feel it at Shabbat Alive, and our mosaic chalk art brunch in the outdoor sanctuary, this summer. And it lit up the air when our RALFTY youth group gathered for their first event a few weeks ago. Just like that, we transformed a year plus of separation into shared moments of jubilation.

The brief breath of fresh air that vaccinations brought has boomeranged back with Delta. I cannot deny that I am personally worn down – as I know you are. It is painful not to be able to welcome these Holy Days in person.

Our Jewish heritage is uniquely positioned to help us overcome this disruption and to find that sense of connection that can rejuvenate our haggard souls. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 12, Moses tells the Jewish people: “What (*mah*) does God ask of you?” The Talmud explains that the word *mah* can be read as *me'ah*, meaning 100. Inferring God obligates us to recite 100 blessings every day. (Orach Chaim 46:3) .

Bracha blessing has roots in two Hebrew concepts that add texture to our prayer and ritual. The more commonly taught relates *b'racha* to *beerkhayim* which means knees. This explains the frequent genuflecting during Jewish services, with some bending their knees every time they say *Baruch*. The physical motion accompanying the words imprints the prayer on our hearts and souls. To pray is to act to bring about that prayer.

We bend the knee as a sign of our readiness to serve God – supplication. The Hebrew word for worship *Avodah* reinforces this. *Avodah* means service in both ramifications of that word. ***Our ritual service puts us in service to the Holy One.***

Much of this Holy Day season centers around realigning our lives in **service: Service** to the vision of our best selves and **service** to contributing to our best world. Brachot offer a ritual tool for intention setting. Marking the everyday events of our lives with blessing – a hundred blessings a day – builds the muscle of purpose. –especially in the midst of a pandemic when chaos reigns

That message, Brachot leading to bending the knee to serve God and build God's world, offers a sacred path for Jewish prayer. Nevertheless, for me, after this exhausting year and a half of Covid19, a heart attack, loss of my own loved ones, and now a hurricane scattering my family all over the country, I find myself wrung out, doubting I have the energy nor the desire to rise for another call to serve. I suspect I am not the only one who needs more than service this season.

Brachot has a second cadence, less commonly known, *Bracha* as wellspring. My friend and treasured teacher, Rabbi Steven Sager explains: **“The Hebrew word, beracha has the sense of overflow. To make a beracha is to capture and hold the overflowing significance of a moment, to deepen (as Dr. James Hillman says) an event into an experience of enduring value.”** (<https://sichaconversation.org/2011/07/05/guarding-ourselves-a-seatbelt-beracha/>).

Yes, the High Holy Days are usually about bending our knee, atoning and re-toning our lives. For this year and these times, turning to *Bracha* as wellspring feels more apropos. We need that collective effervescence that can come in the form of the wellspring of prayer.

Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein illuminates: "... bracha (as wellspring) hints that when (we) offer blessings, **we are actually gathering energy and unlocking a life-source.**

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/blessings-a-conduit-of-infinite-potential/>

Zemer Lexie and I recently completed a class with Cantor Ellen Dreskin on prayer that explored this idea of blessings being a wellspring to gather energy. Dreskin used as an example the first prayer Jews say upon waking. The *Modeh Ani* thanks God for returning us fully to our soul each morning. Cantor Dreskin actually wrote those words on a post-it and put them on her alarm clock as a reminder. (Can you believe she still has an alarm clock) Reaching for the alarm she would hit the post-it and before she even turned the alarm off, she would say: Modah Ani – I am thankful. At first, she admitted it took some concerted effort. After a few weeks she found that not only had the prayer become a natural part of her morning, she started noticing things great and small that made her grateful throughout the day. A post-it, two words, and a new perspective, unlocking opportunities for overflowing prayer: one prayer, and another and another.

It may not be feasible to have the collective effervescence of programming in packed rooms right now, but we can feel the overflowing blessing of gathering outside in our beautiful Silber Sanctuary Garden, or hearing the Shofar together tomorrow afternoon at our Shofar, Tashlich, and Rosh Hodesh service at the JCC.

We can feel that wellspring of God's presence when we open the doors to our Religious School and welcome our students back this weekend for the first time in a year!

On a personal note, that wellspring of blessing is the mighty secret that has lifted me through the pandemic, the death of my father and my son, my mother's illness, my own dance with death this year, and the devastating hurricane that has displaced so many including my own mother and brothers. That there is still blessing in the world, that you have stood with me time and again facing this ravaging year, that you are the wellspring pouring those blessing over me, has literally gotten me out of bed morning after morning.

I want you to be able to feel that overflow of blessing during these Days of Awe. If you would agree to reach out to another Temple member, and do a blessing check once, twice, or a few times before Yom Kippur, you can know more deeply the blessings that flow continually from our sacred community.

Sharing blessings is contagious. It's like a smile. *Can you commit to calling one temple member this week and sharing your blessings? Are you willing to listen for the blessings in their lives?* It would be easy to call someone you know from Temple, who you speak with often, and you are welcome to do that. But it is likely you already know their blessings. Consider letting us match you with a blessing partner from our congregation for the Days of Awe. All you have to do is open the email you will receive later and press the "blessing partner link" and I will get you connected. And make sure to email me during this week to share a little overflow of your blessings with me as well. It does my soul good to hear from you.

As Rothstein reminds us: "Blessings are a portal to the Infinite. They are the utterances and sentiments shared by us and our ancestors for thousands of years" (Rothstein, *ibid*).

The abundance of God's overflowing blessing awaits us. It is there for me and it is there for you. Let us open our hearts and let it in.

AMEN