

For Oriya Anael and Lavi Nissim Hanania
Midor L'Dorot: Blessings from a Grandfather to his Grandchildren

Yom Kippur 5774

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Nearly eight weeks ago, I received a call from Israel from Lori, informing me that my daughter, pregnant with twins, had gone into labor. Within only five hours, a boy and a girl were born to my daughter and son-in-law, Tamar and Yoni. Born a bit early, the healthy but small twins stayed in the hospital for two weeks. I arrived in Israel just as the twins, Oriya and Lavi, these new grandchildren/children/ American - Israelis/ citizens of the world, arrived home.

When I first saw my newest grandchildren, I felt profound gratitude, gratitude for 10 fingers and 10 toes (times two), for increasing strength and weight. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude to God for the blessings bestowed upon me, Lori and our family. I thought of the line from our High Holiday liturgy, "*HaYom Harat Olam/ Today a new world is born*". For me, this year, two worlds were born, two worlds linked together at the moment of conception and inextricably tied to each other from that moment on.

At the moment of the *bris* (for Lavi) and the *brita* (for Oriya), however, I experienced a different emotion: fear. This sense of fear was not connected to the natural degree of parental/grandparental apprehension created by the image of a knife being held above the child. I did not fear that my grandson would be hurt. Having attended so many *bris* ceremonies over the years, I had great confidence in the expertise of the *mohel* and the safety of Lavi, my grandson. Rather, the fear, to which I refer, came from an unexpected yet pervasive sense of awe and humility. My fear derived from my own sense of impotence, my own inability to protect my grandchildren from the difficulties they will encounter in this world.

As a part of the ceremony, as we were surrounded by nearly 200 people, friends and members of the community where Tamar and Yoni live, the *mohel* turned to me and to Yoni's father, the two grandfathers, and said: "At the moment of a *bris*, as the covenant is made, God hears most clearly and most distinctly the prayers and blessings we recite. So, please, bless these children." I froze. At a moment filled with such emotion, hope, optimism and fear I could hardly speak. With what should I bless them?

How would you bless your children or your grandchildren? I ask parents, as they stand on the *bima*, before their son or daughter at the moment of their bar/bat mitzvah, to prepare a blessing for their child. Health, joy, happiness, and success are all important. That list of prayers, hopes and wishes, are certainly things for which we all pray and hope, but these are things over which we have little control. Moreover, expressing the hope that all of our children's wishes be fulfilled does not guide those we bless. To bless means to draw upon the insights you possess and which you can share with those you love. Whether or not you have children, what lessons have you learned which have served you well and might help those you bless to experience life more fully, guide them on the right path, help them to live

by the values you cherish? As my grandchildren begin their lives, as we begin a new year, I pose this question to myself and to you as well: What blessings do you have for our children and grandchildren?

Giving a blessing is a powerful experience for both the one blessing and the one receiving. That blessing creates an invisible bond, a deep connection between the giver and the recipient. But inherent in that blessing is also the recognition of the limitations of a blessing. Powerful as is the experience of giving a blessing, the blessing is not magic. I know that my blessing will not be able to shield these newborns from physical pain, but it may instill in them a bit more stamina to endure the pain they experience. My blessing cannot assure that they will avoid life's difficulties. But I can hope that when they recall my blessing they will find the courage to confront the challenges which life presents. My blessings will not bring to them the health and prosperity for which we all hope, but I hope that my blessing will give them a sense of direction, so that they will not lose their way. And, I hope that my blessing reminds them where to find support, friendship and love in their lives. That is the sort of blessing which might give them the strength to persevere. These are the blessing which one generation bestows on another, from one generation to the next, *Midor LiDor* or, in this case, from a grandparent to his grandchildren, *MiDor LiDorot*.

At that moment, standing beside the *mohel*, looking at my grandson, overwhelmed by the power of that event, I froze. On this Day of Atonement, the day on which God grants us all a second chance, however, I would like to utilize my "do-over" card. With the benefit of having several weeks to reconsider this assignment more deeply, I would like to use this moment to share with you my blessings for my new grandchildren and, in doing so, express my hopes and wishes for them as they begin their lives. And perhaps, as I share with you my blessing, you will formulate your own blessings for your children and grandchildren. As they begin their lives together, I bestow upon my grandchildren these blessings: The faith to jump, the courage to feel, the grit to commit and the confidence to be humble.

I. **The Faith to Jump.**

There are different kinds of faith: There is blind faith, for example, which implies that things are as they are because that is how God made them. We may or may not understand the world, but our comprehension is not necessary. Some possess a faith which allows them to believe that God is in control of everything, despite evidence to the contrary. But these are not the faiths with which I bless them. I bless my grandchildren with the kind of faith that will propel them to act, the faith that teaches them to hope. This is the faith necessary in order to lead. And we have examples of this sort of faith in our tradition.

When the Children of Israel stood at the shores of the Sea, the Egyptians were in hot pursuit. Under cover of darkness, the Israelites had left Egypt and the slavery they had endured for centuries. In an attempt to re-capture the Israelites, the Egyptian soldiers were closing in. And, at this point, as the *midrash* tells the story, Moses receives some unexpected help.

Standing at the edge of the sea, the Israelites cry for Moses to do something to save them. And, Moses did what he did best: he started to pray. As the People cried and the Egyptians got closer, Moses prayed harder. Finally, when there was no time left. One of the tribal leaders, Nachshon, acted. He

jumped into the sea and, according to a *midrash*, when the water reached his nose, the waters split. The Israelites crossed to safety.

Among the lessons of this version of the Pesach story is the role of a person in God's miracle. Here we learn that, even the greatest miracles of God, depend on our participation. Or better, these miracles require that we initiate the miracle. When there is a need for someone to jump, someone must jump first. The faith to jump first is the faith of Nachshon.

What does it mean to jump into the water without knowing for certain that the water would split? This is a very literal example of what the Danish philosopher, Soren Kirkegaard, calls "a leap of faith". This is the faith which enables us to act without being certain what will occur. This is also a faith of optimism. It is not a blind, fool-hearty faith in the impossible. Rather, this is the optimistic faith to act on the possible when there is no certainty. This a worldview not based on magic but on "maybe". When the choice was between doing nothing and returning to Egypt as slaves, Nachshon's hope helped to empower him. His sense of optimism allowed him to believe in the possibility of the possible.

In life, there are few certainties. At the same time, there are an infinite number of possibilities. And so, I bless my grandchildren with the faith to act, to jump. I bless them with a sense of optimism, a sense of hope in the possible. I bless them with the faith of Nachshon.

II. **The Courage to Feel**

About a year ago, the "New York Times Magazine" featured a story about a girl who was growing up with a very unusual genetic anomaly which resulted in "Congenital Insensitivity to Pain", the inability to feel pain. As she grew up, her parents would routinely find her hands burned by boiling water or by a flame on the stove which she had touch either inadvertently or out of a sense of curiosity. She walked around on a broken leg, at one point, for several days until her parents notice the swelling and took her to the doctor. She could feel pressure. She had a sense of touch. She simply could not feel pain.

According to the Times article, hers was a case so rare that this girl, Ashlyn, was the only documented case of this disorder in the world.

There is a far more common problem, widespread and well-known, which is quite similar to this genetic disorder. This problem is not characterized by the inability to feel physical pain. It is characterized by the inability, or unwillingness, to feel emotional pain. In a world so rife with pain, I bless my grandchildren with the courage to feel the pain of others.

There was once a very wealthy man who loved horses. He loved horses so much that, when he would hear that a horse with a particular impressive breeding line was for sale, he would drop everything and go to buy the horse. In that way, he acquired a collection of horses from the greatest stables and breeding lines in the world. Once, while out on a ride in his carriage, being pulled by six of his prized horses, his carriage ended up in a mud pit. And, try as they might, the horses could not pull the carriage out of the mud. As the sun began to set, the wealthy man became increasingly distraught and desperate.

At that moment, the wealthy man heard the sound of a carriage approaching from the other direction. This carriage, if you could call it that, was made of little more than a few planks of wood, tied together and was pulled by two old, scrawny horses. Pulling up next to the wealthy man's carriage the driver of the other carriage asked if he could be of any help. "Of what help could you be to me? I need to be pulled out of the mud. If my fine horses can't pull me out, your horses will certainly not be able to pull me out either."

"Well", said the man, "since you have nothing to lose, then, why not let me try?" With that, the man jumped out of his rickety carriage, hitched his horses to the carriage of the wealthy man and, with just a few good pulls, those scrawny horse pulled the carriage out of the mud.

The wealthy man was incredulous: "If my horses couldn't pull me out, how were your horses able to succeed?" "Well", he replied, "Where are your horses from?" With a smile on his face the wealthy man explained that each of these horses came from the most prestigious stable from countries the world over. This one was from India. That one is from Egypt, and so on.

The man listened and then responded: "Now I understand. My horses, you see, are siblings. They have grown up together. Their whole lives they have eaten from the same trough. They have run together in the same fields. And, every time I whip one of the horses the other one feels the pain and pulls even harder so that his brother won't be suffer. It is for that reason that they are able to cross any hurdle, however hard it is. Each musters all of its strength for the sake of the other. Your horses, however, are strangers to each other. They don't feel each other's pain. Regal as they appear, each thinks only about himself, not about what they can do together".

It is interesting to note that on Yom Kippur, as we confess our shortcomings, our weaknesses and our sins, the language is always in the plural: We have transgressed, we have been unkind. We have treated others maliciously and cruelly. We explain that, although one of us may not have been guilty of this sin or that, we stand together as one people, agreeing to confess together, to beat our chests together, to be judged together and to be forgiven together. But it seems to me that there is a deeper level to this confessional. When we stand together, we confess the sins together in order to remind us that we are part of one community, one People. We are friends. We are siblings. We stand together in order to feel each other's shame, in order to feel each other's pain. Only when we are that close can we hope to help each other become unstuck, to pull each other out of the mud and to help each other to get back on the right path.

I bless my grandchildren with feeling hearts, hearts which know how to love, to care and to yearn, hearts which will be open to feel the joy celebrated by those you love and, when necessary, hearts courageous enough to feel the pain of the other.

III. **The Grit to Commit**

Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik, one of the great leaders, teachers and philosophers of Modern Orthodoxy in the 20th Century, once elaborated on the distinction between nomads and farmers. Nomads, he writes, move from place to place, grazing on the land. They do not love the land for they cannot stay there long

enough to love the land. Once the animals have grazed, the nomad moves on. Farmers, on the other hand, love the land. They work the land and live in a relationship with the land. While nomads wander, farmers reap the harvest.

In a similar way, there are spiritual nomads and spiritual farmers. These nomads move from religion to religion, trying new kinds of faiths, skimming from the surface, traditions of this or that culture. They do not contribute for they do not stay. To love a tradition, however, one must be a farmer. Skimming the surface will never lead one to appreciate one's religion. Commitment takes time and dedication.

Recently, an article was published, also in the New York Times, which reported on the findings in a study about success in life. Who succeeds in life? Is it the smartest? The fastest? The most popular? The study found that there is a quality called grit which seemed to correlate most highly with success. Grit is that trait which enables some people to stick with a task, to continue to try, even if one is not the best. It is that sense of perseverance and dogged desire to push forward without despair, without being overcome with self-doubt, without being defeated by a lack of self-confidence.

My grandchildren are Israelis. They are growing up in a loving and secure home. But Israel is not an easy place to live. As some of us say, it is a beautiful and inspiring country which is located in a very bad neighborhood. They and their parents love the land. But to succeed in Israel, Israelis must internalize that national sense of grit in order to endure the hardships of a country which lives, at all times, in a state of preparedness for war. Think about it: how would your life be different if you feared each and every day that there were people, literally a stone's-throw away from you who, with the means and the opportunity, would kill you in the blink of an eye? Would you have the courage and commitment to live in a country which is in a constant state of readiness for war?

My children and grandchildren love the land. They love their Judaism. Philosophically speaking, they are farmers, not nomads. They will stay there. They will deepen their connections to Judaism and Israel. They will contribute both directly and indirectly to Israel's strength. They will plant, they will build families and their saplings will grow. But the goal is not simply survival or growth. The goal is to thrive. And, in order to do that requires, commitment and dedication. To be a farmer requires commitment to the land, devotion to one's faith and the grit to stay and work the land, to study Judaism, in order to reap the harvest.

And so, my blessing for my grandchildren is the blessing of grit, the grit of the farmer, the perseverance to stay, to wait to plant and to watch. May they be blessed with a gritty commitment to the Land of Israel and to the Jewish People. And, may they possess the faith that the land they love will love them back, the Jewish people will remain vital and strong and they will all enjoy with a full and rich harvest.

IV. The Confidence to be Humble

While Moses was at the summit of Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel had built a Golden Calf and, as the Torah recounts, God was furious. He instructs Moses to go down: "*Lech Raid*", says God to Moses. "I will destroy this ungrateful People. I will find a new People, more obedient, more compliant for you to lead, for me to be their God". But the Talmud teaches a different story.

When God says to Moses, "*Lech Raid*", God does not mean: "Go down to the people". He means: "Get down from your high horse". The Talmud suggests that Moses was the one who wanted God to destroy the People. And God says to Moses, "Get off of your high horse! Do you think that you are better than they? They have erred. Go down and teach them, show them. Take the Torah to them for them to learn. Go down to your people." God castigates Moses for being haughty, for removing himself and the Torah from the Jewish People. "People err. We all make mistakes, Moses, even you. "

The point here is not simply to remind Moses that all people make mistakes. The point here is that Moses is who he is, because of those people and, as uncooperative as are the people he leads, Moses, himself, is not without his flaws. God is suggesting here that Moses has forgotten the most basic rule of Jewish life, to understand who you are, to use your strengths and recognize your weaknesses. Unless you know you are weak, unless you realize that you are fallible, you may come to think that you are better than the rest. You may even begin to think that you are a god.

A discussion is presented in the Talmud over which might be the most important verse in the Torah. I agree with those who believe that verse to be "*VeAhavta LiRei'echa Kamocha / Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Lev. 19:18). In expounding upon this verse, we often emphasize the obvious message which relates to treating others as we would like to be treated. But there is a second part to this injunction, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord your God." Why does this verse end with God asserting the he is God? In order to remind us that we are not gods. There are times when we think that we are perfect, that we must be right and all the rest must be wrong. We are so invested in being right, in appearing flawless like God, we cannot admit that we may be wrong. That is when we see ourselves as gods.

This entire day of Yom Kippur is orchestrated to remind us that, as human beings, we sin. We ask forgiveness. And why must we explicitly put aside a day on which we apologize? We put this day aside to remind us that we are not the gods we think we are. In establishing relationships, when you are ready to judge others, get off of your high horse, remember that you are no better than anyone else. Treat the other without condescension for you are not God. Moreover, if you cannot find God in your life or if you believe that you have no need for God in your life, perhaps it is because you have come to believe that you are a god. We cannot find God if we think that we are gods. But, when we lose that assumption, when we acknowledge our flaws and foibles, we can try to find the God that we have been missing.

I share with you today the blessings I have for my beautiful grandchildren. I hope they will succeed in many things and that they will use their natural gifts to excel and to thrive. But, I bless them, as well, with the humility to acknowledge failure and the confidence to admit that they are wrong. And may that confidence not only enable each to forgive himself/herself but to understand and appreciate others, even at moments of their weaknesses and failures. For, I believe that it is in our common and shared imperfections that we find God's presence.

My new grandchildren enter the world together as twins:

May they always feel each other's presence in your life.

May they each experience God's presence in their respective lives.

And I pray that my dear children, may find and experience peace.

In the traditional blessing we offer to our children each Friday night, we pray for our children to feel protected by God, to feel God's presence. In the midst of a tumultuous and dangerous world, we bless our children with peace. For as long as I have had children and grandchildren, I have intoned these words and given these blessings. I would do no less for my newest grandchildren:

YiVarechecha Adonai V'Yishmirecha.

Yisa Adonai Panav Elecha Vichuneka.

Ya'er Adonai Panav Elecha V'Yasem Lecha Shalom.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. ViNomar: Amen