

The Blessing of Making Our Lives a Blessing to Others

Kol Nidre 2013 - 5774

Rabbi Mark Schifftan

The Temple

When our children were young, we developed a cherished bedtime ritual by which we would end each day. Though the ritual was similar for each of our three children, its nuance varied ever-so-slightly as we applied it to each specific child. There were stories first, for each of them, followed by a trilogy of songs, hugs and kisses. For example, Ari, our first-born, liked the stories written by Dr. Seuss. Why? Because he had already figured out, at a very young age, that they were the longest of all stories, with the highest word count, and therefore stretched out the duration of his bedtime to its maximum length. Sarah Rose, our incredibly empathetic daughter, loved the stories that often brought tears to her parents' eyes. I cannot even begin to tell you how many times I read the story about Mrs. Katz and her cat, Tush, that ended with a visit by Mrs. Katz's gentile neighbors, to pay their respects at her graveside. And Jacob, as our youngest, born into the whirlwind of an already full and frenzied family life...well, suffice it to say that there was an understandable phase in his young life in which he only wanted "Mommy" to put him to bed. Maybe that's why I have no memory of what we read to him! As our third child, I'm just happy that he learned to speak English, and that he even learned to read, at all !

And so, in many ways, even as we tucked each of them in each night, we tucked ourselves in as well. In the midst of the daily chaos of living in an uncertain world, we wound down each and every day, attempting to make them -- and by extension, us, as well -- feel safe and secure, as we sought to hold the darkness of night at bay. To this day, whenever I encounter other parents, with young children of their own, I tell them that it is no small thing, to get their children safely through another day, and to tuck them in securely at night. It is a huge accomplishment, a daily miracle of devotion, stability, and love, in an often unpredictable and unstable world.

Even as our children get older, and move away from home, we try, nonetheless, to express the same sentiment, albeit in a different way. In fact, even as our physical presence may lessen in our children's lives, our worries for them still remain. Our desire to protect our children, neither desists, nor diminishes over the years. In fact, it only seems to increase, and to continue to endure, throughout their lifetimes, and ours.

And therefore, on every Friday afternoon, just before sunset (and services), I text my children the words of the priestly benediction, the words from the Book of Numbers traditionally designated to recite over our children at the Sabbath dinner table. And though I wished we would have begun reciting it over them when they were younger, I think the words still possess their potency as the years go by...maybe even more so:

Yevarechecha Adonai VeYishmarecha.

May God bless you and keep you.

Ya'er Adonai panav alecha veYichuneka.

May God's countenance rest upon you, and be gracious to you..

Yisa Adonai panav alecha veYasem lecha shalom.

May God grant you a sense of peace, within your soul and throughout your life.

Amen.

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That is the blessing Jews recite to protect their children from harm, regardless of their age, or location, whether they are near or far from us.. The words are still meant to offer them some measure of protection, even in the midst of an uncertain, unstable and often unpredictable world. It is the formula we have used for generations, the spoken, shared blessing designed to extend a measure of protection, and to dream of a sukkat shalom -- a shelter of peace -- spread over all of our children.

But there is another blessing, of sorts, that I have for my children, and for all of our collective children, as well. It, too, comes directly from our Jewish communal narrative. Though often unspoken, it resonates deep within the Jewish soul. It is the blessing we say, in some way, after we have expressed our desire to protect our children from harm's way; it is the blessing, the reminder, to our children, that it is their sacred Jewish task, and their ancient Jewish calling, to come to the aid of others whom they will meet, in their lives, and throughout their lifetimes, who will request, and require, their protection, as well.

Lately, sometimes, I have begun to add it, as a preface to the words of the priestly benediction over my children. These words are mine; but the heritage from which they emanate...is ours, all of ours. Listen:

Always remember where you came from, and to whom you belong.
Always know before whom you stand, and that for which you stand;
And that you never make the journey alone.

And admittedly, it is an encoded, encrypted message; it is purposely phrased so as to affirm our obligation to others, to protect others from harm's way, yet without either explicitly stating or conveying an onerous sense of guilt upon our children's shoulders, nor wishing to place any untenable burdens upon our children's backs. This is the challenge, the often unspoken blessing we carry within us for our next generation: On the one hand, we pray that they might never know the pain of anti-semitism, nor the plague of bias, or bigotry, nor the wrath of hatred, exclusion or discrimination. And yet, on the other hand, we pray in equal measure, that they might never be so removed from human suffering, or so innured from it, or that they feel so profoundly detached from it, or so completely removed from it ... that they feel virtually exempt from responding to it, either.

It is the blessing of remembering who we are, where we came from, the blessing of remembering -- and reminding ourselves -- before whom we stand, and all that, for which we stand.

But how do we inform the next generation of Jews to be empathetic, caring human beings if they haven't ever been directly impacted by any of the harsh winds of our people's journey? We need in short, to tell them our collective story, and to then also share our personal, familial narratives with them, as well. That is our job to do: Not to enshackle them by them, but to educate them; It is our sacred task, through the sharing of our stories, to teach them what happened to us, and why it should matter, to them.

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Why did we come to these shores, from so many different places? Who in our families came here, as immigrants, and refugees...and why? What did they hope to find here? What did they hope to leave behind? And what challenges, in this regard, did we face, in our own day? These stories, too, can be a blessing for the next generation.

For example, I remember two Congregant Hour speakers, from years ago, who shared the journey of their families to these shores, seeking refuge or relief from the darkness of the Holocaust, or the shadows of European anti-Semitism. Those parents and grandparents left everything they had and everyone they knew, for one simple reason: To build a better life for themselves...and for their children, in this land of liberty, a land free from religious bigotry and persecution. They worked hard days and long hours to make a living, and to create a lasting legacy for all those who would come after them. I recall a Congregant Hour speaker from the more recent past, a past president of this congregation, who spoke, publicly, for the first time, of the bigotry and discrimination he felt during his high school years, at an elite high school just down the road from here. His successes could neither hide nor diminish the pain he felt and endured. And tomorrow, during our Congregants Hour, you will hear from someone who may have lived a blessed life, but whose life -- as a Jew -- might not have always seemed like such a blessing.

These stories frame a connection to our past, and our future; they inform our desire to model, for our next generation -- for our children, a true sense of empathy: A sense that even though this may not have happened directly to you...that you, are connected to it; that you are here, because of our collective narrative, and its collective impact upon you.

Our sacred texts can help us in this accomplishing this goal. This is why the most important verse of the Torah comes from the Book of Exodus: And you shall tell your child, on that day, "It is because of what God did for me, when I was set free." It is our communal story, which we are instructed to tell in real time, as if it happened in a past so close to us, that it remains an active part of us: It is because we still recall the taste of tears of human degradation and suffering on our lips; it is because we still taste the harshness of the bitterness of servitude, of second-class citizenship, in our mouths; it is because we still feel the lashes of human suffering, upon our backs; it is because we continue to remember the misery of our bondage... that we are given both the standing, and the strength, to work to secure the safety, and the freedom and the liberty of others.

But this is not solely what our ancient texts, and the rabbis of old who cherished those texts, sought to teach us. It is also true of the great Reform Rabbis of a far more recent era, in places much closer to our current communities, and the places we call home. In turbulent times, they modeled these lessons for us, with courage and conviction. We were not always ready to hear, those lessons they tried to teach us, nor were we always willing to heed them, either. They were rabbis, for example, like our own beloved Rabbi Falk, who reminded us all of the difference between right and wrong, between right and might; they valued both human rights and humane righteousness.

They were rabbis like Rabbi Alvin Fine, my mentor, of blessed memory, who wrote:

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It is for us to seek the right way -- not merely the easy or the safe way. We who have known slavery and segregation -- poverty and persecution -- humiliation and homelessness -- but have emerged triumphant, must, forever, lead in the struggle against these iniquities whenever they inflicted upon any man or any people, anywhere.

In Judaism we not only make a sanctuary of the synagogue. We also expect the synagogue to help transform the world into a sanctuary. (VoR, p. 227-8)

They were rabbis who echoed the blessing of our prophetic call for social justice. And, make no mistake, we stand in the grateful shadows of these gentle giants. Their clarity of their vision, in this regard, was precise, and perfect: They could spot an act of social injustice, whether a mile, or even a world, away. They modeled this, for us.

Our heritage inform us of the lessons we are to teach; our rabbis instruct us and often inspire us as to why those lessons matter should matter so much to us; and we have the extraordinary opportunity, in with our lives, and within our own lifetimes, to model those lessons for all those who come after us. They are the teachable moments we create through personal example.

It is in that same spirit that I'm inviting you to travel with me to the Murfreesboro mosque, to stand by the side of our Muslim neighbors, who wish to affirm their First Amendment rights, to worship openly and safely, in their sanctuary, free from threats of vitriol... or violence. Even though our people, sadly, are no strangers to the very real and current threats of Islamic extremism from abroad, including those aimed at the State of Israel --here, in America -- we place the protections of the Constitution above our fears of the other, and we place the religious rights of others, among the highest values we cherish for all Americans. We do so not only for ourselves alone, but for all Americans, including those of other faiths, and those of other religious minorities...including those with whom -- on certain agendas -- we might dissent, or differ, or disagree. In fact, this is often the truest test of the application of our Jewish values -- do we apply them even towards those with whom we differ, or with whom -- in some measure -- we may dissent, or disagree?

To pray without fear of persecution; to gather as a community of faith, without fear; to teach tolerance, and understanding, even in the face of xenophobia, and hatred: This is our sacred duty. And if Jews are not forever in the lead in defending these rights...who will be?

Let us not forget: In a different time, in a different place, there were those who wished to deny us those very rights and liberties. Synagogues were destroyed, our sacred books and sacred scrolls were set ablaze...and the fires of that hatred... only served to fan even greater flames...which didn't end with the mere burning of books.

This is why I'm inviting you to join me on a journey to the Murfreesboro mosque: Because in a different time, but in this very place, even here, in America, and right here, in places in the South, like Atlanta, and Nashville, it was we who were not always welcomed by our neighbors. Our faith made those of other, more dominant faiths uncomfortable. Our very presence, and practices, made others suspicious of our motives. There were threats of intimidation; ugly

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incidents of hate inspired graffiti placed upon the walls of our sanctuaries to frighten us, and the attempts and actual detonations of bombs, designed to destroy us, and to silence us.

Elie Weisel once wrote: I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

Inspired by our tradition, reminded by our rabbis, we are a people that has always found our voice. We teach with empathy and model by example; and we choose selflessness -- always -- over silence.

On the wall just outside this sanctuary, hangs a mosaic, a magnificent tapestry of stone, one whose design continues to define a courageous statement made by this sacred congregation. It is a statement about who we were, and who we are; it was, and is, a statement about before whom we stand, and a statement about that for which we stand. It was, and is, a blessing, of sorts, to our children, and a reminder to us, of where we come from, and to whom we belong: A band of slaves, transformed into holy people.

More than merely displaying a beautiful mosaic, we set down before us, a powerful marker: A proud expression of our belief, that people of all races, of all faiths, of all ethnicities, and orientations -- people from all walks of life, even those that differ vastly from our own, or whose views disagree with our own -- all are created with equal worth --all are created in God's very image -- all are to be welcomed, right here, with us. All are worthy of God's blessing, as God's children, alongside our own precious children. It is that very teaching, that shared tradition, that same value base -- that is also part of the blessing which we extend, not only to our children, but to all of God's children, as well.

It is Kol Nidre night; it is also Friday night. Another Sabbath eve: Another chance to bless our children; and another opportunity, to ask to extend God's blessing, over all of us, as well. If you are so inclined, I'd ask that you find someone close to you, and place your hand either upon their head or shoulder. And I'd ask that you feel the loving hands of your parents, and grandparents -- even in memory -- as they rest upon you; that in a very real sense, you feel the tenderness of their touch, and the warmth of their loving embrace.. For they bless you, too. Even here, even now.

Please join me:

Always remember where you came from, and to whom you belong.
Always know before whom you stand, and that for which you stand;
And that you never make the journey alone.

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