

Blessing and Curses / Trust and Gratitude

By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana
Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783

בְּרוּךְ הַגֵּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בַּיהוָה וְהָיָה יְהוָה מְבִטְחוֹ:

*Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
Whose trust is the LORD alone.
[They] shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream (Jeremiah 17:7-8)*

This message from the prophet Jeremiah is repeated daily in the *birkat haMazon* – the blessing after every meal. Blessed is the one who trusts. Like a tree refreshed, drinking from a never-ending stream. Blessed is the one who trusts in G-d. When we trust, the prophet says, we carry a blessing – a hope, a gratitude in the Eternal. We have hope, when we trust.

I have been thinking about what we have learned in these past few years of pandemic. It is so good to be together, to return to this sacred space as we start the first day of the Jewish new year. New beginnings. New promise. Leave the past behind.

But we know we cannot forget what has passed. At the beginning of the pandemic, when we had no idea what we were facing or how long we would be isolated, we looked to the past to try to understand the future. But our own ancestors of a century ago gave us little to go on. As I have reported before, our Temple's archives makes almost no mention of the "Spanish Flu" pandemic which we know historically devastated Portland and the world. It seems they wanted to forget, even while it was happening. But we are not a people who forget. The Jewish people are a people of memory. As we enter this post-pandemic future – we are not yet there, but perhaps soon – I want to think of what we have learned. What did we gain, what do we lack?

It has been common to talk about polarization in our country – and indeed the divisions we see don't need to be spelled out. But polarization is not a new thing. We are many countries in this one United States. Our beliefs and our priorities differ, based on our own experiences, and increasingly, on where we live and what media we consume. It seems to me that what is lacking is not a common belief but a common trust.

Trust can be hard. Many of us feel burned. Who or what can we trust? We would like to be like a tree planted by the water – all of us drinking from a common source. But we carry too much uncertainty and suspicion. As we become isolated – something that began before but was heightened by the pandemic – we have lost much of that trust – that common stream of water which bound us together.

בְּרוּךְ הַגֹּבֵר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בַּיהוָה

Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,

Blessed is the one who trusts.

Our Biblical ancestors understood that need for trust and the value of community. The Torah¹ describes a powerful ancient ritual, which I believe encourages us to trust, and to have gratitude. All through a shared experience.

Thousands of years ago, when the Israelites were standing on the border of the Promised land, after a 40 year journey through the desert, Moses proclaimed a ritual to observe soon after they enter.

In the countryside near the town of Shechem, all the people were divided into their tribes. Then those tribes were split up into two groups: 6 tribes to stand on Mount Gerizim and 6 tribes on Mount Ebal. Between the two mountains, according to the Mishnah², the ark of the Covenant was placed, surrounded by the priests. The priests would then call out a series of blessings and curses for the people to hear – a powerful reminder to them of G-d's expectations for the society they were to create in the Promised Land.

I have been thinking about that strange and dramatic Biblical ritual and imagining how it can relate to us today as we emerge from all we have experienced during these past years of pandemic. The Israelites knew a generation worth of wandering, uncertainty, unexpected dangers and leaving the trauma of generational slavery. Over these recent few years, we have known isolation, fear, polarization and the politicizing of everything from masks to vaccines, from government to school policies. We have endured so much anger and distrust and separation. It can feel like we are standing on two different mountains – hearing the words of warning but understanding them in completely different ways. We cannot even agree on measures to keep each other safe.

As I was reading about this ancient sacred drama, I came upon a fascinating reinterpretation, contained in a somewhat obscure Talmudic text. The Jerusalem Talmud is an older, less studied version written in the land of Israel during the Babylonian exile³. In that Talmudic passage I read the rabbis challenging the traditional view of this biblical ceremony. The plain reading of the Torah text leads one to think that the curses were called out all together and then the blessings

¹ Deut. 11:26; 29ff; 27:12 ff

² *Sota* 7:5

³ The Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud was completed c. 350 CE and the Babylonian Talmud written down c. 500 CE and further edited over the following two centuries. See British Library <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/babylonian-talmud#:~:text=The%20Jerusalem%20or%20Palestinian%20Talmud,all%20codes%20of%20rabbinic%20law.>

followed. No, the rabbis said. The blessings and the curses alternated between the two: a blessing and curse, a blessing and a curse. Additionally, you would think from the Torah text that the people on one mountain responded “amen” to the blessings and those on the other responded “amen” only to the curses. No, the Jerusalem Talmud proclaims – all the people said “amen” to the both the blessings and the curses.

Now all this may seem rather like minor details – but I think it has something important to teach us today.

I think the rabbis reimagined the ritual because they had also experienced loss and tragedy; a realignment of their reality. The exile was a profound reshaping of the world as they had understood it. From the confidence of feeling that they were G-d’s blessed people, safe in their homeland, the rabbis had experienced curses out of their control: a foreign army destroying their Temple and their autonomy, exiling the majority to a strange land. The only response left to them was “amen.” Acceptance of what they could not change. The word “amen” comes from the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*. When we have faith, we trust. We trust that it will get better. Let’s try it: **Amen!** When we face challenges in our lives, sometimes the only response is to say: **Amen.**

And, we can imagine the rabbis also knew blessings - because life continues, even in difficult times. There were weddings, there were births there was joy among the sorrow. And the response to these was also “amen.” We will gratefully accept joy when it occurs, even in troubled times. When joy comes, we say “**Amen!**” We give an “Amen!” to life.

And so, the rabbis reimagined the ancient ritual to reflect their reality. When the curses were proclaimed all the people responded “Amen!” And when that curse was followed by a blessing, all the people, again, proclaimed “Amen!” We accept what is painful in life and we celebrate what is joyful in life. We say: **Amen!**

This is how I see us today. We have been through a historic experience – something which may take us years to evaluate. But some things we know now. We know that blessings and curses come to us in ways and times we cannot expect. We have seen and experienced them both in abundance these past few years. We have lost family and friends. We have lived in fear of a virus and isolated ourselves from the routines of work and school, family and community. And we have known moments of joy and celebration as well: engagements, wedding, babies, many new possibilities. How do we respond to the blessings and the curses? The rabbis tell us: by saying “**amen!**”

What does it mean to say “amen” to a blessing? Some blessings are grand, life-changing events: Our son recently became engaged to a young woman we love. Amen! I feel blessed to know this moment. I embrace it with gratitude. Amen to life’s blessings. Being grateful is its own practice and it is good to be reminded that we can’t always expect blessings, but we are grateful when they occur. Gratitude does not always come naturally – we have to cultivate it. We teach our children and our grandchildren to say “thank you.” But we don’t always

remember to do it ourselves. Judaism gives us rituals, blessings such as those before and after meals. בְּרוּךְ הַגֹּבֵר – blessed is the one who blesses – who gives thanks. **Amen!**

And, we know that life presents us with unexpected loss as well. We all have felt moments of curses when we feel the world and circumstances are aligned against us. I recently learned of the unexpected death of a childhood friend – someone younger than me - and the memories and loss are painful to experience. All I can say is “amen.” It is a reality and there is little to do. How do we respond to the helplessness of loss? With trust. It will get better. We are never truly left alone. And we need never be hopeless. בְּרוּךְ הַגֹּבֵר – blessed is the one who trusts. **Amen!**

Trust is not blind faith. But it is the belief, borne from experience, that these feelings of grief and loss will not consume us forever; that it will get better. Trust is to believe in the future, and in those who help us remember to live. Trust builds community and helps us share our burdens.

Last night, Cantor Cahana spoke about confronting unexpected loss and the trust in community to find understanding and support. The rabbis understood this reality and offer us a response. Standing on the mountains of blessings and of curses we all respond together “Amen.” Amen to the blessings, Amen to the curses. And we say it together. **“Amen!”**

It is not easy to find trust, to find hopefulness when there is difficulty. Trust takes confidence. But knowing that we are not alone, knowing that we can rely on others, knowing that we can be vulnerable and be held by community, allows us to trust in each other – to trust in the Divine Source. “Amen” is a cry of connection. We can be confident that we do not walk this path through the mountains alone. We trust in those who walk with us, and in the One who guides us. When faced with the curse we join in saying **“Amen!”**

When we practice trust we also learn not to limit ourselves to a small circle. We learn to open our hearts to the goodness of humanity – allowing others to trust in us and enlarging a circle of connection. The ritual between the mountains did not have just some people respond to the curses – all the community did it together. With trust, we share in each other’s burdens. We say: **Amen!**

And similarly when we experience blessings it is to be shared. “Amen!” we say with gratitude. It is beyond our deserving. We did not design it, or shape it. But we can accept it. We can acknowledge these moments and be grateful for them. “Amen!” is a communal cry to share our joy with others.

It is not easy to be humble enough to be grateful, to be courageous enough to trust. Gratitude and trust can be big emotions and can leave us feeling out of control – unless we are humble enough to accept them. If there is something we have learned from these years of pandemic it that there is much out of our control. Our science has developed amazing tools – vaccines, masks, communication tools to share knowledge of risk – but human beings sometimes reject those tools and give in to rumor and fear. And even with our mighty human-designed tools, we can be humbled by a mutating virus. To say “amen!” is not to blindly accept a so-called “fate.”

Jewish theology asks us to partner with G-d, to use our skills and knowledge to protect ourselves and each other. And while we are arrogant in the power of our skills, we are humble enough to know we cannot control everything. Saying “Amen!” to the curses is to acknowledge that while we are learning more and more – reaching for the stars – human beings remain limited. We trust that we will continue to get better, but know with humility that we are not there yet. We learn to be grateful for what we have and trust that it will get better. Amen.

Today, as we are emerging from a historic pandemic, trying to understand and put it all into perspective, the mountains of blessings and curses still stand before us and we walk through the valley. But we do not walk alone. Together as community we can support and love each other as we receive blessings and we endure curses. With gratitude and trust together, no matter what we face, we can resoundingly say: “**Amen!**”

בְּרֹחַ הַגִּבּוֹר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בִּיהוָה יְהוָה מִבְּטָחוֹ:

Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,

Whose trust is in the LORD

May we be humble enough to be grateful. May we be confident enough to be trusting. May we walk together between the mountains, having the courage together to say “**amen.**”