

Opening Our Eyes to Blessing

I am blessed that my family has discovered our own personal Garden of Eden. Nestled in the southwest portion of Colorado's San Juan Mountains is the town of Telluride where we spend time each summer. We hike, swim, play in Town Park, and strive to truly take in the breathtaking views only available in the box canyon where the town resides...surrounded on three sides by snow-capped peaks, even at the onset of summer. Each year I retake the same photographs of red rock mountains, aspen trees, and rivers flowing with fresh snow melt, all in the hopes that I can somehow take this place and these moments home with me. I know that my camera and I labor in vein...that these views are precious but fixed – they must remain there. I take the pictures anyway. I can't help myself.

And those who have been in my study here at temple, or in our home, know that I really have tried with all my might to infuse my Needham spaces with pictorial remembrances of this mountain town. Our kitchen wall contains one such photo, taken by a professional photographer some fifteen years ago. Standing at the end of the town's main street, he was fortunate enough to catch the entire town embraced by a beautiful rainbow. I have been blessed to witness much beauty in Telluride with my own eyes, but the rainbow...that had always eluded me. Perhaps this was a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

On this past summer's trip we experienced something we never had before...Colorado's monsoon season. It rained for some part of every day we were there.

On our final night of vacation, Michele and I were getting the kids ready for bed when I glanced out the window to see a long-awaited break in the darkness. The clouds split to let the sun peek through as it sank in the western sky. Could it be? I ran onto the patio, and my heart leapt as I saw half a rainbow peeking out from beyond the edge of the house next to ours. "Rainbow!" I exclaimed to everyone else in the condo. Knowing what I would want to do next, Michele snatched our two-year-old, Adam, from my arms and yelled, "Go, go, go!" I grabbed our camera as I ran out the front door and sprinted to the center of town to the same photographic vantage point as the picture that hangs on our kitchen wall.

The rainbow was perfect, embracing the vista of Main Street just as in the photos I'd seen. Strange things pop into rabbis' minds at moments like these. As I snapped off more and more shots with my camera, I thought to myself, "Is this how Noah felt when he saw that first rainbow in the sky? A sign of God's peace and presence with humanity?" I switched over from single shot to "continuous mode." "If I take enough of these, one of them will be perfect...I'll have this forever." I held down the button as the shutter clicked with rapid-fire succession. "The mystics taught that the rainbow Noah saw was actually God," I thought. What is it I'm trying to photograph here?

Back at our condo, a very different moment was taking place. Michele, still holding Adam, was repeating the same conversation over and over and over again. "Do you see it?" "Me no see it." "Can you see it, Adam? It's right there." "Me no see it." "Adam, right over there. The colors in the sky? You see? The arc? Red, like Elmo! Orange, like Zoe! Yellow, like Big Bird! See?" "No! Me no see."

Our Adam was a little microcosm of us all. His Hebrew name, *Adam*, literally means "Human Being." Indeed, in this moment, he represents all of humanity. Something awesome is happening right before his eyes, and he just can't see it.

Our Sages imagined what it must have been like for our ancestors who left Egypt to cross the Sea of Reeds, to walk on dry land between walls of parted waters. Has there ever been a grander miracle, a more awe-inspiring moment? And yet, our Sages imagine¹...two of the wanderers, Reuben and Shimon had a different experience that day. Discovering that the ground upon which they walked was still damp like clay as they made their way across, Reuben exclaimed, "What is this muck? We had clay back in Egypt! Why did we have to come all this way just to find more?" "I know," replied Shimon, "The gunk is in my sandals now. And these were brand new!"

¹ *Midrash Exodus Rabbah 24:1 (inspired by R' Lawrence Kushner's retelling of this Midrash)*

“Disgusting!” Reuben retorted, “it’s on my clothes now, and OH, COME ON, the donkey in front of me kicked mud up into my bag.” From one side of the sea to the other they didn’t ever look up. Just *k’veitching* – ceaseless complaint and distraction. They were never able to see the miracle taking place all around them.

Standing at the end of Main Street, the flash of another person’s camera sets off a spark in my mind. “I can’t fully photograph this experience, no matter how perfect the settings on my Canon SLR. Like all instances of great meaning and import, this is fleeting. It just won’t last forever. I can’t take this moment home with me. But I know what I am supposed to do right now. I lower the camera from my face, look up at the rainbow in the heavens and whisper, “*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, zocher ha’brit v’ne’eman bivrito, v’kayam b’ma’amaro.* – Blessed are You, Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills creation, You remember the covenant, You are faithful to the covenant, You keep Your promises.”

For two thousand years Jewish people have spoken this blessing upon witnessing the awesome spectacle of a rainbow...why should I be any different? Uttering these words aloud prompted me to be more fully present in the moment, absorbing its power without distracting thoughts of how my 8x10’s will look.

Back at the condo, the struggle continues. Our five-year-old, Mia, is trying to encourage her little brother now. “Right there, Adam. Blue like Cookie Monster. See it?” Her efforts aren’t helping. Then Michele, a gifted teacher and an even better mother, realizes that there may be a stumbling block in Adam’s way, something obstructing his vision. She takes him to the computer, directs the browser to Google Images, types in, “rainbow,” and clicks on the first photograph. “There Adam. That’s a rainbow. Do you see it in the picture?” He nods. Michele carries him back to the patio and points once again to the sky. “Can you see it now, Adam?” “Me see it!” he declares, his accomplishment drawing applause from his sister. “Me see it!” Poor little guy. He must have been so frustrated. Adam didn’t know what he was looking for. Do we?

Did you know that, while each rainbow appears to have seven distinct bands, there is actually a continuous color spectrum present within – an infinite number of hues? We only see seven distinct bands because these

are what our human eyes allow us to see. Our vision is limited, and thus our perception of the world is often incomplete as well. This holds true in so many realms of life when we constrict our field of view to the utilitarian, the convenient, the shallow or ultimately meaningless. Like our forefather, Jacob, who awoke from a dream and declared, "God was in this place, and I did not know it,"² we too are often emotionally, psychologically, spiritually asleep - unable to recognize holiness and wonder even when it's right before our eyes. In the words of poet, William Blake, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way."³ As a person is, so he or she sees.

Great 20th Century Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught extensively about the Jewish imperative to walk through life with a sense of "radical amazement." He noted that we all share a tendency to become inured to the wonders of our world. We take our surroundings, our resources, our very lives and the people in them, for granted. Heschel writes, "As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. [Hum]ankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is...a will to wonder."⁴

Why is this so for us today? In some cases, perhaps, because of life's comforts and conveniences...it is hard to view life-sustaining food as something remarkable when it pours out of our cupboards with endlessly renewable supplies nearby. So too, the pace of life can get in our way. I am not likely to be awestruck by great astronomical wonders or the subtle intricacies of a rosebud if I never stop to observe either. And, as Heschel notes, we know so much about the functioning of our world that we sometimes assume to know it all, thereby robbing ourselves of the joy which stems from being awe struck, baffled, curious, or astonished. When we fail to marvel at moments of potential holiness in our lives it is because guardedness is safer than openness, because self-concern casts a shadow over our place within the big picture. We miss our opportunities for wonder because cynicism is more comfortable than idealism, because disinterest is easier than engagement, or because the stoic and cerebral parts of ourselves have crowded out heartfelt emotion and belief. "There are only

² Genesis 28:16

³ letter, Aug. 23, 1799. The Letters of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1956).

⁴ A.J. Heschel, God In Search of Man, pp. 45-46

two ways to live your life,” Einstein is said to have taught. “One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Our tradition invites us to incline toward the latter by providing a ready-made tool for practicing the art of awareness, a system of blessings which serve as spotlights, illuminating particular moments, certain experiences, which are worthy of our attention and appreciation. In the words of my colleague and teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner, “Blessings keep our awareness of life's holy potential ever present. They awaken us to our own lives...With each blessing uttered we extend the boundaries of the sacred and ritualize our love of life. One hundred times a day, [our tradition asks us to recite a blessing.] Everywhere we turn, everything we touch, everything we see.”⁵

Our Jewish tradition is so very wise in this regard. Uttering a blessing elevates the ordinary to the extraordinary, the mundane to the holy. These words focus our attention on the moment at hand and invite us to pause, to recognize something sacred in what might otherwise be everyday routine. Before I shove food into my mouth, shouldn't I take a few seconds to give voice to the fact that this is a gift? Roughly one sixth of the world's population will go hungry today. I get to eat. Have I no appreciation to be expressed before this sacred act? We ought not take our reality for granted, so we bless this moment, raising it up in our consciousness.

And our blessings for various foods are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Knowing that we are like my son, Adam, unaware of the miracles that are taking place right before our eyes, Jewish tradition provides us with blessings to begin each day, thanking God for the fact that we've awoken to a new morning, that our bodies are still functioning, that our souls continue to animate us.

We are the inheritors of blessings for the events that fill those days: blessings for witnessing a large crowd of people or a friend whom we haven't seen in months. We have a blessing both for hearing good news and for hearing bad news...both are moments of import and meaning,

⁵ Lawrence Kushner, The Book of Miracles, p. 20

worthy of our more focused attention. Our Sages composed blessings for a person's healing and for families who have lost a loved one. We have blessings to recite before setting out on a trip and to speak aloud when we have survived a dangerous experience. We have blessings for bearing witness to natural wonders...upon hearing thunder or seeing a falling star. These are only a sampling of the ones provided by our tradition. But if our eyes are really seeking moments worthy of sacred attention, if we know what we're looking for, then we will surely recognize other times deserving of our blessing as well: when we complete a major project at work or at home, when our child accomplishes a new goal after struggling to do so, when someone we care about musters the courage to share critique with us openly and honestly.

To help us gain greater access to this spiritual practice, I have created a resource for us all on the temple website which contains many of the blessings that our tradition has to offer. You'll receive the link in next week's e-mail to our congregation. Familiarize yourself with the possibilities. Make yourself a wallet-sized card with three of your favorites so you have them handy when opportunity arises, or better yet, bookmark the link on your phone so you can pull all of them up anytime you need them. Uncomfortable with the Hebrew? Say them in English. And if you stumble upon a blessing-worthy moment or experience for which you don't have pre-composed words close at hand, then make up your own. They will count equally, both within, and on high.

Our tradition invites us to count the blessings in our lives, and to recognize them aloud, because each and every one of these experiences is passing us by and has the potential to inspire wonder. It won't last forever.

We cannot fully retain the feeling that comes with seeing spring's first blossom, or tearing a *k'riyah* ribbon while surrounded by a wall of comfort and support at a loved-one's funeral, or the moments when our child stands beneath the *huppah*. We aren't able to take the entirety of these moments with us. So, instead, we elevate them, bless them, uttering words that are like a snapshot for the soul, a recognition that this experience is holy – that inspiration, mystery, and God are in this place. Then we move on with eyes wide open for the next moment worthy of such significance and respect.

I returned to our condo, wet from the rain which had begun to fall once again. As I opened the door, Adam ran towards me and jumped into my arms. “Me see it, Daddy! Me see a rainbow!” I looked into his eyes...so filled with wonder...and whispered, *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha’olam, shehecheyanu, v’kiyimanu, v’higiyanu, lazman hazeh*. Blessed are You, O God, Holy One of Blessing, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for allowing us to reach this truly awe-inspiring time. Amen.

