

Spiritual Reflection on Blessings

This year we are focusing on the meaning of blessings in our lives. You will know from the High Holy Day liturgy that the Machzor (prayer book) is replete with blessings. We begin our Rosh Hashanah prayers with the Barchu, which calls us to worship; we say 'Praise Adonai, to whom all prayer is directed'. We conclude our Yom Kippur prayers with the Havdalah service, in which we utter a blessing that takes us out of High Holy Day mode, and back into the everyday world: 'Blessed is Adonai, who distinguishes between the sacred and the ordinary'. In between we recite blessings which give thanks for bringing us to this special set of days; blessings for hearing the sound of the Shofar; blessings for the giving of the Torah; blessings for peace; blessings for wellbeing; blessings for God's presence among us; blessings for our ancestors; blessings for the preservation of our faith; blessings for God's bestowing upon us laws and commandments that bring order and purpose to our lives. Many other kinds of blessings are uttered on the High Holy Days.

Just as we are expected to hear one hundred shofar calls on the High Holy Days, we are expected to recite one hundred blessings each day. If we pray on a daily basis this total is relatively easy to achieve: the morning service (Shacharit) features 47 blessings; the afternoon service (Minchah) has 19; the evening service (Ma'ariv) has 23. Eating a meal featuring bread involves at least 6; that leaves only five more to find!

For all of the above there are formulas – that is, forms of words that will convey the blessings to God, through prayer, in a language that is appropriate to that Divine entity. But what about the blessings that we direct towards one another? The traditional greeting at this time of year is 'May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year'. That's a nice thing to say, and much appreciated by the recipient! More important, demonstrative, and inspirational is the Priestly Blessing, from the Book of Numbers chapter 26 (which you will find below). At our synagogue I recite this triple blessing at the close of each of our services. Also, during Musaf (the additional service), those who by tradition belong to the Priestly Class (Kohanim) bless the people, as prescribed in the Torah. The Priestly blessing is also recited by the Reader in the repetition of the Amidah (standing prayer) during the morning service on a daily basis. That particular set of blessings has great power and meaning; it is referred to in Rabbinic literature as *nesiat kapayim* (the raising or laying on of hands). What happens is that those who utter the appropriate words place an onus on God to bless those at whom the intention is directed.

Kohanim, and indeed Jewish spiritual leaders like Cantors and Rabbis, utter the Priestly blessing because they are meant to represent the congregation in various ways, and should encourage God's blessing to be bestowed on the people. During the High Holy Day period, though, this expertise and responsibility are meant to be shared more widely with members of the congregation. If you look at pages 200-201 of the Machzor (Prayer Book), you will see a description of 'Blessing the Children'; many families do this every Friday night at the Shabbat table, but it is especially important to observe this ritual on the eve of Yom Kippur, before leaving the house for Kol Nidrei. It recalls Jacob's blessing of his grandsons, Ephraim and Menasheh (the two sons of Joseph), who are invited to take up special roles in Genesis chapter 48; Jacob says, 'By you shall the people Israel invoke blessings'.

The succession and direction in such blessings should not, however, be restricted to parents' blessing children. Not only do we all need blessings, but we can all facilitate the bestowing of blessings on our fellow human beings, and that is precisely what I would like you to do this year.

Your task falls into two parts:

1. **Bestow the Priestly Blessing** on members of your families, on friends, and indeed on everyone whom you believe merits God's blessing, between now and Yom Kippur. Remember: anyone can bless anyone else – so long as you recite the words with meaning! **We do not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews for this ritual: please do whatever feels comfortable and appropriate to you!**

2. **Write a few paragraphs**, on the attached sheet, about your own feelings and experience of blessings. What does blessing mean to you? When do you use blessings yourself? When do you feel blessed? How does God come into this? If you did bestow a blessing on someone else, how did this make you feel?

Please write out your thoughts on the attached sheets. You can either use this form in hard copy, or you can email it to me, at leonlitvack@mac.com

Please take your time over this. Please be as honest as you can, and please use your own words.

If you want to learn more about the Jewish understanding of blessings, please see the following biblical passages:

Genesis (Bereshit) 48

Numbers (Bamidbar) 6: 22-27

There are also numerous websites that address the Jewish understanding of blessings:

<http://www.jewfaq.org/prayref.htm>

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-priestly-blessing/>

<http://thetorah.com/birkat-kohanim-the-magic-of-a-blessing/>

http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/894569/jewish/The-Priestly-Blessing.htm

NOTE: DISCRETION WILL BE ASSURED! I WILL NOT READ OUT ANY NAMES, AND WILL NOT ATTRIBUTE ANYTHING I RECEIVE TO ANY SPECIFIC INDIVIDUAL!

You can email this form to leonlitvack@mac.com

or bring the hard copy with you to the synagogue on Friday 29 September (Kol Nidrei night)

We will hold a discussion about your answers on Saturday 30 September, during the time for Yom Kippur Minchah (4:30 pm).

With best wishes for a shanah tovah,

Cantor Leon Litvack

Blessings for the High Holy Days

You may bless someone of the same gender, or of another gender. We do not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews for this ritual: please do whatever feels comfortable and appropriate to you.

You may place your hands on the head or shoulders of the person on whom you are bestowing the blessings.

Reciting a blessing over a male:

יְשִׁימֶךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה.
יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ,
יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנְךָ,
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.

May ADONAI bless and protect you.

May ADONAI's countenance shine upon you and grant you kindness.

May ADONAI's countenance be lifted toward you and grant you peace.

May it be the will of God in Heaven that you be instilled with love and reverence;

May your eyes look straight ahead;

May your mouths speak wisdom;

May your hands busy themselves with mitzvot;

May your feet run to do the will of God in heaven;

May your livelihoods be assured, with contentment and relief, so that you may be free to serve God;

And may you be inscribed and sealed for a good, long life

Among all the righteous of Israel.

And let us say Amen.

Reciting a blessing over a female:

יְשִׁימֶךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּשָׂרָה רַבֵּקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה.
יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ,
יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנְךָ,
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

May ADONAI bless and protect you.

May ADONAI's countenance shine upon you and grant you kindness.

May ADONAI's countenance be lifted toward you and grant you peace.

May it be the will of God in Heaven that you be instilled with love and reverence;

May your eyes look straight ahead;

May your mouths speak wisdom;

May your hands busy themselves with mitzvot;

May your feet run to do the will of God in heaven;

May your livelihoods be assured, with contentment and relief, so that you may be free to serve God;

And may you be inscribed and sealed for a good, long life

Among all the righteous of Israel.

And let us say Amen.

