

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Naso

There are blessings everywhere we turn. Yes, sometimes, we do not see them; but they are there, just not necessarily always easy to see. I think, one of the main purposes of religious participation should be to gain help and support in making sure that they stay visible and accessible through celebration and through trauma. It may not make us more or less Godly, but affiliation with a group of people who share core values helps the world make more sense. Each tradition has a communal way of sustaining this support system, each has rituals that lead people from the mundane to the sacred, and each has some belief foundation upon which observance of these precepts hinge. In most cases, the most basic ritual that fulfills this need is prayer.

Prayer is a loaded word. In South Carolina, I met the "Wejus" prayer. "Lord we just want good health, we just want strength for little Timmy, we just want food and shelter for the poor. We just ..." In a Wiccan tradition, prayer is the attempt to hear nature in its glory and in its pain, committing to celebrating the first and healing the second. For some, prayer is the act of meditation, in an attempt to find some consonance with all that is beyond our own fragile personal being. When the Reverend Dr. King was marching for civil rights in Alabama, he called on his friend, Rabbi Abraham Heschel to help lead the way. Rabbi Heschel asked the seminary for permission to help lead prayer for social justice, which was granted. When he called from jail, days later, and was met with anger and astonishment, "You were supposed to be leading prayer for civil rights, not going to jail!" He responded, "I was, my legs were praying." For some, prayer is found in what you do more than what you say. For others, the words of a prayer lead one's heart to open, ears to unplug, and mind to expand in its ability to comprehend. This form of prayer is most common, and I think most misunderstood. I do not believe that blessings come or go because one attends a house of worship, recites a formulaic statement, speaks feelings from the heart, or prayed at all. I do, however think that our ability to look beyond ourselves to a much broader world in a moment of prayer helps to make us stronger, more productive, and more well balanced in life.

In this week's Torah portion, we confront one of the very few actual moments of prayer in the Torah. The Kohanim (high priests) gather and pronounce a three part benediction, the goal of which is to help ground people, help them recharge, and take the next step on their journey with greater focus.

"May God bless you and keep you." As we celebrate the victories in our lives and struggle through the challenges, we need to be reminded that the source of our creation provides for us all equally. In other words, remember that you are made out of the same stuff as everyone else. While politics and power may certainly color or impede the opportunities one may have in life, spiritually, we need to remember that when political power takes precedence over the dignity of others around us, we abuse each other and defile the source of divinity that we are supposed to share in - equally.

"May God's light shine for you and in that light, may you know God's grace." In our moments of great celebration, we often forget that we can only claim partial credit. Whatever we believe divinity to be, most certainly the atmosphere in which we find ourselves has volumes to say in how we perform and what we achieve. This atmosphere includes the people in our lives, the examples from which we learn,

the opportunities that present themselves, and then also our commitment to see the task through. In our darkest moments, we have to remember that even where we cannot see its light - the strength to survive is out there. That light often comes in the form of dear friends who show up at just the right moment to help remind us that this strength exists. I do not know how the system works, but I believe that we find ourselves connected in often uncanny ways. For the record, this is my explanation of how "angelology."

"May God be with you and grant you peace." May all that makes this world move, all that we can and cannot explain, continue to evolve in ways that help us to see the need to take better care of each other, continuing, almost vicariously, the divine work of creation. We do not think of puzzles as being complete until the last pieces are in place. As such, creation cannot be finished. There are pieces missing, and it becomes our job, as partners in finishing this puzzle to put the remaining pieces in place.

Ultimately, the blessings that abound are there for us to take and to use. They are the reminders of our own potentiality and the potential for the world. They take effort and work to fully blossom, but then, that is the nature of prayer. Our tradition teaches that prayer does not bring blessings; it gives us the power to engage and understand the ones that already exist. May we be equal to the task in garnering the blessings available for our own lives, and share them with others who need help in finding this focus and in mustering strength. Shabbat Shalom.