

Rays of Light Amidst the Darkness

During this pandemic, I have received several calls that have played out kind of along these lines.

“Hello, rabbi?”

“Yes, it’s so nice to hear from you; how are you?”

“Great! We have some good news!

“We are getting married; we are considering having a celebration in shul, we would like to hold the *aufruf* in the sanctuary?”



“That’s wonderful! Mazal tov! But, because of the pandemic, unfortunately, the sanctuary is being used by a family celebrating a bar-mitzvah so we can still celebrate your wedding, but we will hold that part of the celebration on Zoom. Is that OK?”



“Oh, Forget it. We don’t want to trouble anyone during the pandemic.”

This is the point where my heart sinks a little, but I stay in my compassionate listening mode.

“I understand. But I think holding an *aufruf*, the special aliyah even over Zoom will be really special, not just for you and your family and friends, but for our entire community, which could really use joy amidst all of these challenges.”

“Ok, rabbi, we will think it over....”

“Thanks, nice to speak with you. Let me know if you have any questions. And I hope we can still celebrate!”

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This week’s Torah reading, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, has the Israelites at the threshold of entering the land of Israel.

After wandering for 40 years through the wilderness, they are ready to move into the Promised Land, though their great leader, Moses, will not enter with them.

But like a great parent or grandparent, he sends them off with everything they need, a backpack of final teachings, a metaphoric water bottle for the



road ahead. He tells them: “*V’hayah ki tavo el ha’aretz asher Adonai Eloheikha notein lekha* – when you enter the land that Adonai your God is giving you as heritage.... (Dt. 26:1)”

Let’s think about what we might do when we reach a moment of blessing in our lives.

Well, once we get there, hopefully, we’d pause. At least, I’d like to think or hope we would. We might write notes of thanks, of appreciation to those who helped us get to where we are: to our teachers, our mentors, our parents and friends, our partners, and our children.

How did the ancient Israelites do this?

Once their farms were producing, they brought their best fruits in a basket to Jerusalem and recited a mini-history of



their journey. They expressed their gratitude for the blessings they had in their lives and they acknowledged all that their/our ancestors suffered and sacrificed to bring them to the land.

But the *parashah* does not end there.

It then goes on to a litany of *brakhot u’klalot* – blessings and curses.

Or as we might say these days: opportunities and challenges. Life is filled with challenges and opportunities, especially these days as we face the pandemic and a world riddled with deep problems and injustices. We need merely look around or turn on our TVs, computers, or phones.

But there are also opportunities, moments of blessing, sparks of light.

I remember studying this Torah portion as a youngster in *yeshivah* and I (all of 13 at the time in 8th grade) asked the rabbi why there were so many more curses than blessings? And it's not even close!

He answered that it reflected reality.

He said that life is hard.

I nodded sadly.

And then he concluded with a question to me: "David, which do your parents do more: do they tell you more often: TO DO something or NOT TO DO something?"

I thought for a split second before giving him the answer he was looking for "...not to do something...."



“Right,” he concluded, “so Moshe is warning the people not to mess around a lot more than telling them how they will be rewarded.”

I nodded my head again.

That was that.

But I have to admit.

I didn't like the answer back then.

And I still don't love that answer.

So today, I want to offer a different approach.

I believe the Torah mentioned many fewer blessings than curses, many fewer opportunities than challenges to remind us how precious blessings are.

They are rare and they do not come around every day.

And when they do, we should stop, pause, bring our fruits to the temple, and celebrate – even if it's in the middle of a pandemic.



Or, especially, if it's in the middle of a pandemic.

A blessing is a ray of light, it is a beam of hope that shines through the darkness. And when things are really dark (and we can all see that on

numerous levels right now), even just a small light shines with incredible brightness.

Think about when you are outside in the dark, and you shine even just a dim flashlight, one where the battery is going out, it still has great power to illuminate the dark.

Perhaps that is why during this time of year as the days are getting rapidly shorter – each week we are losing about a quarter of an hour, we start reciting a Psalm that opens with light.



It is my favorite Psalm, maybe because it is so beautiful or maybe because we started reciting it on my Hebrew birthday.

But either way, as we approach these days of awe – these days of deep introspection and self-transformation, we turn to this Psalm for support and strength. It opens with “*L’Dahveed – Adonai uri v’yishi mimi ira* – A Psalm of David: *Adonai*/the One Who is in All Places and Moments is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear?” (Psalm 27:1)

When we are afraid, when we are anxious, we are invited to think about rays of light, moments of blessing.

So, I invite you right now, here on Zoom, to close your eyes, take a deep breath, and think of a blessing in your life.

For what are you grateful? For what are you thankful?

What are the rays of light in your life?

Find those blessings.

Hold onto them.

Nurture them.

We cannot make all the challenges, the curses of this year go away, but we can hold each other, support one another and find blessing, even in the smallest glimmers of light.



Lest us practice that this year.