



“BLESSED AND SAFE”

It's been raining a lot - you may have noticed. It's been raining so much, in fact, that we had to bring Rosh Hashanah Under the Stars back under the roof last week. That was a bummer - the only time since we started that service 11 years ago. I want to acknowledge that in the scheme of things - as we watch the devastation being wreaked by Hurricane Florence, canceling Rosh Hashanah Under the Stars was nothing. Truly nothing. I hope that we will all send prayers to the people whose lives have been upended by the rain, the storm, and not just prayers but money too. And also, while it was bound to happen eventually, bringing RHUS indoors was also a great big bummer. And there's an interesting way that that bummer points to a narrative.

The narrative goes like this: For the last 11 years, people have said things to me like "God must have blessed Rosh Hashanah Under Stars again. God must have made it stop raining just in time. And my personal favorite "Rabbi, you made the rain stop! Good job"

The danger in the narrative is not that people think I can control the weather. Btw...I can't...and I don't actually think those people who say that think I can either...but in the line of thinking that says, "If things are good and the way we want them to be, we must be blessed. And if things are not good or not the way we want them to be, we must not be blessed." I don't buy it. I've been thinking a lot about this idea of blessing recently and I don't think that's how it works. (and I should say that I generally assume you have been here in the sanctuary for Rosh Hashanah and therefore have not heard my sermons from the Straus, but if you came over from the Straus you'll recognize much of this sermon. Feel free to migrate back there to hear Rabbi Busch's sermon instead.)

So back to this notion of blessing. We recited earlier in our service:

Yivarechecha... The blessing has three parts and a traditional translation in both Jewish and Christian contexts is -

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

Though I didn't understand it the same way then, my first memory of this blessing comes from 1983. It was a great year in Baltimore, I've learned, since the Orioles beat the Phillies in the World Series. Thanks Google. It was also the year of some memorable movies: Risky Business, Scarface, The Big Chill. The music was great too: Flashdance, Every Breath You Take, and Mr. Roboto. And it was the year of my Bat Mitzvah.

I remember a lot of random things from my Bat Mitzvah service and party. One moment I particularly remember is the blessing I received. The Rabbi put his hands on my head and not being so tall then - not like I am now - my nose was positioned just right for the sleeve of his billowing black robe. It was a hot September morning and his robe was heavy. The scent I received along with the blessing was not uplifting.

It was an imperfect blessing - or at least an imperfect experience of blessing. But it was a blessing nevertheless and one I sometimes think about as I get ready to bless our b'nei mitzvah. That thought is often followed by the hope that I have put on enough deodorant. As I reflect on that blessing, what becomes clear to me is that there is no such thing as a perfect blessing. A perfect blessing would only be possible if it were possible to do the thing that everyone wishes could be true when they say "God must have been smiling on Oregon Ridge." A perfect blessing would be able to move the hand of God, k'ilu, to sweep away the clouds and make it not rain on Erev Rosh Hashanah. And we all know that the world doesn't work that way.

I've recently learned a new interpretation/translation from my fellowship at IJS.

Yivarechecha...

May you feel Blessed and Safe
May you feel Luminous and Loved
May you feel Joyous and Whole

It is a powerful blessing - a blessing that invites us to orient ourselves toward the good, to find the good even when things are not as they should be or as we want them to be.

A Story:

Roz is sitting in a reclaimed school bus with a bunch of strangers bumping down the road to the Kennebec River for her first ever white-water rafting trip.

The guide stood swaying in the aisle of the bus, coaching us on what to expect:

'If you fall out of the boat,' she said, 'it is very important that you pull your feet up so that you don't get a foot caught in the rocks below. Think toes to nose.'

Balancing on one foot in the middle of the bus she attempted a demonstration. 'Toes to nose and then look for the boat and reach for the oar.'

Most of us had been on the road since 4am. We were sleepy and mesmerized by the swaying of the bus. "Toes to nose," I heard as I dozed. And then, "look for the boat"

By the time we arrived at the river's edge I had heard the two phrases so many times I felt slightly crazed. We gathered our equipment and stood in a circle for our final instructions.

"If you fall out of the boat what do you say to yourself?"

"Toes to nose and look for the boat." We chimed

Someone here is mentally challenged, I thought, as we climbed into the boat.

Not long into the trip, we surged into some CLASS 5 rapids. A wall of water rose up at the stern of the raft and I vanished as into a black hole. Roiling about underwater there was no up and down, neither water nor air nor land. There had never been a boat. There was no anywhere, there was nothing at all.

Toes to nose...the words emerged from a void. I pulled together into a ball. Floated toward the surface. **Look for the boat...**did that come from my head or was someone calling? The boat came into view and then an oar...**reach for the oar...**I did and found myself back in the boat, gratefully traveling down the Kennebec with a bunch of strangers in a spew of foam.

Psychologist Roz Zander tells this story in The Art of Possibility, a book she co-wrote with her husband Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston philharmonic. She says that when things are not as they should be, when it is hard or even impossible to feel the ground beneath you, when you are "out of the boat, you cannot THINK your way back in; you have no point of reference. You must call, she says, on something that has been established in advance."

I think we're out of the boat. Things are not as they should be and it is hard to find the ground beneath us.

There is enormous injustice and greed and willful ignorance in our world today. Young people have cancer and old people are abandoned by their families and black lives don't really seem to matter, and children can be ripped from the arms of their parents if those parents don't possess the right pieces of paper and a winner of the Nobel peace prize heads a country engaged in genocide and two different peoples claim that they were promised the Promised Land and how can their claims ever be settled now with all that's gone on?

Things are not as they should be.

I think this blessing is one oar that we might grab onto.

Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha - May you feel blessed and may you feel safe. While those waters churn, we have something established not just in advance, but from thousands of years of Jewish life, an oar to grab onto. Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha - may you feel blessed and may you feel safe.

To feel blessed is to experience the world as a place where it is possible to hold on, to swim through challenge and climb back onto a boat. When the rains come and threaten to drown us, feeling blessed is a way that we can re-orient ourselves.

Feeling blessed, feeling safe, does not require that the hand of God sweep away the rain clouds. It is a mindset, an orientation, a choice about how we will navigate our world. And what I have found helpful in choosing to feel blessed is to FEEL blessed.

So, I want to invite you to partake of an ancient Jewish spiritual technology mostly lost in today's synagogue Judaism. A meditation:

As you sit here, I want you to call to mind a moment in which you have known yourself to be truly truly blessed. It could be an hour, a week or a split second of your life story, but hold that moment. It could be a feeling you get from another person, someone who loves you; or a place that is sacred; something you did or something someone did for you. Feel it in your body, feel how knowing you are blessed, if even for a moment is warm and

comforting, like being held in a simple, loving way, a way that lets you soften - yivarechecha Adonai vyishmerecha may you feel blessed. May you feel safe.

These words, - may you feel blessed; may you feel safe - and when I say them to myself, May I feel blessed, May I feel safe, are the oar I have learned to reach for when the waters are roiling around me. They are the mantra I recite like toes to nose and reach for the oar.

I have written them on sticky notes that hang on my refrigerator because like the incessant repetition of toes to nose, they need them to come from someplace beyond conscious thinking when the waters start to swirl. When things are not as they should be, we all need something to hold onto. And when those words do come, they remind us of who we are and who we want to be. May you feel blessed, May you feel safe.

Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha - Is an imperfect blessing. It does not mean that you will have everything you want and it does not fix the problems of the world. And it also does not mean, you're blessed and safe, so sit back and relax. The opposite in fact, is the true quality of feeling blessed. When God chooses Abraham and says "Lech Lecha" Go forth, God promises "va-avarechecha - I will bless you...vheyeh bracha - and you shall be a blessing...[and a little later in the passage] v'nivrech uvecha - through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:2-4)

If we do not ourselves feel blessed, our very human instinct is to try and gather all the resources we can for US, not for anyone else. But if we do feel blessed, then we will be motivated to share our blessings because that is the very essence of blessing. It longs to be shared and acknowledged. It thrives and grows in community. Blessing, even imperfect blessing, brings more blessing in the world. Toes to nose, my friends and reach for the oar.

This New Year, as we all strive to navigate the rapids of our chaotic world, Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha so that we may all one day come to live in a world of blessing outside ourselves as well as within. May YOU feel blessed, May YOU feel safe.