

Taking in our Blessings

One night after evening *minyan*, I was discussing plays with a couple of members of the community. As we were describing some of the performances that some of our Emunah teens were in this week – I did get to see one, it was excellent – the term used to describe this drama was: “a straight play.”

It was interesting to note how these terms about plays – a “straight play” or a drama versus a musical – overlap with descriptors of sexual orientation: gay or straight. And thus, we reveal something of our hidden biases and our societal values.

Terms and names are part of our how we relate to ideas and people. Think of the Torah portions we are reading these weeks about Jacob and the names of these biblical figures.



Laban in Hebrew is Lavan, meaning “white,” or purity – which could be a sarcastic name, since Laban’s behavior does not reveal the most “pure” motives, deceiving his son-in-law-to-be Jacob into marrying Lia/Leah before Rahel/Rachel, as E.V. emphasized in her thoughtful *dvar* Torah.

Perhaps the most striking name is Jacob himself.

He is born holding the heel of his brother, Esav/Esau and thus is named Ya’akov, linked to the Hebrew word for heel, “*eikev*.”

In ancient times and today, “heel” does not carry positive connotations. To call someone a “heel” is to say they are crooked; they do not behave in morally upright ways.

Now, we know the trajectory of Jacob’s life and that next week, we will read about his new name “Yisrael/Israel,” symbolizing his own growth and transformation, but it is striking to see how this central patriarch is given such negative nomenclature at first.

* * *

While Jacob/Ya’akov may not be the most not be the most positive name, he is always surrounded by blessings. He desperately yearns for blessings from others and offers them to others.

Last week, we read the narrative about how Jacob and Rivkah/Rebecca conspire to deceive Yitzhak/Isaac into giving Jacob the firstborn blessing that was supposed to be given to Esau.

Jacob received additional blessings that are not as well known. Isaac blesses him again at the end of last week’s reading, which is striking since it comes right after the Jacob’s deception on Isaac. It makes us wonder whether Isaac really knew who Jacob was all along.

And blessings continue in this morning’s reading. After the opening vignette where Jacob dreams of angels, Jacob makes a vow, almost demanding God’s blessing and protection on his journey. And then next week, Jacob encounters a mysterious assailant, with whom he wrestles all night and when he has emerged victorious, he demands a...blessing.

It's a bit *hutzpah-dik*, a little gutsy, to demand a blessing even in that fraught moment.

What is behind Jacob's yearning for blessing?

What is the importance of the blessing and why are blessings highlighted so much?

* * *

To answer that, I want us to think about what a blessing means?

It is a way of acknowledging someone, appreciating them. When we want a blessing, it is because we may be afraid or feel alone or nervous. The blessing helps us feel less afraid, less isolated, more connected with others – the one who is blessing us – and through that person, we are connected to others, the entire world and God.

Blessings/*brakhot* help us feel more confident and less anxious. Blessings help us know that we exist, that we matter, that we can make a difference.

It is interesting to note that *brakhot* become a centerpiece of Jacob's life as his life closes with his blessing of his grandsons.

The practice of blessing children is still central to our tradition as we bless our children on Friday nights at Shabbat dinner.

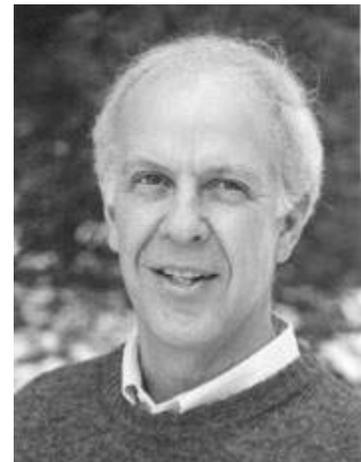
Brakhah – blessing, is connected to the word *barukh* that also relates to the word for knee, *berekh*. When we bless God in the *Amidah*, the standing central prayer in



Judaism, we bend our knees, lowering ourselves a bit to make room for the Divine and for the world beyond ourselves.

Brakhot are about acknowledging someone else; *barukh haba* – literally, “blessed is the one who enters” is how we say “welcome” in Hebrew. When we bless someone, we acknowledge their presence – something so basic to human interaction – simply appreciating someone else. When we say *barukh* – we are appreciating another person, God, the blessings in our lives.

As the educator Parker Palmer writes, “the human soul doesn’t want to be advised, or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed...exactly as it is.” We want to be acknowledged as we are. Those types of blessings are really helpful.



* * *

Perhaps as the younger son, Jacob felt underappreciated by his father who favored his older brother and thus struggled with his own self-worth. Thus, it would make sense for him to deeply desire blessing and acknowledgment from his father. And perhaps that is why he yearns for it so desperately.

Blessing is also about appreciating a moment and the goodness in a moment.

The Jewish tradition builds an entire system of blessings to help us appreciate the goodness in the world and in our lives. It invites us to pause before we eat, before we smell, as we see or hear wonders in nature, appreciating their power and grandeur.

Far too often, we, in the modern world, seem to be oriented to look at the world through a critical lens, one that is comparative and harsh.

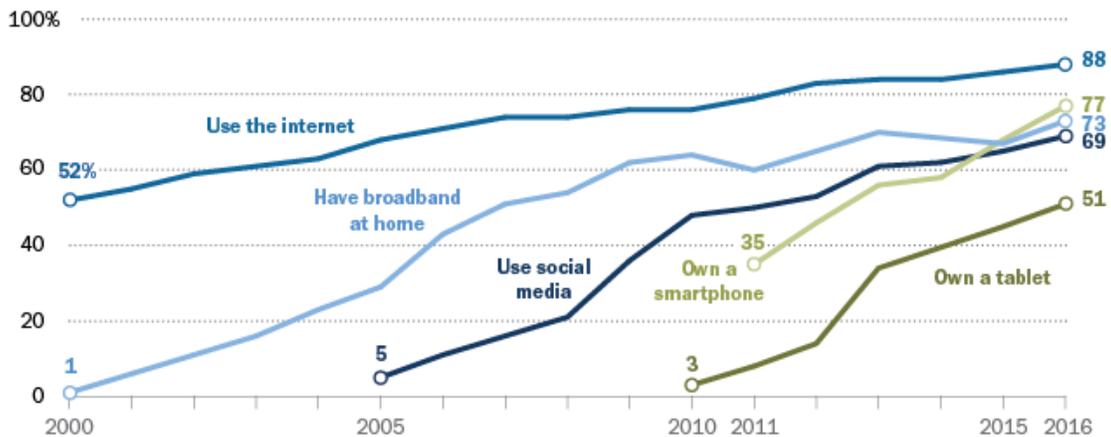
We look to see what is wrong with something, rarely pausing to see the good, to see what is right. That sets up a dynamic where negativity, harshness, critique can become the dominant trope.

Sitting in several meetings this week, I was struck by the difference. In the meetings where people paused to state what was good, even as they offered suggestions for change, were qualitatively more productive than those that drove straight into critique.

I know that years of being trained to analyze texts and situations sometimes leads me to look for what is wrong rather than what is right. And it may be that our scientifically oriented education has made us look for that as well.

The evolution of technology adoption and usage

% of U.S. adults who ...



Source: Surveys conducted 2000–2016. Internet use figures based on pooled analysis of all surveys conducted during each calendar year.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Perhaps the modern world with its fast pace and its relentless rate of technological change has pointed us toward a “how can we make this better” mentality. But that has come with a cost – it has moved us away from blessing. From sitting with the good. Some of us are more comfortable being critical than complimentary, more comfortable being harsh than holy, and more comfortable breaking things down than blessing them back together.

Judaism invites us to pause, to appreciate the wonder of the world around us, as Jacob does when he wakes up from his dream of the angels on the ladder. “*Akhen, yeish Adonai bamakom hazeh, va’anokhi lo yadati* – wow! God is present in this place and I was unaware of it!” (Gen 28:18)

Writing some 2,000 years ago, the rabbis of the *midrash* ask what was so powerful about this experience for Jacob? They answer that he was able to take a step back and see where he was, the big picture. Instead of merely seeing his plight – his being forced to run away from his brother to save his life and now finding himself sleeping on a rock on his way to a strange place



where he does not know what will happen next, he pauses and sees the positive. He imagines a better future, dreaming of the Holy Temple, the *Beit Hamikdash*, understanding his life in the context of a larger narrative.

I would argue that it is in the deepening of the moment, in Jacob's ability to appreciate the good – even in an moment of uncertainty – that is the best teaching for us to take to heart.

Let us hold onto moments of blessing, truly locking them into our minds. Take the extra time to pause in a place of connection allowing ourselves to be more aware of how that feels. Try not to move out of that place too quickly, retreating to a more negative orientation.

That may not always be easy to accomplish, but it can create an entirely different experience. Let us be like Jacob who sought to deepen moments of appreciation, moments of blessing.