

If you can start the day without caffeine or pep pills,
If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
If you can resist complaining and boring people with your
troubles,
If you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for
it,
If you can understand when loved ones are too busy to give
you time,
If you can overlook when people take things out on you
when,
through no fault of yours, something goes wrong,
If you can take criticism and blame without resentment,
If you can face the world without lies and deceit,
If you can conquer tension without medical help,
If you can relax without liquor,
If you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
If you can do all these things,
Then you are probably the family dog.

(Tim Brownson based on Jack Kornfield's version)

We all need a little help, don't we?

These are very challenging times. We look around the world and see hatred and violence. There's the relentless drumbeat of technology, the pressure of constantly trying to adapt to a rapidly changing world. . . . Thank God for Yom Kippur. For a day, we just get to deal with ourselves: to look inside, before we go out into the world again, spiritually renewed.

And yes, we all need a little help. In Judaism, help comes in form of blessings. Today I would like to talk to you about a blessing that percolates through Yom Kippur and the Jewish holidays.

I rediscovered this blessing on a recent Jewish spiritual retreat. Every day, I, along with 40 other rabbis and cantors, practiced a daily meditation on these words. And this blessing practice followed me home to Marin. Now it enhances my own praying. It reconnects me to what is most important in life.

Mr. Spock used to spread his hands out: "Live long and prosper," he would declare. Leonard Nimoy, of blessed memory, played Spock. I have to laugh. At Jeff's and my wedding, my father-in-law Jack, raised a toast to Jeff and me: "Live long and prosper." Then, he attributed these words to Star Wars, not Star Trek.

Leonard Nimoy remembered being in shul as a kid, learning how to spread his hands in the shape of the Hebrew letter shin.

יברכך ה' וישמרך

יאר ה' פניו אלך ורחמיך

ישא ה' פניו אלך וישם לך שלום

May God bless and keep you

May God shine God's face upon you and grace you

May God lift God's face to you and grant you peace.

The blessing is said over a couple under the wedding huppah. It is said Friday nights and holy days as parents place their hands on their children's heads.

In Fiddler on the Roof, the song "Sabbath Prayer," is based on these biblical words. You know it.

May the Lord protect and defend you.

May the Lord preserve you from pain.

Favor them, Oh Lord, with happiness and peace.

Oh, hear our Sabbath prayer. Amen.

On Yom Kippur, the blessing is chanted many times in the Amidah. It is clearly a very significant part of prayer. But what does it really mean? We read it in the mahzor, but can it penetrate our hearts? Can it ground us in our world, in a world that is often chaotic, and at times, downright scary?

When I am not sure what to do next, and I feel doubt and uncertainty, when I feel the earth move under my feet, I turn to six words from this blessing on this card:

May I be blessed.

May I be safe.

May I be luminous.

May I be loved.

May I be happy.

May I feel peace.

It opens my heart and quiets my mind: six words [indicate the card] to tuck into your heart, to transform you; six words to turn back to God, to reconnect to what is holy.

It begins: May you be blessed - 'יברכך ה'. Many of you know about bowing in gratitude. It's a part of Asian culture. The Hebrew word for blessing comes from the same Hebrew word for "knee". Blessing is bowing in gratitude. That's

why the prayer leader bends the knees, bowing on the word, "barukh." Barukh Atah Adonai. . . May I feel blessed.

It sounds so easy, but it's so not. We are pulled in many directions. How do we live each moment? How do we see the blessings that are right there?

True story: A woman fasted and prayed on Yom Kippur. . . She left shul, walked across the street - boom - she was hit by a car. Thank God, she survived. She goes to see the rabbi saying, "Rabbi, on Yom Kippur, I fasted and prayed. Then I was hit by a car?"

The rabbi said, "Good thing you prayed. You could've been dead."

The rabbi was saying, "Bow in gratitude for what you have. You are alive, you survived. You are blessed."

We Jews have blessings for everything including going to the bathroom, because Judaism knows that when things work, it's a miracle. Our bodies open at certain times, close at other times. If this doesn't happen, we notice.

לברכה means "for a blessing." But Hasidic tradition says: read it so it means "לב רכה - a soft heart". Walk in the world with a soft heart. A soft heart takes in blessings.

Debbie Friedman, our great Jewish songwriter, said it best. She took the words from Genesis, out of God's mouth, and

set them to music: "you shall be a blessing and you shall be a blessing, and you shall be a blessing, l'khi, lakh."

May I be blessed. May those around me be blessed. May you be blessed.

The second part of the blessing: May you be safe - וְיִשְׁרָךְ - Is this even possible? In France, New York, Sandy Hook, San Francisco, can we ever be assured that we are safe? Bad things happen to good people. Why did the rabbis put these words from the Torah in a blessing?

The book of Job (19:26) says: we come to know God through our bodies. Our bodies don't lie. We know tension, nervousness, fear. The more fear we feel, the less aware we are of our blessings. Feel safe by counting your blessings. Release fear and see life as it is now. May you be blessed, may you be safe, and may those you love feel safe.

Light - may God's light shine on you - ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ - the third part of the blessing: Light means creation. We are to give off light wherever we go. We are to be a light unto the nations. Think of it like this: may you be luminous.

How are we luminous? When we first discover our own inner light. The book of Proverbs (20:27) says: God's light is our soul - נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם נֵר ה'. When we find our own light, we

shine forth out into the world. May you be blessed. May you be safe, and may you be luminous and spread that light to others.

May God grace you - טַיַּיִן. What is grace if not being loved? May you feel loved. Focus on those who love you. Are they here? Are they far away? Did they leave this world, yet you still feel their love? Or are we so busy and get so caught up in our lives, and forget we are loved? Judaism says over and over that God loves us - we say it before the Shma: God's love is great and eternal. Community exists so that no one should feel unloved or isolated. We, as a community take this love, turn it out to the world, a world so desperately in need of our love. May you feel blessed, and safe. May you feel luminous and may you feel loved.

The fifth part of the blessing: May God lift God's face to you - ה' פָּנָיו אֵלַי. My teacher, Rabbi Bendat-Appell, translates it like this: May you be happy. Yes, happy: deep and abiding satisfaction: content with what we have, despite the challenges. . When we feel blessed and safe, luminous and loved, then we have a shot at being happy. Think about Yom Kippur - it's the most joyous day in the Jewish year. No eating, drinking, sex - how could this be? But at this moment, we have all we need: air to breath, community around us, this moment to live. When that is

enough, we can be happy. May you be blessed, and feel safe, may you feel luminous and loved, may you be happy.

And finally. . . May you feel peace - םלש ךל םשׁו. It's a beautiful summary: If you feel blessed and safe, luminous and loved, happy, then you can feel peace. םלש not only means peace, it means wholeness. That's really what this day is all about. We can complete the circle of teshuvah and forgiveness, we can gain a part of our soul back; the part that has been leased out to anger, resentment and hurt. We can release these tenants from the chambers of our heart. We can feel peace.

In a harried world, it's a tall order to live out this blessing. That's why it lives in so many places in Jewish tradition. Seek them out and hold them close to your heart. Here are three ways:

Pray in Community - Soften your heart, accept prayer, especially when the prayer leader offers the priestly blessing. He or she prays for you, bows to God for you, for me, sending words of blessing to us all.

Bless children - Parents you have a right and a duty to bless your children. When the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, the rabbis took the power to bless and gave it to parents. If you have children, bless them. If your

children are grown, call them Friday afternoons before Shabbat, and offer this priestly blessing.

And finally, put the blessing in front of you - When blessings are a part of you, you draw upon them at any time. On your way out, take one of these cards with you. Put in your wallet, in your car, your purse, or somewhere else you'll see it every day. And when you need a blessing, take the card out and meditate on these ancient words: May I be blessed, may I be safe, may I be luminous, may I be loved, may I be happy and may I feel peace.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah.