THE CURSE OF BLESSINGS
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What's the best terrible thing that's ever happened to you?

Is it some food you thought you hated, but someone made you try it and you liked it? Or did you have to go somewhere to which you desperately wanted not to go, but someone made you go and you liked it?

For me it was Jewish summer camp. I hated the idea of going away to a summer camp for four weeks in the Pocono Mountains of upstate New York and studying Judaism. No one made me go. It wasn't that my parents sent me off to go find God. No, what made it so horrible is that I chose to go, not for the Judaism but the camp. I wanted to be a leader in my youth group, BBYO – B'nai Brith Youth Organization and to have even the slimmest chance of being elected I would have to go through the crucible of the four-week Kallah/convention program with its rabbis, daily minyan, Hebrew classes and Israeli dancing, oh did I hate Israeli dancing.

I hated Kallah, so much so that I wrote a letter telling all my friends back home how awful it was. The camp read my mail, we do that at camp, I know mail is sacred, but hum a few bars of "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah" - every camp director who wants to keep his or her job will screen the mail to see what's going to be the source of the next phone call from somebody's Jewish mother.

They read my mail and here's the worst part: they sent me to the rabbi. Well more accurately they sent the rabbi to me. Rabbi Bruce Aft, he was a rabbi AND a semi-pro baseball player, a pitcher. At the time I aspired to be the next Johnny Bench; I was a catcher for my high school baseball team.

Rabbi Aft didn't even try to hide it, "Danny," he said, "I read your letter, let's. Lets go have a catch and talk."

So we did, everyday after Israeli Dance…; I wish it had been DURING Israeli dance.

You learn a lot about a person during a game of catch, the conversation goes back and forth just like the baseball.

I learned what a rabbi really does, pretty much everything. I learned that what he loved most about his job was hearing people's stories. I learned that he wasn't sure he believed in God, at least not the God I learned about in Hebrew School. Learned that Judaism was a way to live a life of meaning, and when you're a 15-year-old boy trapped between childhood and adulthood, meaning was all I was looking for.

You know how the story ends: I became a rabbi. You know who signed my ketubah, the? The rabbi who was a pitcher, Rabbi Bruce Aft.

Jewish summer camp, Israeli dancing, conversations with rabbis don't really come close to being the worst things a person can experience. But suffering is suffering. And learning to handle life's difficulties with grace, to even find ways to be grateful for the goodnesses that still remain, these are among life's greatest challenges, and most powerful lessons. It is what makes us human.

"The Curse of Blessings." a story written by Rabbi Sheryl Lewart (from a book called Blessings for Life's Journey) says the following:

Once upon a time, there was an Officer of the Law. A newly-minted graduate of the academy, he was filled with pride, dressed in his crisp, blue uniform, adorned with brass buttons, gold epaulets, and a silver pistol at his side. But the young officer, also filled with self-importance, was arrogant and cold-hearted.

One day, while walking his beat, he heard a commotion in an alleyway. Stepping into the darkness, he saw a man dressed in rags. "Come forward," he commanded. But the man did not come forward. "I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you to come forward!" The man still did not move. Instead, he spoke, "I just don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"Do with me?" the Officer replied. "Do with me? You don't do with me! I do with you! I am an Officer of the Law and I order you to come forward."

"Ahh," said the man in rags, "now I know what to do with you," and as he spoke, he drew a knife from his waistband. "Now I know exactly what to do," and without another word he moved to attack.

The Officer drew his gun in defense. "Stop that!" he ordered. "Put down your knife right now or someone is going to get hurt." But the man in rags continued moving forward. "Stop!" he said again, but to no avail, and as the man in rags thrust his knife forward, the Officer of the Law cocked his gun and prepared to pull on the trigger.

In that moment, just as the young officer pulled the trigger, all became silent and still. Suddenly frozen in place, he could not move. But he could hear. And what he heard was the man in rags saying this: "I am leaving you – but as I do, I place upon you the Curse of Blessings. The Curse of Blessings means that every day you must offer a new blessing, one you have never spoken before. On the day you do not offer a new blessing, on that day you will die."

And then all returned to normal. Except the man in rags was gone. The Officer of the Law's gun fired harmlessly into the alleyway wall. The officer lowered his gun, wondering what he had just seen and what he had just heard. "I must have imagined the whole thing," he thought.

It was late, and the sun was setting. The Officer felt his body growing cold. Did the man in rags exist? Did he really speak those words? Was the Officer's life leaving him?

In a panic, he blurted out a blessing: "Thank You, O God, for creating such a beautiful sunset." At once, he felt warmth and life flow back into him, and he realized, with both shock and relief, that the curse was real.

The next day, he did not delay. Upon waking, he offered a blessing: "Praised be the Source Who has allowed me to awaken this morning." His life felt secure the entire day. The next morning, he blessed his ability to rise from his bed; the following day, that he could tie his shoes.

Day after day, he named features that he could bless:
that he could take care of his body,
that he had teeth to brush,
that each finger of his hands still worked,
that he had toes on his feet and hair on his head.
He blessed his clothes, every garment.
His house, the roof and floor, his furniture, every table and chair.

One day, running out of blessings for himself, he began to bless others. He blessed his family and friends, fellow workers, and those who worked for him. He blessed the mailman and the clerks, firefighters and school teachers. He was surprised to find they appreciated his blessings. His words had power. They drew people closer. He became known as an unusual Officer of the Law, one who brought goodness wherever he'd go.

Years passed, decades. The policeman had to go further and further afield to find new sources of blessing. He blessed city councils and university buildings, scientists and their discoveries. As he traveled throughout the world, he grew in awe of its balance and beauty and he blessed that. He realized that the more he learned, the more he had to bless. His life was long, and he had the opportunity to learn in every field.

He passed the age of one hundred. Most of his friends were long gone. His time was now devoted to searching for his life's purpose and the one source from which all blessings flow. He had long since realized that he was not the origin but merely the conduit, the channel, and even that realization was welcomed with a blessing that sustained him for yet another day.

As he approached the age of one hundred and twenty, the Officer decided that his life was long enough. Even Moses had lived no longer than that.

So on his 120th birthday, he decided he'd offer no new blessing and allow his life to come to its end.

All that day he recited old blessings and reviewed all the gifts he had received throughout his life.

As the sun was setting, a chill settled into his body. This time, he did not resist it. In the twilight, as his breath grew shallow, a familiar figure appeared — a man in rags.

"You!" whispered the Officer of the Law. "I have thought about you every day for a hundred years! I never meant to harm you. Please, forgive me."

"You still don't understand," said the man in rags. "You don't know who I am, do you? I am the angel who was sent one hundred years ago to harvest your soul. But when I looked at you, so arrogant and cold, so pompous and full of yourself, there was no soul there to harvest. An empty uniform, that's all you were. So I placed upon you the Curse of Blessings, and now look what you've become."

In an instant, the Officer of the Law understood all that had happened. Overwhelmed, he said, "You, my friend, have been my greatest blessing."

The man in rags replied, "Now look what you've done. A new blessing!" The Officer of the Law and the man in rags looked at each other, neither knowing what to do.

Sometimes we have a million blessings and can't see any of them. And sometimes, when blessings are in short supply — that's when we rise to our very best, seeing the most important blessings of all, and giving thanks for our great fortune.

Among the many horrible and tragic things that have happened in this past year, the mass shootings in America's schools have been the most difficult for me to bear. As a parent of three school age children, who but for the good fortune of coming to Canada five years ago would be in those classrooms, doing active shooter drills, god forbid hiding in utility closets or barricading classroom doors, as a parent, those shootings are soul shattering.

But you know what is soul restoring, the hundreds of thousands of children that marched through the streets, that called upon the national conscience, that demanded the shootings had to stop. They are trying to wake the world, to gun violence, climate change, LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights, civil rights, human rights and one day I believe they will.

The trick, of course, is to acquire this sensitivity without having to endure tremendous hardship.

At Mount Sinai, the Torah tells us, God instructed that we should never make gods of silver or of gold (Ex 20:20). In a collection of midrashim on the book of Exodus called the *Mekhilta*, our rabbis interpret "gold and silver" to mean life's best moments. "When happiness comes," they teach, "give thanks. But when things get tough, give thanks then as well."

The rabbis probably didn't mean we should be happy when we're sad, but that we should remember, even when we're sad, that life has had its wonderful moments and, if we'll open our hearts, we can have wonderful moments again. We can find meaning in the struggle.

What blessings don't you see? Take a moment think about your curses that are actually blessings, turn to the person near you, if you're brave enough share what you're thinking about.

[TAKE A MOMENT]

The New Year is here. Time to reflect on the past and resolve for the future. In this New Year count your hardships, challenges and curses, count them all as blessings…for they will end up teaching you. They are just another way to remind us that life is filled with opportunities in which such curses can become blessings, where there can be a silver lining in a tarnished experience. Keep your eyes and your hearts open every moment of every day in this New Year so that you see the blessings that surround you, some are right before you very eyes. Some, I hope will read this sermon after the holidays, thank you Rabbi Aft for saving me from Israeli Dancing and my own cynicism and despair. The people in our life, past and present, they are blessings too.

FOLLOWING SERMON:
To help anchor the message of my sermon this evening I have prepared for you and printed these blessing cards you can carry in your wallet or purse. Take a few, use them to help notice the blessings that surround you, hand them to a friend to help them see that they too are surround by blessings and goodness, even when we are struggling, even when things seem helpless and bleak. They don't need to be, they have you, you have each other – together we can see the blessing that escape us everyday.

**B'shem Omro: this sermon is modeled after a similar sermon delivered by Rabbi Billy Dreskin at Woodlands Community Temple in White Plains, NY, May 2018*