COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

"Once there was a poor man who thought it was too bad that he had to go about begging for bread, and he complained about it to God. With that, a hump grew on the old man's back, and in addition to the hump, a man grew there too, and the man had a mouth as well, and each time the beggar tried to eat a morsel of bread, the man on his back snatched it from him.

At this the beggar prayed, "Neither erase, O Lord, nor write. Please just let things be the way they were."

I have been thinking about the prayer offered by the old man in this Yiddish folk tale, and how in its simplicity it is the basis for so many of our prayers. So many times we have prayed to God simply for life to return to how it once was. How often have we prayed for things that we used to have but no longer do? We pray for health that has escaped us, we pray that the freedom of our youth be restored, that the

security of our previous job be renewed, we pray that the waistline of summers past be given back to us. In all these prayers we are not asking God for something new, we are not consulting God on how we might proceed with our life, a decision or a crisis; we simply ask God to give back to us the blessing, and way of life that we once enjoyed. It is the most basic formula for our prayer, occupying countless moments in our day, our week, our year, and it is the most difficult prayer to endure when it seems to go unanswered. Dear God, why can't things just go back to normal!

I don't pretend to have the answer to this prayer. The explanation for why something attained through hard work, integrity, and dedication to principle is taken away from truly good and deserving people, has always eluded me. But what I can offer is a teaching from the Jewish tradition that has helped me, as I encounter those moments in my own life and the lives of my congregants, those moments when it seems life is just a series of hardships and trials without end.

In our tradition every individual from Rabbi to student, from the very old to those just old enough to understand is obligated in the fulfillment of the commandments (Mitzvoth). These commands, in our counting, include not only the ten given to Moses at Mt. Sinai but also the additional 603 found elsewhere in the Torah. As modern liberal Jews we do not accept all of these commandments as binding upon us in this time, and indeed some of them are impossible to fulfill because the rituals associated with them are no longer physically possible, yet for even those we are still obligated to study and understand all of the commandments of our tradition and observe those which appeal at least to reason, if not also to sensibility.

The 613 Mitzvoth involve religious and civil obligations, they address the most highly ethical matters of justice and truth, and the most practical matters of how to dress and what to eat. Maimonides grouped them in two categories, *Mitzvot S'chlot*, those that make good common sense and

Mitzvot shimiot, those that provide spiritual fulfillment. In all of these commandments one in particular has always been of great fascination to me, not because it is greater than all the rest, for part of the wisdom of Judaism in my opinion, is that all Mitzvoth are considered equally important. What makes this particular Mitzvah so uinque is that it cannot be placed entirely in one category or the other, but by definition must occupy both our moral and spiritual experience. The commandment I am referring to is, "Every Jew is obligated to recite at least 100 blessings a day."

The commandment is not specific as to which blessings should be recited every day, only that the individual should aspire to recite a least 100. There's an old joke about Jewish practice that we have a holiday for everything. I think in many ways this is true, when you are around for also long as we have been you acquire lots of things, one of those is certainly holidays, and the other is blessings. In Judaism we truly do have a blessing for everything, and if we can't find

an appropriate one then our tradition demands that we create one. Jewish blessings fall into three categories: First blessings for ritual acts like sanctifying the Sabbath day, or kindling the holiday lights. Second, blessings for daily activities; such a eating, sleeping, and study; third, and by far the largest category of blessings in Judaism, are those that we invoke upon witnessing the marvel, wonder and beauty of God's creative power. From the birth of a child, to seeing the ocean for the first time, the Jew is commanded to acknowledge God's creative role in the formation of the universe as it unfolds before our eyes. This moment is acknowledged and sanctified by the recitation of a specific blessing, and it is these blessings, counted along with all those of the other two categories that permit one to attain the goal of 100.

It is not an easy thing to recite 100 blessings a day, it requires one to constantly be aware of his or her environment and God's role in it. But through the process of

blessing and sanctifying moments in our daily routine one becomes acutely aware of just how precious life is, how wonderful it is to live in a world of such miracle and beauty. At the end of every day, whether I have said 50 blessings, 100 blessings or 200 blessings I appreciate all that I have blessed, and I am acutely aware of the privilege of life even in the face of hardship, and disillusion.

The sages teach that one who enjoys the fruits of the earth without saying a blessing, it is as if that person has stolen from God. So often we are like the old man in the story, constantly asking God to make our lives better, to fulfill our every desire and want, yet in doing so we often fail to observe, count and acknowledge the blessings we enjoy everyday. Imagine for a moment how happy you would be if everything that you had was suddenly taken away from you, and then given back. Sometimes we need to stop and count our blessings, it gives perspective to both the joys and the

sorrows of life, and most assuredly it provides direction for our prayers.

This Wednesday night as you gather hopefully with family and friends around your seder table you will say dozens of blessings, a whole book of blessings, four alone over wine, not to mention those over Matzah, bitter herbs and parsley. Those blessing are important, it wouldn't be a seder without them. But the true blessings of the evening are not those in the book they are those sitting around the table and the blessed memories of those who no longer sit there but whose presence if still so strongly felt. Wednesday night and every night, count the blessing in your life, my guess is if you take the time it is much more than 100, my guess is they are far more than you could ever count, but try anyway, simply to be able to count your blessing is a blessing in itself.