

V'ZOT HAB'RAKHA – THIS IS MY BLESSING
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Moses' last speech to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land began with the words, *V'zot Hab'rakha* – "This is the Blessing." I am not Moses, yet, like him, I am completing my years with you. As Moses did for the tribes of Israel, allow me to review where we are and my hope for the future. "This is my Blessing."

It would be easy to look around our world, with imminent threats to democracy, to the survival of our planet, to the security of our freedoms, and paint a dark picture of the future. The pandemic has unleashed many other viruses: polarizing political and religious ideologies strain the moral center; disagreement leads to demonization; ideologies confound ideas.

Many are issuing dire warnings coupling global fears with alarm for the Jewish people: a rise in antisemitism, scapegoating of Israel, declining synagogue membership.

Naïve optimism would tell us all will be well: stop worrying. Pessimism would tell us: all is collapsing, there is nothing to be done. But realism, and I am realistic, would say: nothing is certain, all is possible, and the future depends on us.

Decades ago the great American scholar, Simon Rawidowicz, wrote "Israel: The Ever-Dying People," an essay about how we Jews tend to think of ourselves as "being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be..." He noted that there is "hardly a generation in the Diaspora that did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain." Rawidowicz decried this tearful approach to history and encouraged us to assume responsibility for ensuring the future, as generations before us, often in more dire conditions, had done.

Following the revelations of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the most comprehensive demographic study of Jews, many leaders panicked about American Jewish continuity. Growing assimilation, increased intermarriage, a diminishing Jewish population, and changing attitudes towards Israel led some to warn that American Jews were "in danger of disappearing."

But, to the contrary, recent surveys show that 7.6 million Americans identify as Jews, a 35% increase since 1990. The causes for that increase include immigration from the former Soviet Union, and the influx of converts and children of intermarriage who bring renewal to Jewish communal life and religion. New (Pew) studies also find that 80% of American Jews regard caring about Israel as "essential" or "important" to being Jewish. Remembrance of the Holocaust and working for justice remain integral components of contemporary Jewish identity.

And yet – and yet... There are issues and concerns we need to address.

The pandemic has impacted on our sense of community. Livestream and Zoom Judaism serve a purpose and meet the real needs of many in our communities, but they cannot become the default way of Jewish living. We need to reconnect with the synagogue. Even as we remain attentive to health protocols, let us remember that nothing replaces a heartfelt handshake, a hug, a kiss, a community meeting face-to-face.

Apathy, lack of connection, vicarious Jewish living, and a breakdown of communal norms are present threats. A la carte, privatized, boutique spirituality, mail order rabbis, feel-good mitzvah point religion will not sustain us. The synagogue and the organized Jewish community need to cooperate and invest treasure, time, and talent (of which we lack none) in creating meaningful experiences of welcoming, hospitality, and engagement, or we will lose Jews and weaken the fabric of Jewish belonging.

But there is more to Judaism than belonging. Unless we cultivate and teach a faith that is intellectually credible and spiritually ennobling, we will lose Jews who decide that all religion, including Judaism, is infantile, a numbing analgesic or perilous anesthetic. My teacher, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, warned that "an intelligent and instructed laity is as indispensable for the teaching of sound religion as for the practice of sound medicine. For lack of such laity, various kinds of religious quackery are peddled around and bought up at bargain prices."

Towards the end of his journey, Moses counsels the Israelites that the teaching he has imparted "...is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heavens and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (Deuteronomy 30: 11-14).

Torah, my friends, is not a supernatural mandate God reveals to Israel, but the wisdom and ways of life that Israel, in our quest for God, discover and create. Torah is not the last word, but the first word of our ongoing conversation.

We are called the "People of the Book." Yet, many of our otherwise educated adults know more about other books than about their own. If Jewish learning stops at the Religious School level, Judaism remains forever an adolescent identity. Qualifying for Jewish leadership entails continued Jewish literacy.

"Belief" and "Belonging" need to be ensured by "Behaviors." Tradition is not only something we receive, but something we enhance, create, and transmit. The ancient rabbis taught: "The Torah is not an inheritance. Each generation must relearn it anew." Religion is more than nostalgia and sentimentality. Let us ensure that the synagogue is not a museum of obsolete practices or a mausoleum of outdated beliefs,

but a laboratory of the Jewish experience, a sanctuary of renewal, a workshop of innovation and hope.

Judaism is not only what we do as Jews or with Jews. Rudyard Kipling quipped: "What do they know of England who only know England?" Being Jewish is the way we engage our total humanity and our common humanity. It is the way we grow as human beings and with human beings.

Even as we need to be attentive to the needs of Jewish community, the texture of our American democracy is fraying. The foundations of the Enlightenment upon which this nation was built are being questioned. Science is under attack. Reason is suspect. Truth is denied. Ideologies of right and left that place religious dogma and tribe ahead of equality and freedom are eroding our sense of citizenship and of shared purposes. Autocracy is on the rise worldwide. The United States ranks below New Zealand, Costa Rica, Switzerland, Canada and Japan in surveys measuring the stability of our democratic institutions and practices. The preservation of our constitutional democracy is essential to American and to Jewish survival and vitality. Whenever autocracy has reigned, Jews have suffered. Whenever chauvinism has triumphed, Jews have become scapegoats.

As Jews, we have a common obligation to a human agenda: environmental challenges, gun violence, economic disparities, racial and social inequality, restrictions on reproductive rights and healthcare clamor for our attention. This work, among ourselves and with our neighbors, constitutes our unfinished agenda as Americans and as Jews.

As a result of the ruptures and discontinuities of the past years, we are living through a new inflection in history that will require imaginative solutions and the full throttle of our individual and collective wills. This is not a time for timidity and pessimism, neutrality or discouragement. This is a time for renewal and idealism, pragmatism and innovation. From the beginning of our ancestral stories, being "Israel" has meant to wrestle, to wrest a blessing from life's challenges and opportunities.

Beyond our nation's borders, we affirm our solidarity with Israel. Like all countries, Israel is not perfect. Israel is an independent, self-critical democratic nation in a region that is still a sea-bed of autocracy and terrorism. Israel is both a refuge and a dream; a complex and challenging political reality. While her sovereignty and security are non-negotiable, Israel serves herself best as it continues to normalize coexistence with its Arab citizens, its Palestinian neighbors, and the region, as it has begun to do through the Abrahamic Accords.

Israel needs also to normalize its relationship with world Jewry. The stranglehold of ultra-orthodoxy and of right-wing religious nationalism chokes Israeli citizens and erodes its relationship with diaspora Jewry. Zionism is reciprocal. It is our care and support for Israel, but also Israel's care and respect for the Jews and Jewish life in the diaspora.

The recent artful address of Israel's Prime Minister, Yair Lapid, before the United Nations (Sept. 22, 2022), outlined a vision of an Israel that is "proud and prosperous," a nation that chooses not to be a "victim," to dwell not "...on the pain of the past" "but... on the hope of the future." Prime Minister Lapid spoke of Israel as a "vibrant democracy...in which Jews, Muslims and Christians live ... with full civic equality" where the government coalition includes an Arab Party. Israel has Arab Ministers, diplomats, judges, doctors, authors, beauty queens, and pop singers.

Yet, the Prime Minister acknowledged that there is work to be completed, and he responsibly committed his nation to undertake it: "an agreement with the Palestinians based on two states for two peoples." Prime Minister Lapid prophetically observed that "Peace is not a compromise. ...Peace is not weakness. ...Peace is the victory of all that is good." He reminded his neighbors and a world yet filled with anti-Zionist rhetoric and antisemitic hate: "We are not going anywhere. The Middle East is our home. Our hand is outstretched for peace."

As American Jews, we support and partner with Israel and will oppose those who seek to weaken or destroy her from within or from without, from the right or from the left. We have an obligation to teach our children, who were born long after the exhilarating experience of the creation of a Jewish state, the meaning of Israel to the Jewish people. They need the resources to respond to the hate that is being directed singularly against the Jewish state.

Recently, a college town congregation decided to take the word "Israel" out of its liturgy, so that they no longer recite - *Shema Israel*, "Hear O Israel," but *Shema Ami*, "Hear my people." Israel has become, for some, an offensive term of opprobrium. Many Jewish college students hesitate to speak of their support of Israel for fear of academic or social repercussions. We must recognize the challenge we face and respond by cultivating an identity that does not deny our particular experience in order to uphold universal values. We need not renounce who we are in order for others to affirm who they are. That is a bad recipe for interpersonal as well as for inter-group relations.

Yes, antisemitism is on the rise again. Aside from Iran's existential threats, far right politicians spout lethal hatred of Jews; on the far left, toxic anti-Zionist rhetoric is redolent with antisemitic sentiment. Groups that proclaim themselves advocates of social justice believe that being inclusive and diverse does not preclude being exclusive of Jews and friends of Israel.

Remember the line about the classic Jewish telegram: "Start worrying! Details will follow." We cannot forge an identity based on worry, a faith based on self-doubt, a peoplehood on the defensive. Only by knowing who we are as individuals and as a community can we build our future, despite those who would question and deny us the right.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of the rabbi who, in the face of dire opposition and despair, persisted in proclaiming his message of defiance and hope. When asked why he continued to cry out knowing that no one listened, he responded, "I may not be able to change others, but I will not allow others to change me."

We cannot allow those that hate us to make us hateful. The American Jewish poet, Charles Reznikoff, reminds us of our purposes, of who we are: "Out of the greatly wronged a people teaching and doing justice, ... a generous people, ... out of those who met ... with hate, a people of love, a compassionate people."

Judaism has a long and vigorous history of social justice, from the prophets to the labor movement to the civil rights era. We will not let antisemitism deter us, nor anti-Zionism silence us. We will not allow prejudice or hatred to define our condition or shape our agenda. We respond to antisemitism, the chronic disease of others, from the health and strength of who we are: not the "ever-dying people," but *Am Olam*, the "ever-living people."

Abba Kovner, poet and partisan leader during the Holocaust, said that the responsibilities of the Jew are: "To remember the past; to live in the present; to trust in the future." This is my blessing for you: Let us not be afraid of work that cannot be completed; let us plant trees whose fruit we will not eat, but will be harvested by those who come after us, even as we have reaped the blessings of those who came before us. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, a colleague with whom I am well acquainted, reminds us, "All of us are necessary, yet none of us is sufficient."

Traditional Judaism prescribes a medieval thirteen-fold credo of faith, ANI MA'AMIN, "I believe...." I offer you my briefer four-fold ANI MA'AMIN, my credo:

- I believe that Judaism is neither heavenly ordained nor supernaturally prescribed. Judaism is our memories and our imagination. It is what Jews hope and do.
- I believe that Judaism is a path to growing intellectually and spiritually, rooted in history, grounded in community, inspired by the wisdom and moral values of sages and folk.
- I believe that Judaism is the sacred words, adornments, and practices of a holy tradition that reveal the sacred in our lives and point to the possibilities of a better world.
- I believe that Judaism is not a finished product or an heirloom from the past; it is our present task and our legacy to the future.

This is the faith that has sustained me. This is my blessing for you: Not a faith of exclamation points and absolute certainties, but a faith with question marks and room for doubt. A journey, not a destination; a cooperative venture, not a solitary path; a faith of discipline, duty, and possibility; a way of believing; a way of behaving; a way of belonging; a way of being; a way of becoming.

At this time in my faith journey, I am reminded of a poem by Wendell Berry, entitled, "Our Real Work":

It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

For the last half a century, I've known what I have wanted and needed to do. My assistant, Sharon Hein, has told me where to be. I know Sandy will yet tell me where to be and where to go! I am completing a real journey. A new one will begin.

I hope that my mind will continue to be baffled, and I trust that I will yet (with the Cantor's indulgence) sing the melody of our people, or, at the very least, tell a good pun.

... And perhaps, when the story of my rabbinate is told, it will be titled, "Once a Pun a time..."