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Yom Kippur Morning 5783/2022
Flatbush Jewish Center

"Blessing"

There's a temptation, in a Yom Kippur sermon, to make ourselves feel bad–to catalog our sins and call us to do teshuvah. But given the year we've had, I think we'd all feel a lot better if instead I spend the next few minutes on blessing.

Arguably the most joyful moment of the Yom Kippur service is the piyyut, the liturgical poem, *Mar'eh Kohen*. As I said last year, the editors of our new machzor took it out of the book, which was a mistake on their part and one we'll rectify by singing it anyway when we get to it. Set to a bouncy, energetic tune, *Mar'eh Kohen* celebrates the splendor of the High Priest as he emerged from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. His venture inside–the only person in the whole community allowed to enter–was one of great danger, because the belief was that if he erred in some way or his heart was not sufficiently pure, God would strike him down. So of course, his successful return, atonement achieved, is a moment of rejoicing.

Right before *Mar'eh Kohen*, we read an alphabetical acrostic version of the High Priest's prayer that he would offer upon leaving the Holy of Holies. What's totally unsurprising about this prayer is that it is phrased as a petition: "May it be Your Will, our God and God of our ancestors, that the year that is beginning be a year of abundance, of blessing," and so on down the alphabet. Petition, after all, is one of the core formats of Jewish prayer. What is surprising is that, despite that technicality, it feels to me like a blessing–as if theHigh Priest is somehow bypassing God and offering these blessings to our people, assured and assuring us in his moment of forgiveness and grace that God will say yes. It feels quite different from Avinu Malkeinu, which is also written as a petition and very much feels like we're asking for things we may just not get.

The text we recite comes to us from the Middle Ages, with a rougher version appearing in the Jerusalem Talmud, completed around the year 400. But the idea of this blessing does not appear in the Torah's description that we read this morning. So where does the impetus for this powerfully positive blessing come from?

We can trace it as far back as the Mishnah. In Yoma 5:2, we read that after he would exit the Holy of Holies, the High Priest would pray a short prayer–but he would not go on too long, lest he frighten the people. That is to say, this was his private prayer, immediately outside the Holy of Holies but still where no one else could see him; if he went on too long, the people would think he had died inside. The Jerusalem Talmud (Yoma 42c) in fact relates a story that, one year, the High Priest Shimon HaTzaddik spent a long time on his personal prayer, until finally the people decided he must be dead and went in to see. When they found him alive and asked what he had been doing, he responded that he had been praying that the Temple not be destroyed.

I want to suggest to you, however, that the idea did enter the Mishnah from the Torah itself, albeit not in an obvious place. Follow me in some simple chronology. Our Torah reading this morning, from Leviticus chapter 16, begins "After the death of the two sons of Aaron, who came too close to God and died." That story occurs in Leviticus chapter 10, and the intervening chapters are filled with laws about purity, *tzara'at*, and what animals are kosher. The Torah doesn't often make the passage of time clear to us, but we could assume that these instructions–including our Yom Kippur Torah reading from Leviticus 16–come immediately after Aaron's sons' death, and not some time later.

One chapter further back, Leviticus 9, we find ourselves at the initial setting-up of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. After Aaron and his sons have done all the prescribed ritual, here's the end of that chapter, verses 22-24, which happen right before Nadav and Avihu decide to bring their strange-fire offering to God and get burned up for it:

> Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being. Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of THE ETERNAL appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before THE ETERNAL and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted–or perhaps, sang out–and fell on their faces.

Here is Aaron blessing the people, and more than that, here is a sign that the blessing worked–the presence of God, however you imagine that, appeared to all the people. I'm guessing that this episode sort of blurred into the Yom Kippur ritual in the minds of the ancient rabbis, emerging as the Prayer of the High Priest that we recite.

But there's something odd here: two back to back episodes of blessing. First Aaron blesses the people, then he and Moses go into the Mishkan, and then they come out and together bless the people. You might read this as choreographed ritual, but I once learned from someone–and I wish I could remember whom, so I could teach it in their name–to read this almost like a comedy. They're improvising. Aaron stands before the people, hands raised, calling out a blessing. He stands there… waiting… the seconds stretch on. He starts to feel awkward. His arms grow tired. He clears his throat, lowers his hands, and looks at Moses. "What happened?" he stage-whispers. "You told me this would work?"

"I don't know," Moses whispers back, and then in a normal voice, Moses calls out, "Come, brother, let us enter the Tent and inquire of God."

Rashi relates the episode similarly but without the dramatic stage directions: How Aaron, seeing that he had done everything and yet God had not appeared, felt bad–he was certain that he had done something wrong, that God was angry at him and withholding the blessing. He turns to Moses and says, perhaps with some heat, "Is this what you've done to me, that I should go in there and embarrass myself?" Immediately, Moses goes inside with him and asks God's mercy, and God's presence appears for them.

What does this have to do with us, you might ask. Most of us are not priests. But our role in blessing the world starts way before Aaron. The very first time God spoke to Abram, God's first instruction was *lech lecha*–go out from this place. The second, one verse later, was *heye bracha*–be a blessing. God then repeats it to Abraham in various forms, most notably for our purposes today at the Akedah, which we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah: "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed by, or through, your offspring." It's part of our mission, each one of us: a role we are equipped to play, if we are willing to embrace it.

It's also worth pausing to distinguish the blessings we give others from the way we use the word blessing to mean "making a *bracha*." When we say Hamotzi, or Shehecheyanu, or any one of the other hundred blessings we are encouraged to say every day, they are directed towards God–I'll avoid the word blessing for the moment, because it's a whole other question, what it means to bless God. But those are *baruch Atah Adonai*. Here we mean opportunities to direct God's blessing to other people.

We have certain prescribed, ritualized moments of blessing in our tradition. The priestly blessing in shul on yom tov. Parents blessing their children on Friday nights. Blessings under the chuppah, or given by a bride on her wedding day. But blessing does not have to be constrained to these times and relationships. Any of us can be a conduit for divine blessing to flow into the world.

So what does this story about Aaron and Moses teach us about blessing? Here are four thoughts:

First, blessing sometimes needs a buddy. To be a solo vessel is a lot of work, and it also puts too much attention on a single person. God appreciates working in a team.

Second, blessing requires some internal preparation, a moment of quiet before we offer it. We can read Moses and Aaron ducking into the Mishkan tent as a moment to collect themselves, to ready themselves emotionally and spiritually to become vessels of blessing. Under the exacting pressure of performance, to do every ritual precisely right before a massive audience, Aaron was too focused and tense. Perhaps he needed a moment to relax, to loosen up, so blessing could flow through him.

Third and related, to follow Rashi's reading of the story, we can't be effective conveyors of blessing when we feel self-doubt and self-criticism. Blessing can't coexist with inflated ego, lest we think the blessing comes from us and not through us, but it also can't dwell in us when we're down on ourselves. My colleagues who specialize in chaplaincy say you can't pour from an empty cup–that is, you can't take care of others when your own internal resources are depleted. The same is true here.

Finally, that moment inside the Tent echoes the moment Aaron would later go into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. We can view this as dramatizing the idea of bringing blessing from some other place–wherever we imagine that being–to the people in front of us. Or we can interpret the inward move as being one of closeness and intimacy with God, which makes that connection of blessing possible. In the dance between private and public, hidden and revealed, blessing comes forth into the wider world.

May this year be a year of blessing for us, one in which we receive blessings from the divine, and one in which we each find ways to be and give blessings to each other and the communities beyond these walls.