

A Hundred Blessings

We are such creatures of habit, aren't we? Years ago, when I weighed about 325 pounds, I used to give driving directions not by street names or compass direction. No, I told people how to get places by following fast food restaurants. "Drive about fifteen minutes on the freeway until you see the MacDonald's next to the Burger King. Turn right at Dunkin Donuts and I am across from Coco's restaurant." I just had a food fixation and everything fit right into that mindset. If I could find my way through a city by fast food restaurants, I was certain you could too.

My wife has a ritual that she follows each morning. She has a cup of coffee. Makes a second cup which she pours into a driving mug for her commute in the car. And then she makes a third cup, which goes into yet another mug, to drink when she walks into the office. So she leaves the house everyday with two commuter cups of coffee. What if she didn't do that?

I know people who, when driving on a vacation, have to stop at the same rest area or the same restaurant each time. Or those who bet the same lottery numbers each week. And we all know about ball players with their rituals. I

was watching the World Series this year and marveled at the batting habits of some of the big hitters. The pine tar; wrapping and unwrapping batting gloves, spitting and digging holes in the batter's box.

There are people who wouldn't think about going to a business meeting without sharpening four pencils just so. And there are the gum chewers, water bottle drinkers, smokers and the chronically late!

WHY DO WE DO THIS? Let me simply say, we do things for a myriad of reasons and rationalizations which are only important if we think they are. Sometimes we choose to repeat behaviors because they give us a sense of comfort or balance; they justify a world view or make us feel in control.

There is a story in the Talmud, you can find it in Brachot 28b. It concerns a rabbi named Nechuniah ben HaKanahah, who ran an academy during the Babylonian Exile. The Mishnah tells us that Reb Nechuniah had his own habits. Nechuniah used to say a prayer before he entered the academy where he taught and then upon leaving he would say another prayer.

The prayer he said upon entering was one where he asked that no mistakes be made on his account. He prayed that his words and actions comported with halacha – proper law - and therefore he wouldn't encourage anyone to “go the wrong way” so to speak; to err because of something Nechuniah did or said. His prayer upon leaving was a different one. This time he asked that he remember to be grateful for his lot in life. A prayer to leave behind the discussion and decisions and feelings experienced and just be grateful for his life: his health, his family, his lot in life.

The Talmud is filled with sentences that begin with “he used to say,” or “he used to...” followed by a verb. Why does it matter what someone used to say or do? And further, why did they relate everything in their world to prayer and to holiness? Is it because they didn't have reality tv and computers?

In another place in Talmud (Menachot 43b) it says “R. Meir used to say a man is bound to say one hundred blessing daily as it is written, And now Israel, what doth the Lord require of thee?(Deut. 10:12)”

A hundred blessings a day! Who has time for that? If there are sixty minutes in an hour and we are awake approximately sixteen hours a day that means about six blessings an hour or one every ten minutes! How can that possibly be a realistic goal and still leave time for us to get things done? I mean, spirituality is nice but someone has to drive carpool, make the kids' lunches, go to work. Pick up the laundry, read a newspaper, cook a meal. A hundred blessings a day!?!

Of course we could look at it another way. Maybe we need to first ask ourselves are there a hundred things in a day worth blessing? Are there fifty? Or twenty? Or even five? Why do I sound like Abraham bargaining with the Almighty over Sodom and Gomorrah? Is there anything left to give blessings over at all?

I take this challenge every day – the hundred blessing challenge. It goes something like this. Imagine a movie: Fade In: my bedroom. There I lie after a night's sleep. The sun has crept up and suddenly “beep-beep-beep” the sound of the alarm wakens me. My wife pretends to be asleep. I open my eyes.

My first thought of the day: Thank you God, I'm alive! I get to do it again!
(one blessing down, 99 to go) As I stretch my legs I thank God that my body
seems to still be in one piece. (98 to go) My eyes search around the room, I
see color, I see gradations of light. Thank you for my sight, my, hearing –
my senses. (97 left) I get out of bed, take my water glass and tip toe into the
bathroom.

Very quietly I pour the standing water from my glass three times from my
fingers to my wrist on one hand and then the other. I say Al Netillat
YaDayim, the prayer for washing – actually for lifting up my hands (yup, 96
left). I put some water from my fingers on my eyes. I do this quietly so my
wife doesn't hear and think I have become a Chassid and get scared. I then
say the other two prayers: Modeh ani and Elohai neshamah. (93 left) They
take a few seconds, I brush my teeth. I taste the toothpaste, I feel the water
and ugh! I see myself in the mirror. I am thankful that time hasn't done
worse to me! (Are you still counting?)

Don't worry I'm not going to take you minute by minute through my day.
But seriously I must tell you this process continues from the time I awake
until the time I go to sleep. I attempt to remain in what I call an attitude of

gratitude all day, or as long as I can manage it. Look, I am not a saint: I fail, I forget sometimes, I get carried away or enmeshed, I get selfish or self involved. I say blessings but skip the gratitude which makes the blessings just empty shells; half truths which say that I am grateful while I am not in a state of gratefulness. Some days I don't get to twenty five blessings. Other days, I get further.

Please stay with me here. If I begin my day being thankful for everything, nothing is taken for granted, and if I end my day that way...how bad could a day be? If I take a minute, no, half a minute, before everything I do and just express my gratitude for being able to tastetouchseehearsmell how could I experience the world as anything less than a wonder and a nurturing home in which to live? If I take the time to be grateful – maybe even write them on a list once a day, how then could I experience my family and friends as anything less than just below the angels?

Okay, then I turn on the news. (I'm in the 80's by now, blessed to have communication). You know what comes next. I hear about war and sadness, hatred, intolerance, floods and ignorance. And I get sad, just like you do.

And I feel helpless and angry, just like you do. And I get pulled down, just like you do. And now what?

There's an old Zen story about this monk who was wandering about in the countryside. He was picking herbs when he saw something running full speed at him! It was a lion, a hungry lion. The monk dropped his sack and ran for his life ultimately running to the end of a cliff. He spied a thick vine growing out from the cliff and began to climb down it. As he climbed down he saw another lion at the bottom of the cliff licking his lips and looking up. A small mouse climbed down the vine but decided, halfway, to chew his way thru the vine. One lion below, one above and a mouse chewing on the lifeline. The monk looked at the cliff, and he saw a branch growing out from the side of it. The branch had a big red berry at the end of it. The monk plucked the berry and ate it. The story ends with the author saying "how sweet the berry tasted."

Yes, I know we live in a world of peril. I know we live in a physical world whose stakes are often measured by life and death. Our forbears knew that too. Every year on Yom Kippur we read the names of Rabbi Akiva and other martyrs. But what did they, what do we live for?

They left behind their words and directions. The Shulchan Aruch reminds us: “every Jew whether poor or rich, suffering from an illness or in good health, young or old must learn Torah by day and night.” That was every Jew. Not every Orthodox Jew or every Rabbi. Every Jew.

And by studying Torah what will you learn? The story of Moses? Abraham and Isaac? The Red Sea? Those stories are good and worth learning. But it is my belief that unless we learn the very nature of our lives, we have learned nothing. Unless we hear that we are like grass that in the morning grows and in the evening is cut; unless we hear that we are dust and unto dust we shall return, we are missing the point.

Every moment is a gift. A precious drop of time and possibility. A moment to be strong and choose life. A moment to see, really see. To see color and shape and texture. Light and Shadow. A moment to taste: sweet and salty, sour, bitter. To hear, to smell. To live. And to wonder. To wonder how it all happened this way. The magnificence of the human senses. The wonder of the universe. The becoming of a Bar Mitzvah.

And from deep in that moment to look for God. To turn and dare to ask your 21st Century self: is there something there? Or to paraphrase the Verizon man: God, Can you hear me now?

Friends, in this very moment, can you feel your heart beat? Can you sense your breathing? Do you realize that deep within your ears are tiny little pieces of toy-like flesh that are vibrating and allowing you to hear and experience my voice? How does your spine feel? Can you sense that you are alive? (Twenty blessings to go).

Imagine if everyone could take the moment and feel the magic of just being. Where would that lead us? Could it not lead us to a place where each of us would feel grateful? Connected? Energized? Able to say a hundred blessings a day? Able to bless ourselves? Able to bless the “others?”

Imagine taking all those habits that we have collected: bringing two commuter mugs of coffee to work each day, hanging two cel phones from our belts, eating the same meal at the same restaurant – taking all those mindless habits and in their places substituting blessings of gratitude.

Moments of unspeakable and lovely gratitude. Tens of them, fifties of them, maybe even a hundred of them.

That's what our ancestors were trying to leave behind. That was the message. "As above so below." As God blesses you, so do you bless God – the God of your understanding. Your life is sacred, it is precious. Every delicious moment is to be savored and to be blessed. And each moment of gratitude is to be expressed to creator of all, as you understand the creator of all. (Five left)

May this Sabbath bring you peace. And may you find the time to perceive your aliveness and offer thanks. The journey of hundred blessings begins with one moment of pure unencumbered awareness. May God bless you and may you bless God, (one left)

Shabbat Shalom..... One Hundred!

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