

## THE BLESSING OF KNEES EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2009

Shana Tova.

Happy New Year. Today is September 18<sup>th</sup>. It turns out that it is exactly one year from the date when we all heard a deep rumbling. The sound had the quality of a shofar, a low, deep sound beseeching us : Wake up! Wake up! It was the sound of our financial markets shifting, cracking, opening, changing. Tadah Tadah tadah!!!

It has been quite a year of change for all of us. This wake up call reminded all of us that stability is a myth, that change is a constant dynamic and that within that change there are many blessings, even though they may be accompanied by discomfort and pain. Baruch atah adonai elohenu melech haolam, shecheiyanu, v'kimanu, v'higiyanu l'zman hazeh. We say this "bracha" thanking God for sustaining us, for keeping us alive, and bringing us to this season even in unstable times- these have been shaky times indeed.

You may have noticed that I am sitting more during these services, and standing on one leg a great deal of the time. That is because life became even more precarious last spring, when I ripped my knee to shreds wrestling a suitcase off of an airport conveyor belt. I admit that we have discussed airports before, but the luggage conveyor belt offers an unparalleled opportunity for spiritual growth and development.

First and foremost, it presents a question of faith. Will my luggage come down that shoot? Will I spend the next 72 hours in the clothing that I am wearing, brushing my teeth with one of those flimsy toothbrushes? Will I be the only one at the wedding or bar mitzvah in jeans and a comfy sweatshirt? As the minutes pass, with no bag in sight, and I am increasingly certain God has abandoned me. At the same time, I push myself into the proper

position, just in case by some miracle, my suitcase does arrive. Here, at the edge, there one can experience the ultimate equality- no First, Business or Coach; just a mass of humanity and the turf belongs to the strong. Suddenly, a shower of black bags comes down the chute. I have exactly twenty five seconds to identify my bag, lunge for it, and wrest it to the side without toppling myself or those around me.

And lunge I did. Unfortunately, my timing was off, and the bag slipped from my grasp. I twisted and pulled- and twisted and pulled..... my knee. I heard an unpleasant sound, and fell backwards, bag over body. It could not have been more humiliating. I was literally on my knees.

The Hebrew word for knee is Berech--- Beit, Resh, Kof. These three letters form the Hebrew root for knee, but these same letters are also the root of the word for blessing- b'racha. The blessing of our knees is the blessing of humility. It is only through instability, and often great pain, that we learn to bend our knees, and to bow to forces beyond our control.

For two months I limped along without seeing a doctor. I would just push through. Ominously, my knee began to buckle. I, who pride myself on my yoga-like flexibility, could hardly stand. I was forced to bend to reality. I had the meniscus operation in May.

By the time I left for Israel in late June, I was feeling my limitations. "Just don't walk too much," the doctor said. Has he ever been in Jerusalem? The distances in LAX seemed endless as I hobbled forward with my cane through the endless corridors. . And then, I made a fatal airport miscalculation. I wanted to bring a special gift to my uncle, and there was a fabulous offer on two bottles of Johnny Walker Black label in a cute carrying bag at the LAX Duty Free Shop. I lugged the bottles through a plane change

at the Zurich airport, only to be told that I could not bring them through security. I would have to take them back to the El Al counter, three terminals away. Fine, I said, I have two hours. I'll do it- they cost too much money. By the time I arrived at the El Al counter, I was in such pain that I finally asked for a wheel chair. OK, they said, but you will have to wait with the others. Others? It seems that a travel club of handicapped Israelis were on their way home via Switzerland. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by a sea of wheelchairs. At first, I wanted so get up and shout- no, you have it wrong. I don't really belong in a wheel chair. I am not one of THEM. But I was. I Am.

As I waited helplessly in my wheel chair for a push through security, I could hear the words of the great Jewish –Zen poet, Leonard Cohen ringing in my ears:

Some day, you're going to get down on your knees  
You're going to get down on your knees  
You're going to get down on your knees.  
Please, don't pass me by.

For I am blind, but you can see  
I've been blinded, totally  
Please, don't pass me by.

I became a part of the world that was helpless, waiting for others for a push, a hand. I got it. Please, PLEASE don't pass me by.

Help me. Bless me. Thank You. And then, a great pool of blessing opened before me. The Hebrew word for pool, berecha, comes from that same root as berech –knee and bracha- blessing. .When we acknowledge one blessing in our lives, we see the pool of blessings, the berecha of brachot that surround us. In these pivotal moments, when we bend our knees in humility and gratitude, we are open to growth and change. I am so blessed.

Those of us who live in Malibu and its surroundings are no strangers to instability. Fire sweeps through our canyons and floods crumble our hillsides, clogging our PCH artery and challenging our very existence. We all know the blessings that come from these times. We cooperate. We feed each other. We carpool. We express our gratitude to God and the Fire department for saving our lives, our pets and our possessions. We change, if only for the moment, and become aware of our pool of blessings.

The blessings of this past year have not been immediately apparent to many of us. Within days of the rumble of last year's shofar blasts, our stock market wobbled and plunged. Many of us saw our portfolios shrink before our very eyes. The California real estate market took a dive. Even if our homes did not face foreclosure, the value of our homes shifted dramatically. "Underwater" was no longer a surfing term.

As the year progressed, it became apparent that we in Malibu would not emerge unscathed. Of course, the synagogue suffered as a direct consequence. When faced with job loss, or a weakened market, or even the fear of loss, membership dues are often the first payment to be delayed. Some tried to suspend their membership- we did not let that happen- just at the very moment that a synagogue community was most needed in their lives. "A Bad Economy Deserves a Good Community". If you can help, please do. The blessing emerging from this moment of bent knees is that we at MJC&S have been taking networking and social action programs very seriously. Please bring back the canvas bag on your seats filled with canned goods for food banks not only on Yom Kippur, but each time you attend the synagogue. These food banks serve the entire LA community, but ironically, more and more middle class Jews are slipping into the lines, driven by job loss and financial insecurity.

It is especially difficult for Jews to bend our knees and ask for help. How're you doing?" " Just fine," we say to one another. But I personally have seen a parade of people in my office this year who have faced months of unemployment, or who have seen their dreams of retirement wither. The downturn affects our entire social dynamic. There are more Dads picking up kids at pre-school, and more Moms returning to work. The economic realities have placed strains on our marriages, as discretionary income becomes less discretionary. Many of the changes have been beneficial- a bracha/ blessing- as Dads spend more time with their families, and "staycations " keep us at home in beautiful Malibu. But many of these changes have placed severe strain on our resources, both personally, and in the community at large.

But the blessing is there nonetheless. As we look back upon the trajectory of our lifetimes, we see that most of our defining moments have come in a time of challenge and instability. When we lose jobs or change locations, when we experience rejection, or even endure the loss of a loved one , we re-evaluate, and often change for the better. It is not the devastating event itself, but our reaction to that event that has made us into who we are today.

We now come to the core question of this Erev Rosh Hashannah 5770:

- How have I reacted to the stresses of this year?
- Where do I need to make amends?
- Where do I need to stop blaming others, and accept responsibility for my own greed or inattention?
- Where have I been impatient and short tempered with those around me?
- Have I allowed my fears to reduce me to a place of inaction?
- Am I able to see the blessings in the changes that confront me?

The Talmud (Berakot 5a) tells us that when troubles arise, a person must first must “m’fapasesh b’maasav”, examine his own actions. What signs of danger in this world of “forever, better, bigger, more” did I ignore along the way? What are the lessons that I must pass to my children? Do I understand that I can not protect them from their own hard earned lessons and challenges, and that surely I can not guarantee them a smooth sailing from pre-school to a lucrative career?

This is the time to bend our knees, acknowledge our blessings, and solidify the understandings that we have gained though this time of struggle. Recovery, they tell us, is right around the corner. Will we simply return to our old ways? Will we return to a wasteful use of power and water? Will our banking system revert to the same scenario of unregulated excess? Will we again care more about the counter tops in our kitchen than those who have nothing to eat?

Last year, many of us carried signs or sported buttons that read “Change! Change! We did, although not always of our own volition. Now is the time to embrace to positive changes, and to do “tshuvah”, to change the practices and policies that have led us astray. This period of time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mandates that we make our confessions aloud, and seek to return, not to the status quo, but to the place where we are better human beings. As Donniel Hartman says, often our behavior is “katan Alenu”, too small for us, like an old suit. We ALL can do better.

In the worlds of Leonard Cohen , the Zen poet “Elderly Jew” who filled Staples Center last spring:

**DON'T BE THE PERSON YOU CAME WITH.**

Don't be the person you came with. It is only through our trials, our struggles and our adversities that we get on our knees and

change. A world with no growth, and no change would be boring indeed. It is only through disruption and change that we grow into the human beings that God meant us to be.

Since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, humanity has struggled through life's challenges and changes. But would we really want it to be otherwise? Would we really desire to return to the Garden? I don't think so.

Consider this story of Adam and Eve adapted from the book "Capturing the Moon" by my colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein. This fantasy takes place many years after their exile from the Garden of Eden.

From the day Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, they struggled to stay alive. Their sons, Cain and Abel, you will remember, were difficult. Childbirth was no picnic either. Adam struggled to till the ground, and in the bad years, there was little food. All that clothing needed to be repaired and replenished. It was never easy.

At last, they retired, and went on their dream vacation. They journeyed from one corner of the world to the other, exploring God's wonders. In the course of their journeys, they came upon a place that seemed so familiar. It was the Garden of Eden, now guarded by an Angel with a flaming sword.

Suddenly, they heard a gentle voice. It was God, who spoke to them and said "My children, you have lived in exile these many years. Your punishment is complete. Come now and return to my garden. The angel disappeared, and the gate to the garden was opened.

But Adam hesitated and said to God, "You know, it has been so many years. Remind me, what's it like in the garden?"

"The Garden is Paradise, God responded. In the garden there is no work. There is no suffering, no pain. In the garden there

is no death, no time, only an endless today. In the garden there is no change.

Adam considered God's words. He thought about a life with no work, no struggle, no pain, and no passage of time. He turned and looked at Eve, his wife. He looked into the face of the woman with whom he had struggled to make a life, to take bread from the earth, to raise children, to build a home. He read the lines on her face, and saw all of the changes they had endured, the tragedies overcome and joys they had cherished. Eve looked back at Adam's face, and saw how much he had grown, how wise he had become since that day when she offered him that snack of an apple. As all their shared challenges came back to her, Eve took Adam's hand .

And then, looking into his wife's eyes, Adam shook his head and responded to God's invitation. "No thank you", he said. That's not for us. We don't need that now. We've changed. Come on Eve, he said to his wife. "Let's go home"

Let's go home. Let's spend the rest of this evening exploring our challenges and our changes of this past year and the year to come. Don't be the person you came with. Let's bend our knees, release our egos, and acknowledge our pool of blessings.

Shana Tova-For a year of good change

