Blessings in a Time of Pandemic

By Christine Dietz

I have often thought of Jewish observance as an ancient mindfulness practice. The rituals, prayers, blessings and practices that Jews engage in offer multiple opportunities for us to move from *mochin d’katnut* (small mind, the ego) to *mochin d’gadlut* (expansive mind, a more universal perspective) every day. One way to understand *halakhah*, often translated as law or observance, is as a way of walking, as the root of the word may be translated as “to go” or “to walk.” Judaism is how we walk our walk, and blessings can be part of this walk.

I was reminded of this perspective on Friday night when Rabbi Barton reminded us that, traditionally, Jews are supposed to say 100 blessings a day. While I aspire to being able to do that, I am not there yet. At the same time, the idea of pausing and tuning in to a larger perspective multiple times a day does appeal to me, especially at this time, when we are in both a pandemic of illness and a pandemic of fear, as Rabbi Sacks observed ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LDJDxY-5Rk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LDJDxY-5Rk%20) Thanks, Mike Kuperman!). As a psychotherapist and spiritual companion, I witness the pandemic of fear every day. Since I don’t know all of the traditional blessings and don’t yet have the awareness or discipline to recite 100 of them every day, I decided to try saying blessings for 100 people each day during this time of self-isolation and fear. I offer some ideas about how I might do that below and invite you to think about your own ways of offering blessings to the world at this time.

First, I would like to share a Jewish version of the metta meditation, a traditional Buddhist lovingkindness meditation, that I learned from Shaye Cohen and Bahira Sugarman. It is traditional to offer the blessings first for yourself, then for others:

* May you be blessed with *shalom* (peace, wholeness)
* May you be blessed with *ahavah* (love)
* May you be blessed with *refuah* (healing)
* May you be blessed with *simcha* (joy)
* May you be blessed with *kol tov* (whatever is best)

Next, you might bless those who are most affected by the virus. For me, one of the hardest things about this pandemic is the isolation that can result from shelter in place orders, or when affected people are quarantined.

I am acutely aware from personal experience of how this affects both the affected individual and their loved ones. In 2018, my 95-year-old father was quarantined after acquiring MERSA in the hospital where he went for surgery after a fall. He had been in good health prior to the infection but rapidly declined. Visitors were limited and required to take extreme protective measures. He died alone in isolation while my mother and sister were ordered to evacuate due to a flood that same day. My mother is still haunted by the thought of him dying alone and not being able to say goodbye. As a psychotherapist, I am also aware of how many people live alone with their anxiety about themselves or their loved ones becoming ill and being unable to be together.

# Bless Those Affected by The Virus

* The sick (You can also add a *misheberach*, chant “*Ana el na ref na la (lo,li*)” (God, please heal her (him, me), Moses’ prayer when Miriam was stricken with *tzaarat*, a skin affliction) or “*Baruch Ata Adonai, Rofei kol basar u’mafli la’asot*” (the *chatimah* or “seal” at the end of the Asher Yatzar prayer or bathroom blessing).
* The lonely and those who are distant from loved ones
* Children who are ill or separated from their parents
* The poor
* The homeless
* Immigrants and refugees
* Prisoners
* Asylum seekers
* Those who are confined at home with abusers or unsafe people
* Those who tested positive and are in hospitals
* Those who tested positive and are in quarantine at home
* Those who can’t get tested
* Those who are or may have been exposed to the virus and are waiting to see if they develop symptoms
* Those who have lost their jobs
* Those whose incomes have been or will be reduced
* Those whose businesses are affected
* Those who need mental health services and don’t have access to care
* Those who need other kinds of health care that is being pre-empted by this virus
* Those (all of us) who are anxious
* Those who are depressed and in despair
* Those who are mourning or will be mourning without the in person support of their communities
* There are many others – please add your own

Mister Rogers has been quoted a lot these days: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news,” Rogers said to his television neighbors, “my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping’” (Ian Bogost, The Atlantic, October 29, 2018). Mr. Bogost worries that this may be bad advice for adults if it leads to complacency or passivity. For me, “looking for the helpers” gives me hope and leads me to consider how I, too, can be a helper. I can also be mindful of who is helping and offer blessings for them. See Mr. Bogost’s article here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/look-for-the-helpers-mr-rogers-is-bad-for-adults/574210/>

# Bless the Helpers

* Health care workers in the front lines, risking exposure, working long hours without personal protective equipment, fearful of exposing family and friends to the virus: doctors, nurses, CNAs, technicians and other medical personnel.
* People who work behind the scenes in health care institutions, including cleaners, food service workers, administrative staff and assistants, who face many of the same risks as those above.
* Religious and spiritual care providers in hospitals and other health care facilities: clergy, chaplains and others.
* Volunteers and any others working in health care institutions.
* Workers in long-term care facilities and hospice, who face the same risks as those in hospitals as well as the expectation that most of those exposed to the virus will die. These include nurses, social workers, physicians, chaplains, bereavement counselors and others.
* Workers in government agencies, including Departments of Public Health, research facilities, Departments of Mental Health, Departments of Human Services, CDC, WHO and many more, who are doing research, issuing guidelines, making decisions without adequate information, and working long hours.
* Scientists and researchers working frantically to develop treatments and vaccines.
* Policy makers at all levels of government.
* School personnel, from administrators to teachers, who are trying to keep children safe, healthy, fed and educated without much to support them except their dedication and creativity.
* Mental health workers at all levels and in all types of facilities, who are trying to provide hope and healing, either directly or from a distance, in a confused landscape of conflicting regulations, payment restrictions and limitations while trying to keep their organizations running.
* The Boards of Directors and administrators of non-profit organizations, religious institutions and government services who are trying to offer their services at a distance and without certainty of compensation.
* Religious and spiritual leaders and care providers: clergy, chaplains, spiritual directors, teachers of all types, who are working locally, nationally and globally to provide hope, inspiration and comfort.
* Local emergency services whose work does not end during a pandemic: police, fire fighters, EMTs, dispatchers, etc.
* Those who provide food and supplies despite risks to themselves and low wages: stockers, drivers, food service workers, cashiers, store managers and others.
* Employees of necessary services who keep things running: sanitation, utilities, technology providers, repair people.
* There are many others. Please add your own.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list – it is just what I came up with this morning. I plan to add to it daily, creating an ever longer list of people to bless. I also hope that this practice, rather than making me complacent, will lead me to find tangible ways to support these people, whether through contact by phone or video chat, donations, letters of encouragement or other creative ways.

During Purim this year, I was particularly drawn to Mordechai’s words to Esther (Esther 4:14): “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" I am asking myself, and I invite you to ask yourself, whether you, too, are in this time and place to offer what you, uniquely, can and how you will do it. In the words of Psalm 69:14, as translated by Rabbi Yael Levy, (Directing the Heart: Weekly Mindfulness Teachings and Practices from the Torah. (2019) Philadelphia, PA: A Way In).

“I am my prayer to you,

Aligned with the Highest Will in this very moment.

With great love and generosity,

Receive me with the truth of your presence.”

How will you be your prayer?