

How Can We Be a Blessing?

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I have often pondered the meaning of the expression that a deceased person's memory should be a blessing or will be for a blessing. Proverbs 10:7 teaches that "the name of a righteous person is invoked in blessing"—זִכְרֵךְ צַדִּיק לְבִרְכָה. Originally, this likely referred to invoking the name of a well-known righteous person as an exemplar and conduit for our own blessing. The Babylonian Talmud also teaches (Kiddushin 31b) that after the death of a parent, we may continue to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring our parents, and by extension other beloved relatives and friends, by saying "zikhronam livrakhah," "may their memory be for a blessing."

Can only the deceased be a source of blessing? What about the living? This theme is paramount in Parashat Lekh Lekha, where God's response to our patriarch Abraham's call is replete with mentions of blessing. In Genesis 12:2, God says to Avram:

וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְךָ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְרַכָּה:

I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you shall be a blessing.

It is easier to conceptualize what it might mean for God to bless Abraham. But what does it mean for Abraham to "be" a blessing? How might we follow in Abraham's footsteps to be a blessing: for ourselves, our families, our communities and our world?

The 15th-century Italian commentator Ovadia Seforno offers a striking possibility: being a blessing indicates that God will rejoice in Abraham's actions. Seforno cites a

fantastical scene in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 7a) in which Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, a High Priest, enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and encounters the Holy Blessed One, enthroned. God demands, "Yishmael, bless me!" Stunned, the High Priest blesses God:

May it be Your will that Your compassion
overcome Your anger,
and may Your compassion prevail over Your
other attributes,
and may You act toward Your children with the
attribute of compassion,
and may You enter before them beyond the
letter of the law.

Whether or not this gorgeous prayer was spontaneously crafted by Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the Talmud gleans the lesson that *שְׂלֵא תְהֵא בְרַכְתָּ הַדְּיוֹט קְלָה בְּעֵינַיִךְ* one should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly. God nods in approval and acceptance of the prayer. If a mere mortal can deliver a blessing directly to God, surely people can serve as blessings to one another!

What was it about Abraham that enabled him to be a blessing? I'd argue that it was his sense of purpose. Maimonides posits that even from a young age, Abraham knew he had a purpose. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides explains how Abraham became a spokesperson for monotheism: "As soon as Abraham was weaned—even in his infancy—he began to muse, night and day, wondering: how is it possible that the world should be continuously in motion without one to guide it? And such were his ponderings, until

he knew that there was one God.”¹ This text recalls a sweet image of baby Avram, the philosopher. It teaches us that even from a young age, Abraham knew what he was meant to do.

Having a purpose is not only important on our better days. The Austrian psychologist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl was one of the first psychologists to propose that having a high-level belief system, such as a purpose in life, enables people to endure life’s most severe and unimaginable hardships.

An article published in 2009 in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*² examined the connection between purpose and life satisfaction among adolescents, emerging adults and adults. The results of this study revealed that having identified a purpose was associated with greater life satisfaction at all those three stages of life. Interestingly, the study also found that searching for a purpose was only associated with increased life satisfaction during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Moreover, the study stated that a strong sense of purpose underscores moral action and civic engagement. We can understand from this research that both seeking and finding our purpose not only brings us contentment; it also helps us make a difference in our world.

Perhaps Abraham did not have to search for his purpose. Maybe, as Maimonides suggests, God’s call made it clear to our forefather that he was put on earth to disseminate monotheism. In contrast to our patriarch, most of us lack that kind of clarity of purpose. But in these murky and formidable times, discerning, connecting with, and taking action to realize our purpose is more important than ever.

In her Rosh Hashanah sermon, Rabbi Annie Tucker from Temple Israel Center in White Plains, New York, taught, “Purpose can pull us out of the pits of despair, motivate us to fight against improbable odds, and even lead us to risk

the things most precious for the sake of something greater. It is the anchor by which we pull ourselves towards a brighter future.” Rabbi Tucker’s words imply that unfortunately given our current circumstances, our “brighter future” surely will not arrive unless we connect with our purpose and engage actively with leading ourselves—and others along with us—toward it.

If this feels like a tall order, or if you are not sure where to begin, let’s return to two messages from the Talmudic passage above: first, that “one should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly.” While we may not know whether God is nodding along with our prayers as the Talmud describes, I still believe that our prayers in this current moment make a difference. And second, to echo the prayer of Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, extending mercy and compassion toward ourselves and others, while simultaneously aspiring to go above and beyond in all that we do, is more than enough. In these ways, may we all become blessings.

¹ הלכות עבודה זרה וחוקות הגויים 1:3

² Cotton Bronk, K., Hill, P. L., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T. L., &

Finch, H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(6), 500–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271439>