

What does it take, to be able to step out into the unknown, and go forward with faith that somehow everything will work out ok?

A friend and colleague once shared with me that, many years ago, she had been going through a tough time in her life, and she asked her rabbi for guidance. He told her to remember God's command to Abraham. The one that Alexis read for us this morning: Leave your home and everything you know, and go to some unknown place. Internalizing Abraham's faith got my friend through that rough time.

It is very hard to go forward, when you cannot see the light ahead.

Not only did God not tell Abraham where he was leading him - "to the land that I will show you" - by my read of it, God was also vague about what the reward would be once he got there.

You will be a great nation. I will make your name great. Ok, that I get. But "I will bless you"? "You will be a blessing"? "all the families of the earth shall be blessed by you"? What does any of that really mean? What does it mean to be blessed?

I know that's a strange question for a clergy person to ask. I offer people blessings, all the time. Receiving a blessing is powerful - I see it in the way people respond when I bless them. I've felt it, when others have blessed me. But until a few years ago, I was not really sure what the word meant. When I did finally understand, it came to me from the most unexpected source. But I'll get to that in a moment.

First, let me explain at least one reason for my confusion. It's the bidirectional nature of blessings. We bless God, and God blesses us, and there's something kind of confusing about that. When we bless God, it seems to be a form of praise. When God blesses us, it seems to be a kind of gift. So does the word mean something different depending on which direction it's going.

The second reading we heard from Alexis this morning wasn't a single passage, but a selection of quotations pairing up words of blessings going in the two directions. Because I was afraid that might be a little confusing, I also included the selections in your bulletin. ([Click here](#) to see the readings.)

Let's go over these pairs again, so you can see what I mean. The first quotation is from Psalms, blessing God for teaching us how to live. I paired it with a verse from Jeremiah, stating that WE are blessed if we trust in God's teachings.

The second quotations are a pair of blessings on an arrival or departure. The first statement of that pair includes a blessing to God, and the second is a blessing to the traveler, in God's name.

The third pair is a single quotation. The priest of the ancient city of Shalem - which was probably Jerusalem - first blessed Abraham and then blessed God.

And finally, the last pair. Jesus blessed the peacemakers. And in Jewish prayer every morning, we bless God for - among many other things - creating peace.

Jewish prayer is FILLED with blessings like that. The Hebrew word for blessed is Baruch, and the daily prayers include nearly one hundred blessings that all begin with the exact same formula - Baruch Atah Hashem – **Blessed** are You God - who... Some other examples are - בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' חוֹנֵן - הַדָּעַת

Blessed are You God who graces humanity with knowledge.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַרוֹצֵה בַתְּשׁוּבָה

. Blessed are You God who desires repentance. Or

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' רוֹפֵא חוֹלֵי עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל

Blessed are You God who heals the sick of your people Israel

And on, and on. In addition to all the nearly 100 blessings that are part of the daily prayer services, we have blessings to recite before and after meals, that also use the formula Barch Atah Hashem, Blessed are You, God.

More casually, in religious Jewish communities, when a person's asked, "How are you?" the proper response is "Baruch Hashem," which means, "Blessed is God!"

So, you see, to bless God seems to mean simply to praise God. But then what does it mean when we ask God to bless us? Or when we bless one another in God's name?

Remember, I told you that I reached a deeper understanding of the word Baruch - Blessed - from an unexpected source. That source is my friend Doody, an Israeli-American who worked for many years as a taxi driver.

Doody is a veteran of the Yom Kippur War, which was fought in 1973. He was 21 years old at the time - a child, as he would later describe himself - and he was placed as the commander for a unit of 18 year old boys. Under his command, his entire unit walked onto a landmine. He saw every one of his men die in an instant. Only he survived, though he was hospitalized for a year and sustained injuries that plagued him for the rest of his life. Though the physical injuries were nothing compared to the guilt and shame. He desperately wished he could trade places with his men.

The horrors of war defy the imaginations of those of us who have never been on the ground.

Doody had never been a religious man. He was raised in a secular home. But after witnessing the death of all his men, his secularism became an intense atheism, often filled with contempt. If there was a God, Doody felt, he had left entirely that morning when all his men were blown to pieces.

I first met Doody 22 years ago, in the days when you would still call a dispatcher if you needed a ride to or from the airport. I enjoyed practicing my Hebrew with him on my way back from SFO. He dropped me off at home, and then went on to his get his next passenger. But a few hours later - Doody was back at my front door. I had left my cell phone in his car! He returned it to me, along with his business card.

From then on, whenever my husband or I needed a ride to the airport, instead of calling the dispatcher we would call Doody directly. And then there was a period of over a year when I needed a ride every week, and Doody and I became good friends.

He and I had a little joke. I knew he was an atheist, he knew I was a rabbi. We respected each other, and we liked each other. As I would get into his car, I would ask him, "מה נשמע?"
Which means, What's up?

The proper response - remember - is Baruch Hashem - Blessed God!
But Doody would say - "Baruch Ashem" Ah instead of Ha. Ashem means guilty, and Baruch Ashem means: "The Blessed is Guilty".

It was a friendly ribbing.

One day, about ten years into our friendship, Doody called me in tears. He had been living in a trailer, which belonged to a friend of his and was parked on her property. The trailer was not up to code, and his living conditions were pretty bad, but it beat living on the street. Only lately, his landlady had a new boyfriend who had taken a dislike to Doody. And now the boyfriend had called the police to report the illegal occupancy of the trailer, and Doody was being evicted.

Where would he go? He might have taken temporary refuge in a homeless shelter, except that Doody had several little dogs whom he adored. He

called them “yeladim sheli”, my children, and he really did treat them like his children. No shelter would let him bring all of those dogs with him. I couldn’t bear to see Doody suffering so, and I did something a little reckless. I cleared out my family’s garage, and invited Doody to move in with his dogs. I told him it was just for 6 months - but for his sake and ours. We did not want a long term houseguest, especially not one with multiple dogs. And a garage is not a place for a human to live, especially not housed together with his dogs.

But Doody was not earning enough money from his taxifares to get himself a proper place on the peninsula, or even one on the other side of the bridge. And so 6 months turned into a year, and then two, and then 3, and in total Doody and his dogs lived in our garage for 7 years.

He has, by the way, given me permission, to share this entire story.

In the beginning of our friendship, when he was driving me to the airport at a base bargain rate just because he liked me, we would share a naughty laugh at his Baruch Ashem pun. After his financial situation became desperate and he moved into our garage, he would still respond Baruch Ashem when I asked how he was doing, but with a darkness in his voice. We wouldn’t even bother to laugh any more.

Doody is an artist. He works in paint and in clay and in digital forms, and all of his art is abstract, with very detailed designs. His clay pieces in particular take many hours of painstaking work. I have two of his vases on my mantle at home, one of his paintings framed in our living room, and several other paintings stashed away in closets. But these were all produced at least a decade and a half ago.

During the seven years that he lived in our garage, Doody did not produce a single piece of art.

Looking back on it, his Baruch Ashem - the Blessed is guilty - was much more than just a pun. It was a description of his state of mind. Doody felt cut off from all joy. He was in physical pain, because his old war injuries had gotten worse over time. He was haunted by memories from his past. He felt ashamed and isolated, and he increasingly isolated himself. By the end of his stay with us, he almost never left the house.

Doody did not just feel himself to be unfortunate. He felt himself to be unblessed.

When my husband and I decided we really needed Doody to leave our home, there were so many reasons why he did not want to go. Big reasons and small ones, but at the heart they came down to the same thing. He was scared. His living conditions on our property were not good. But it was familiar, and in his unblessed state Doody could not face the unknown.

My husband and I had to hold his hand through the entire move, right down to my driving him to Arizona and unloading his van for him. But when we got there, for the first time in years he looked happy. We had helped him purchase a mobile home using a small inheritance he had received from his mother. His dignity and sense of self were restored by having his own place to live.

He immediately became friends with his next door neighbors. He never said two words to our next door neighbors when he was living with us. He made best friends with the handyman whom the realtor had recommended to us. And, Doody began creating art again. Almost a new clay piece every day, and he has more new friends who have been buying his art because, as he reported in a text message not long after he got to Arizona: "It's what they see and believe that I'm the most talented artist they ever met, I a little agree with them, I'm surprised myself."

But what blew me away, not long after he started creating his art again- Doody several times texted to thank me and David for being a blessing. Don't get me wrong. He has always, consistently been grateful to us. But to

use such overtly religious language! To call us a blessing! It's like he became a different person.

At one point, Doody texted to tell me about a gift his handyman friend had given him. At the end of the long text, he wrote: "I'm blessed"

I texted back, "Truly you are blessed!"

And, Doody shot back: "Amen." In that exchange, I suddenly understood the meaning of the word "blessing."

Perhaps, God's promise of blessing for Abraham was not precisely a reward for his faith. Perhaps it was the prerequisite for faith. I don't know if anyone is capable of stepping into the dark unknown if they feel they are alone. Perhaps to be blessed is to be aware of whatever amount of goodness you have in your life, and to experience that goodness as a connecting force between you and someone else - perhaps another person, perhaps God. Blessing is connection. When you are blessed, you never feel yourself to be alone.

To bless God is not simply to express praise. It is to express connection. Baruch Atah Ado-nai - blessed are You God - you are connected to us, and we are connected to you. We elevate Your name, and you elevate our being.

So I stand here today to tell you, my friends, that you are all blessed. Every one of us is connected to God. All you need to do is open your heart to feel that connection, and you will know that you are blessed.

And if you know that you are blessed, then you must go out into the world and be a blessing to others, as Abraham was commanded to do. Blessings are like love. They cannot be sustained unless they are shared. Let's start right now. If you are sitting next to someone, turn to them and say "may you be blessed."

And now, if you are able, stand up, and find someone not sitting with you, and bless them as well. I will come down and join you. Let us feel God's blessing, and let us bless each other.