

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
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It Can Change in an Instant

Until he retired in 1990, Harry Roth was the rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Andover, Massachusetts. After he retired, he became the Jewish chaplain on the QEII, which is the last place I saw him. I was serving as rabbi in Hong Kong, and one day I received a fax from Harry saying that the QEII was docking a few days later in Hong Kong. Would I like to come aboard? When it docked, I did, and he and I spent a few wonderful hours together schmoozing on the ship.

I knew Harry, of course, from our having accompanied our respective confirmands together on the annual Greater Boston confirmation-class trips to New York city, and more than colleagues, Harry and I became friends. In those days, we used to take our kids on the annual trip to 770 Eastern Parkway, the headquarters of Lubavitch in Brooklyn (We later stopped that because we had to spend too many hours after that visit de-programming our kids!). Anyway, on one of those trips, Harry, after having been rear-ended in a car accident, was wearing a neck-brace. Upon entering 770, one of the *rebayim* (That's a right-wing term for rabbis) who was going to accompany us on our visit, asked Harry, "What happened?"

Harry responded, trying to be clever, responded in a kidding manner, "I must have done something wrong!"

"No," the Lubavitcher shot back in total seriousness, "You must have done something right. You're here. Alive!"

Life can turn on a dime. At the response of that Lubavitcher, my mind went back to a conversation I had had years earlier. It was at one of those all-faith chaplain meetings we sometimes had when I was a chaplain in Germany back during the time of the Vietnam War. There was a Christian chaplain there that I was having a conversation with. Suddenly I noticed, on the chest-full of ribbons representing medals he had been awarded and that came from his having served in Vietnam, that the first ribbon was that of the Silver Star. Now, the Silver Star, officially the Silver Star Medal, is the United States military's third-highest decoration for valor in combat. It is awarded for extreme "gallantry in action" against the enemy. That a chaplain had been awarded such a medal meant...well it meant God knows what. The minute I asked him what he had done to get the Silver Star, I knew I probably shouldn't have asked. But it was too late. The words had already come out.

His answer, slowly and hesitatingly, was. “What I did to get it was to be in ‘in the wrong place at the right time.’”

I didn’t push. All I said, simply, was, “I understand.” I said that because I knew that most medals for that kind of bravery, just like the Distinguished Service Cross and the Congressional Medal of Honor, the two medals awarded for even an higher level of bravery or gallantry in action than it took to get the Silver Star, were awarded posthumously.

Life can turn on a dime. We can be safe one moment, and the next we aren’t. Maybe that’s why there is a practice in Judaism known as *bentsching gomel*. What the act consists of, simply, is, after coming out of a life-threatening situation, one typically is called to the Torah and, after the person recites the *b’rakhah* after the reading, the person says,

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַגּוֹמֵל לְחַיִּים טוֹבוֹת, שֶׁנִּמְלְנִי כָּל טוֹב.

The translation: “You are blessed, our Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, who bestows goodnesses upon the culpable [and] has bestowed all good upon me.”

The congregation then responds,

אָמֵן. מִי שֶׁנִּמְלְךְ כָּל טוֹב, הוּא יִנְמְלְךְ כָּל טוֹב סְלָה.

The meaning of that is, “Amein. May the One who has bestowed beneficence upon you, may that One [always] bestow beneficence upon you, Selah.”

Now our tradition says there are four categories of people who are supposed to recite *birkat hagomel*, the blessing of bestowal, which is the technical name for that *b’rakhah*. They are:

People who have crossed the ocean (as on an overseas flight travel, etc.);

People who have crossed the desert (Included in this category of desert are all other life threatening situations from which one is saved such as a wall collapsing upon him/her, a goring ox, robbers, car accidents, and the like);

People who have recovered from a very serious illness; and

People who have been released from prison.

The blessing is recited in the presence of a *minyan*, typically within three days after coming through the situations requiring the *b’rakhah* (though it might be five days if three days isn’t possible). And women traditionally say the blessing after going through childbirth.

So why the *b’rakhah* and why in the presence of a *minyan*? The first, why the *b’rakhah*, is because Judaism, in the main, believes in Divine Providence being present in our lives. We don’t take our lives as some random, accidental, chance phenomenon.

Judaism believes Divine lovingkindness is operative within it. We acknowledge that even from the moment we awaken each morning when we say,

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁהַחַיּוּת בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ.

The translation of that is “I give thanks before You, living and enduring Sovereign, for You have compassionately restored my soul within me. Great is Your faithfulness!” And if we say that when we wake up in the morning, how much the more so when we have survived a situation where our lives were endangered.

And why in the presence of a *minyan*? Likely it’s because we recognize that we are part of and dependent upon a community that believes each and every one of us is a valuable part of it and that helps make us who and what we are. When one is “saved,” we all are part of that.

But, as I said, life can turn on a dime. Several years ago, I once was involved in a terrible car accident. I survived because the point of impact was about eight inches away from my being broadsided where I was sitting. And when I went to shul the following Shabbat, I *bentsched gomel*, said the blessing of bestowal, and, yes, I cried, likely because reciting the *b'rakhah* was so cathartic.

So why do I bring this all up now? Well, a week before last, Janet and I, out of the blue and but a mile from where we are living, were rear-ended. It happened while we were moving, too, something no one could have expected. Who knows? Maybe the other person was texting. Maybe his car phone, as he said, really did fall out of his hand and he was bending over to pick it up instead of watching the road. Well, fortunately, no one was hurt, and my car is repairable.

But the part that is worth noting, and the part which generates my saying that life can turn on a dime, is the fact that when I took my car into the shop and after an experienced appraiser had called the damage only what he could see, the body shop man opened up the trunk, looked under the spare tire and saw a hole where, judging from the break in the exhaust system, carbon monoxide was pouring into my car as I was driving it after the accident. Who knew? Odorless, colorless, and deadly! That one *could* have been life-threatening.

The point: life is a gift, greater still that we know that life is a gift. And that, for all of us, is why we dare not ever take life for granted. Or dare waste a day of it.

For us all, may we live our lives to the fullest and be thankful, each and every day, for the opportunity we have to do so. And to that I say, *keyn y'hi ratzon*, so may it be God’s (and our) will.