Be Thou a Blessing

I was deeply touched to receive this invitation from Rabbi Ellenson and the senior class. But at the same time, I was intimidated by the challenge. After all, you, the ordainees, have been building your lives toward this culminating and initiating moment for years. Your families and friends have gathered from near and far to celebrate this highly anticipated transformative event. What can I possibly say that can enhance the power and meaning of an already incomparable day? This magnificent setting in the Plum Street Temple says it all far better than words can articulate. And the sense of history that envelops all of us today is palpable. We sense the presence of Isaac Meyer Wise, the builder of this synagogue and founder of our seminary. We think of all the subsequent HUC presidents, the faculty members and staff, the board members, to whom you, the ordainees, are now heirs. We remember the lines of ordainees who have ascended these steps year after year. Although you may have planned for this day for a very long time, your lives will be forever changed in a moment, with the laying on of the hands by Rabbi Ellenson. Henceforth you will be a rabbi, the latest link in a chain, which reaches back to Moses. For we learn in Numbers Chapter 27 that Moses ordained Joshua, designating him as successor. Moses also ordained seventy elders who assisted him in governing the people. These elders ordained their successors, who in turn ordained others, so that a continual succession of ordainers and ordainees existed from Moses to the time of the Second Temple. During the Second Temple Period, the Sanhedrin took over the role of Ordination, and the beginning of Mishnah Pirke Avot reflects that continuing line of authority, which originated with Moses. As of today, you the Ordination Class of 5771 will represent the latest links in this ancient chain. As we participate once again in this hallowed rite, we celebrate both our roots in antiquity and our forward momentum into ever-renewing modernity.

My first inclination when sitting down to write this address was to attempt to reiterate one last time everything I had ever attempted to teach in the classroom. You can relax, however. I decided I could not reduce it down far enough to constitute an appropriate length. I am also cognizant of the fact that the main event today is Ordination, not whatever slight wisdom I might impart. I hope I can rely upon the wisdom of the Psalmist when he asserted:

מִזְדָּרַד נַעֲרוֹתָם יָדוֹ, "The Eternal One upholds the humble" (Psalms 147:6).
Our Torah portion, which was read so beautifully this morning, is both inspiring and troubling: Inspiring, because the language in verses 3–13, which we commonly refer to as the “blessings,” is truly uplifting. We are told that if we comply with the divine will, we will receive a reward of rich harvests, peace, and safety from wild animals. Our population will increase, and God will take up residence in our midst. By acknowledging God, the end goal of the Exodus will be realized.

As inspiring as are the potential “blessings,” equally horrifying are the potential punishments laid out graphically in verses 14–45. Time precludes my summarizing this ascending series of increasingly harsh goads toward compliance with the divine will. Suffice it to say that the incentives are directed toward individuals, communities and even the entire people. Only confession and repentance can bring God to remember the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to obviate the incrementally more abhorrent punishments.

Very similar to the “blessings” of verses 3–13 in our Torah portion are the words of Deuteronomy 11:13–21. Again the people are urged to obey the commandments and to love God, serving God with complete heart and soul. In turn, God will grant rain and abundant harvest. The Deuteronomy passage is repeated daily as the second paragraph after the Sh'ma in the traditional liturgy.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am both inspired and troubled by our portion and the similar section in Deuteronomy. What troubles me, and probably many of you, is the seeming naiveté of the theology conveyed. Long ago in Homiletics class I was taught that one should never make negative use of the text when preaching. Yet, on the face of it, the message is too simple and not in consonance with reality — our reality or theirs. It has never been the case that if one complies with the divine will, rewards from heaven will automatically follow. As idyllic as that kind of predictability would be, we all know that much of the time life simply does not work that way. Those who are faithful to God don’t always receive physical blessing. The Rabbis who created the liturgy, incorporating Deuteronomy 11:13–21 into the Sh'ma, knew that. They knew of the pious spiritual giants who had been martyred by the Romans. And we ourselves can point to thousands of years of Jewish history to call this theology into question. Whether we cite the issues of theodicy posed by the Book of Job, or Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, the problem is the same. And yet I do not think the Biblicists or the Rabbis were naïve. Hence I must look for another explanation for these passages.
Perhaps the underlying meaning for these passages can be intuited from this dilemma — why are so many more verses devoted to those who seem to require explicit threats to urge compliance? The ratio of blessings to potential punishments is ten verses to twenty-four verses.

I would suggest that the answer lies in the biblical stress on the human heart and its faithlessness. Let me give an early example: Noah, after disembarking the ark, built an altar and made offerings to God. God’s response was: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the inclinations of the human heart are evil from his youth. Rashi, the medieval biblical commentator, understood מנדיר not as “from his youth” but “from his first embryonic twitches.” The yetzer harah, the evil inclination, is present in humans from birth. All subsequent life is a struggle to bring that yetzer under control. When the Sh’mah, from Deuteronomy 6:5, urges us to love God with all our hearts — כבל ל Şub — two bets are in the word ל тебך when one would have sufficed. The Rabbis understood this to mean with the yetzer tov and the yetzer harah, the good and the evil inclinations. We cannot rid ourselves of the evil inclination. The best we can do is sublimate. So perhaps the real purpose of the catalogue of punishments is to render a strong literary urging to walk the straight and narrow. The punishments should be understood as proscriptive rather than descriptive.

Earlier in Genesis, God addressed Cain after showing greater attention to brother Abel and his offering. God said to Cain:

Why are you distressed,
And why is your face fallen?
Surely, if you do right,
There is uplift.
But if you do not do right
Sin crouches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master (Genesis 4:6–7).

One common theme emerges from all of these passages: God wants us to do right, but it won’t be easy, because temptations are everywhere and so we must constantly be on our guard.

Let us look again at the potential punishments of our portion, ascending in strength and becoming ever more frightful. If we read just verses 14–45, we are taught that we should act out of an overwhelming sense of fear and dread. The image of
God we derive is of a harsh and vindictive deity, who uses human misfortune and suffering as a vehicle to gain compliance with the divine will. I would suggest that the purpose of such imagery is to bring about in us, at the very least, a state of humility.

If we look just at verses 3–13, what I have termed “the blessings,” or the positive inducements, we are taught that we should act out of a sense of love. The image of God we derive is of a totally loving deity. The danger here is that such total self-affirmation could well lead to pridefulness. By reading the blessings and the punishments together, we learn that we need to strike a balance somewhere between utter humility and complacency, self-centeredness, and even hubris.

In a famous hasidic story, Rabbi Bunim teaches that every person should carry two pieces of paper, one in your right hand pocket and the other in your left. On one of the pieces you write the words from Abraham’s bargaining with God over Sodom:

I am but dust and ashes (Genesis 18:27). On the other piece you write a very different verse, from Talmud Sanhedrin 37b:

“For my sake the world was created.” The key to living a fulfilling and successful life is to be guided simultaneously by both of these messages and to make every effort to keep them in balance. I suggest that this as well is the lesson of our parasha.

I’m certain that at this point you are asking yourselves what this prior interpretation of the Torah portion has to do with rabbinic ordination. What I have tried to explain is my understanding that what the Bible and the Rabbis are urging is proper behavior and praiseworthy character. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah (1:10) teaches:

“These are ineligible for testimony: one who plays with dice, and a lender on interest, and pigeon-flyers, and traders in produce of the sabbatical year, and slaves.” Now I grant that our attitudes toward some of these activities may have changed today. I would not be too upset, for example, if you raced and bet on pigeons. But the important thing to note is that each of these individuals, in his own time-place, was suspect with regard to his character, trustworthiness, reliability. And if the common person had to maintain certain recognized standards in order to play a responsible role in communal life, how much the more so should a rabbi be absolutely above reproach in all regards. One of the major sources of authority for the rabbi is his or her person — his or her personal qualities. We want our rabbis to embody integrity, devotion, dedication and love. All Jews are commanded to be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy (to quote Leviticus), but we want our rabbis to be even a little holier. To the extent to which they personify these high ideals, their authority grows.
When the ancient Rabbis read the paragraph after the Sh'ma which begins אֲמֹרֵךְ אֲלֹהֵי אֲבָנָךְ יִרְאָה הָאָדָם "and you shall cause others to love the Lord your God." How is this to be done? By the example for good that one sets. So not only must rabbis guide themselves on the path of blessing, but, like it or not, rabbis by definition become role models. You, the new rabbis, will be teaching, not only with your words, but more importantly, by your actions. Expect to be scrutinized; it goes with the territory. Your character is your greatest treasure. Do not allow it to become tarnished.

Although one’s character is a sine qua non for the rabbinate, Ordination itself is the ultimate source of rabbinic authority. Earlier I traced the chain of rabbinic authority back to Moses. But it is incumbent upon each individual ordainee to bring personal content to the title Rabbi. Each of you has studied long and hard. You have grappled with questions of philosophy and theology, meaning and purpose. You have mastered significant portions of our tradition, and are eager to share what you have learned. But you also know how much can yet be learned. Ordination is a beginning, not an end. It is the beginning of one’s shaping of his or her rabbinate. We who represent your alma mater hope that your rabbinites will be characterized by continued study and learning, no longer to fulfill assignments and pass courses, but because the act of studying is not only a privilege but a religious obligation. My teacher, Rabbi Eugene Mihaly, ל”ז, used to refer to Torah study as “praying the text.” I hope you will zealously leave time in your lives to “pray the text.” We study, not out of a sense of antiquarian interest, but rather to bring classic Jewish texts to bear on our own experiences. Through study, we engage in an ongoing dialogue with the text.

In the beginning of parashat Lekh Lekha, Genesis 12:1, we read:

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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.”

That is my prayer for each of you, our new Ordainees, today:

That you may be a blessing.

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