

## Lightning Strikes Once--and That's Too Much! Erev Yom Kippur 5774 Rabbi Sanford R. Kopnick--The Valley Temple

We returned from Israel last June on a Sunday night, and went to our home to unpack and go through almost two weeks of mail. By 11:00 the next morning, I was outside Indianapolis for my 36th summer connected to Goldman Union Camp, and my 20-something summer on faculty. In the years I have been connected at the camp, I tried most of the jobs, and held many of them. From counselor to avodahnik, from administrator to unit head, and from camper to program director, I have experienced all that Goldman Union Camp had to offer. I had thought I had seen everything, until the first Shabbat of my faculty stint this year. The previous Shabbat Nancy and I were in Jerusalem, and now we were enjoying Shabbat in what many of our kids think of as the Jerusalem of the Midwest--Zionsville, Indiana. Right after services, I took a Valley Temple picture for the bulletin. I also took a picture of all of the GUCI campers and staff, who hail from the Cincinnati area, and then a picture for Wise Temple and one for Rockdale. This is the Rockdale picture I took:



Just a few hours later, lightning would strike the athletic field of the camp, and the

boy standing in the middle of this picture, Ethan Kadish,



would be one of three campers who would be affected by that random act of the weather. Nancy and I had been off-camp and were returning to the camp when we heard the boom, and were surprised by it. It wasn't raining, and there was no thunder. When we arrived at camp, we realized that something was terribly wrong. When I arrived at the athletic field, counselors were completing CPR on three campers so that ambulances would transport them to nearby hospitals. Those three children's lives were saved by the quick and instinctive reactions of those counselors and staff members. I had never seen anything like it.

Two of the three children regained consciousness relatively quickly, and were held for observation for a few days, but Ethan had been far more seriously injured, and his recovery was (and is) far more precarious. When Ethan's parents were told of his injuries, their first response was the appropriate concern and horror, but also a gratitude to and concern for the camp for all that had transpired. They showed a grace and appreciation for the camp and its staff. Even though this family's life has been permanently changed, their initial reactions were to take care of their son, and to take care of the rest of us, too. They embraced their rabbi, (Rabbi Coran of Rockdale) the camp that had been instilling Judaism in their son, and continued to call for prayers, and appreciated when they heard about how prayerful so many of us had become. They saw Judaism and their faith as one of the

sources for strength to endure this horror. And in so doing, they have inspired many of us.

Around a month after the lightning at camp, the Torah cycle continued into Deuteronomy, where there is a lot of talk of blessing and curse. Bar Mitzvah Student Sam Smith, Jon and Susan Hoffheimer's grandson was reading one of the passages explaining that if we follow God's laws, blessing will come, and if we don't, then curse will come. Sam challenged himself and all of us to really try to figure out whether our behavior really causes God's reward and punishment. And the Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning drives this home when it says in

**Deuteronomy 30:15-16** See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup> For I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His laws, and His rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter.

It later says, **Deuteronomy 30:19**

הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת יָתֵי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרֹתְךָ  
בַּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחַתְּךָ אֶתְּךָ וּרְגַעְךָ -

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Choose life -- if you and your offspring would live --

As I studied with Sam for his Bar Mitzvah, prepared for Torah studies with our small but mighty group on Shabbat morning, and thought about Ethan lying in his Children's hospital bed, I needed to understand this idea of blessings and curses--and how it connected to following God's ways and loving God's commandments.

Truth is, I was very angry at God. I was thankful that no one had asked me to religiously explain that moment at camp.

How was it possible that young Ethan, celebrating Shabbat in the most religious place a Reform child in America can find--would come so close to dying--all while he was choosing life, following God's ways, and learning about how to follow more of them. How could a family who, hours before the lightning strike, put invitations in the mail for the their son's Bar Mitzvah which was supposed scheduled for weeks later, act with such grace and faith? And not just Ethan, but so many of you who act with profound righteousness, yet deal with so much adversity, how does the Torah have the chutzpah to suggest that one way makes for blessing, and the wrong way makes for curse?

The answer, however, is in the text. Sometimes, the answer is in the white spaces *between* the words, thus calling us to interpret what is not there. This, I believe, is not the case this time.

The text teaches: *I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>For I command you this day, to love Adonai your God, to walk in God's ways, and to keep God's commandments... It then goes on to say... I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life -- if you and your offspring would live.*

Some say this is how we know God gives us free will. Some say that this says, "this is the world God created, make the most of it." But for those of us who believe that God is active and capable of functioning in this world--even if we shouldn't expect supernatural or inexplicable events to defy the laws of nature, there has to be some middle ground between total free will, and free will with God's active presence in the world. And that is what the text says to me.

First, we are made aware that life and good, death and evil are part of the world that God created. It is the Biblical response to the idea, "stuff happens." And rather than asking why, we have to accept the point that this is the world that God

created--a world where Cancer infects righteous people, and where the laws of nature can explain how a boy just weeks before celebrating his Bar Mitzvah now lies in a hospital room, the victim of a random act of violent weather.

These "bad" things have scientific explanations. And God can be blamed in as much as these things are part of the world God created. They are cause and effect, but they are not reward and punishment. The text lays out that life and death, and good and bad are realities of the world. Blessing and curse, however, are the result of our intentional acts when we make the choices Deuteronomy commands us to make.

The Kadishes have said they feel so blessed for being the recipients of so much love, prayer, and kindness. And while they do not think of the family's situation as a blessing, it is not a curse, either. It is horrible. It is the result of stuff that happens when people choose to live in God's world. After all, the alternative isn't acceptable.

I think the blessing our Torah tries so hard to describe is the result of doing our best to follow a holy life, to strive to include our faith and its celebration into the mundane of life. And I think the curse comes when we *actively* exclude it. It is not reward and punishment like what happens to a dog with a treat or a smack on the nose. Blessing is what happens when, even though someone is forced to live with profound adversity or evil, rituals and belief help put life's challenges into a context for how to live with them, and not die from them. We all know that death will certainly happen to everyone, and until then, we live life. But blessing and curse is connected to how we live our life, and has nothing to do with the evil and the good that is in it.

A prominent member of a congregation in Chicago would come to the Torah study each week to see if his behavior would warrant God's wrath. He intentionally acted like a *shtoonk*, because

he thought he got richer in business with some shady practices and enjoyed belittling others as he climbed his business-success ladder. But he knew better. He checked in at the Temple to wonder if he would get an illness or evil would befall his family as a result of God punishing him for his un-Torah-like conduct. It is true that people feared him, but the number of people who would do something nice for him, who would appreciate his presence in a room, or would bestow kindness upon him were few and far between. That is curse. His constant worry about God's approval--that is curse.

It is easy to think of winning the lottery or avoiding an accident when the car swerves on an icy road and stops just inches away from a collision as a reward. Those are great things--but the blessing is to live in a world where winning the lottery gives someone the chance for greater *tzedakah*, and avoiding the accident is followed with a thankfulness to God--not because God made the breaks work, but because we know how to appreciate a fortunate moment that keeps us safe, and then gives us fewer distractions to creating a better world as God's partners with creation.

I believe that God created the world. I think that many of us have a difficult time reconciling science with the Bible. Therefore, many dismiss the Bible as utter fiction. Yet, for me, when I consider how complex the scientific theories are, much of the Bible seems to understand the gist of it--even if it is very primitive. And yet, all I have to do is look at the seasons change, the brilliant crisp days when the sky is at its most blue, and that the many cycles of nature are generally harmonious; or remember the births of my children, or even watch teenagers miraculously become adults when they save the life of their camper--and see proof after proof of God's existence and influence.

Many of us have done things that we wish we could take back. Others have done

things that have added profound good to the world--and no one even knows it. Yet, the intentional wrongs that we committed curse us because we know we fell short. And the good we've done--even in anonymity, are blessings--because we know we rose to the occasion.

When we take the time to figure out how each of us defines what it means to love Adonai, to walk in God's ways, and to respond to being commanded--not just suggested--we can begin to understand the difference between blessing and curse. People who can maintain positive attitudes, even though their life's journeys are filled with a string of unfortunate events and horror, have figured out how to choose life and blessing, rather than death or curse.

So I took Ethan's picture on that fateful day at camp, and hours later was praying for his survival. This horrible experience clarified for me that blessing comes in many forms--even during terrible times. I do not accept that God intended for Ethan to get hurt--even though God created the world where lightning strikes. I do think that God is capable of the miraculous moments that could have had Ethan walk away from this accident--but cannot expect God to act in ways that are contrary to what we know about "the way things go." But the blessing that day was in the responses of those around Ethan and his parents. I found God there--lots of times. And while we all could be cursed for intentionally walking away from Judaism, prayer, and all the comfort that our like-minded community brought to that family, let's strive to choose life and blessing--just like Ethan's parents have--as we remember that theirs is a road that will be unthinkable difficult to travel for years to come.

May we all seek ways to find the blessings and minimize the curses--as we acknowledge the good and evil in the world--and continue to choose life. *G'mar Chatimah Tovah!*