

Blessing

We are a people of blessing—we are taught to frame each day with a morning recitation of “Nissim B’chol Yom”, a list of daily miracles, reminding ourselves to acknowledge these often-overlooked blessings, regularly. We offer gratitude for things as grand as waking up once again, alive, to those as seemingly mundane as being clothed. This act of training ourselves to recognize and acknowledge blessing, even and especially when things are hard, familiar, boring, or imperfect, is something that extends beyond our individual lives and prayer practices into Judaism at large. We choose to see blessing in so many forms and places. We bless rainbows, recalling the destruction and restoration of our world. We bless incredibly strange looking creatures, invoking sacred variation. We say the Asher Yatzar to honor the fragility of our bodies, giving thanks for their continued functioning.

For us, a sight, experience, or being does not need to be flawless to be worthy of blessing. Rather, imperfection is an important mechanism through which we find and name blessing in our world. Here in America, our Jewish story is not perfect, but it is one that is worthy of *and is itself* a blessing. The American Jewish story is unique in world history. Since Jacob Barsimson arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, the first known Jew to set foot on what became American soil, Jews have had the privilege of citizenship unmarred by a local history of extreme violence and oppression. Even with today’s rising antisemitism, and the many, real imperfections that have and do exist here, it should not be lost on us that we have never had greater access, power or privilege at any point in history, here or anywhere else.

In America, Jews have not been ghettoized, faced pogroms, exile, inquisition or genocide. We have not been purged nor has our “impure” blood been tracked for centuries. Our children have not been abducted to serve in royal armies, nor have we paid dhimmi tax or faced forced conversion. In the absence of these horrors, we have lived and built our American Jewish civilization in a place that has not only allowed us to remain alive but has enabled and often encouraged us to thrive.

We have gone all in with this opportunity. Over the past centuries, as 2.4 percent of the overall American population, Jews have contributed greatly to America. Here, where we have not been forced into a silo-ed few professions, we have touched nearly every industry in American life. From literally helping to finance the American Revolution, to being present and central advocates achieving labor and voting rights, to civil rights activism, amazing discoverers within

science and medicine, creators of entertainment industries and early contributors to feminism, Jewish Americans have played a part in it all. Today, it is even a regular occurrence for Jews to run for president!

Not only have we contributed an incredible amount, but we have gained so much in return. Here in America, we have seen a great flowering of denominations. Here, not beneath the yoke of a state religion, we have developed Reform, Conservative, Reconstructing, Renewal, Orthodox, Neo-Orthodox, Modern-Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox Judaisms. We have seen the great expanse of Jewish culture, secular and religious, span the worlds of art, film, theater, television, music, and dance. We have seen Jewish culture go mainstream. We have seen Jewish clergy of all genders flourish and diversify, Jewish politics reflect far more than one interpretation of our own interests. We have witnessed the growth of Zionism and at the same time, a deep sense of Jewish “here-ness”. And, in America, the Jews who have wished to step away from their Jewishness, have been able to do so-whether we agree with such assimilation, it is a privilege not seen at scale, before.

As we stand in this moment, where blessing can feel hard to access, it is critical that we remember we are literally etched, engraved, embedded into the backbone and structures of American society. The words of Emma Lazarus, a Sephardic Jewess, adorn the statue of liberty. Nearly every lower body in America (and the world), has been swaddled in jeans, envisioned and created by our own Levi Strauss. Just as we bless the sight of a rainbow, a strange looking creature, the unreliable functioning of the human body, may we remember that our lives here are a blessing. That imperfect America has offered us what no other place has or does-and that is something upon which we will not give up.

We rise for the Amidah!