

This week's Torah portion contains the most famous blessing in the entire Torah. You may have heard it first from your rabbi at a baby naming or Bar Mitzvah or under your *chuppah* or you know it from Friday nights when parents use the very same words to bless their children. The Israel museum has an amulet that dates from the first Commonwealth period, over 2500 years ago, with the words of the blessing. It was apparently worn on a chain around someone's neck like we might wear a Jewish star or Chai. This blessing has been an important part of our lives for thousands of years.

"May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up the Divine face and give you peace."

Another time we'll talk about the meaning of each verse of the blessing. Tonight I want to point out the context and suggest why the blessing is so important. The Torah tells us that God instructs Moses saying: "Tell Aaron and his sons, the priests, that they should bless the Israelites with these words ... and that through this blessing they will put God's name on the Israelites and I will bless them."

So who is blessing whom?

Clearly the priests are speaking the words, but the blessing comes from God. From this powerful insight we learn an important truth about our tradition: blessings come from God, but people, the ancient priests, rabbis, parents, anyone...can be a vessel for God's blessing.

This insight is central to our task of transforming Temple Emanuel into a congregation that truly can live up to its name: Emanuel -God is among us. For that to be true, each of us, lay leader and clergy, parents and educators, congregant and professional staff member...each of us must see ourselves as a vessel of God's blessing.

As I look back over the year, I think we are on our way. As you'll hear from Sue, the focus on sharing stories through the Elul and the Omer projects helped so many of us feel connected to people we don't even know because they shared their stories. The wonderful *mishloach manot*, the Purim baskets that many of you deliver to each other, make people feel special and valued... often the delivery turns into a visit and maybe even a friendship. The work we continue to do through *Hineni*, our community organizing effort, begins with congregants sharing stories about what keeps them up at night, and out of those stories the issues that matter to us become clear. Much of the economic insecurity work that Sue will report on evolved out of this process, a process led by congregants whose work to make a difference in that larger community demonstrates that God's blessings flow through them.

We have begun several other important initiatives this year. One is the Muslim Jewish dialogue, the twinning of our congregation with the largest mosque in Los Angeles, the King Fahad Mosque. After a major public event in November, there have been a series of encounters both here and at the mosque where we have learned about

each other's traditions and each other. About fifty Emanuel members have been engaged in the process along with a similar number of Muslims from the mosque. Especially in the light of President Obama's speech this week, this dialogue is important both to us and to them. It was wonderful when we took our confirmation students to visit the mosque and one student engaged in a powerful conversation with the imam about God. He told me later that being able to ask questions about God was one reason he was so glad to be Jewish. Who is blessing whom? In this case it seems clear each community is blessing the other.

A second initiative is the Re-Imagine Project. Working with the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC, we have created a task force led by Alissa Roston, Gary Yale, Amy Cohen and Jonathan Corren to imagine other models of religious education for our children. It imagines four goals of religious education: the integration between Jewish learning and Jewish living, the creation of meaningful community, family involvement and creating memorable moments. It is asking, without limiting assumptions, what are the many different ways we could do all this. It is a genuinely exciting process that already has begun to yield low hanging fruit, like the Omer stories about Jewish learning. The task force will report to the Board next spring and propose some alternative models to our already excellent religious school. Who is blessing whom? The lay leaders sharing their time, talent and vision will become a blessing to everyone who will be part of this re-imagined religious school. And those who are on the Task Force are already experiencing the challenge as a blessing.

Sue will share with you the blessing of the Imagine LA volunteers who are helping one family move from homelessness to creating a secure home. You already know the blessing of MATCH, and of the impact this innovative teen philanthropy has on our teenagers as well as the organizations they have chosen to support.

In other years I have given what amounts to a report about programs. But what is most important as we reflect on the teaching from our Torah portion that blessings flow from each of us to each other is that a community is created through relationships. Deepening relationships with each other is the beginning of creating a community that makes a difference in our lives, a sacred community.

You and I, all of us together, have a sacred task: to put God's name on this congregation so God can bless all of us through the community we create together. We can do it; we are doing it together, and our lives will be richer because of our work.

"May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May you see God's face in the faces of other human beings and then you will know peace."