**The Blessing of Renewed Beginnings**

May 10, 2022

**In Short:**

We thought we could do our jobs on Zoom and teams and send a gift box with a customized water bottle and brownie brittle, and it would feel like a conference. But not until we entered this room, did we truly understand the loss, the grief, the disappointments of not being together.

What a blessing it is to see all of you – a blessing that itself necessitates a blessing. And Judaism, being what it is, has a blessing for that. True friendship is a work of art, a thing of holiness. Its absence creates a void. Its renewed presence is worthy of prayer. This moment, being here with you, is worthy of that prayer. So I have a short one for you. Only three words long. It’s sourced in the Talmud:

“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who sees his friend after thirty days have passed recites: Blessed . . . Who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this time. One who sees his friend after twelve months recites: *Blessed . . . Who revives the dead.*” (BT *Brakhot* 58b)

Two thousand years ago, if you didn’t see someone for a whole year without a means of communication, the chance of seeing them ever again was grim. Seeing a treasured companion alive and well is an emotional resurrection of the dead; someone who became dead to you through absence suddenly comes alive again. Rav, a third-century Babylonian scholar, uses a prooftext for this practice from Psalms: “I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind; I am like a lost vessel” ([*Psalms*31:13](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.31.13?lang=he-en&utm_source=ejewishphilanthropy.com&utm_medium=sefaria_linker)). Just as it’s unlikely that a lost object will be found after a year, a friend may also become lost to us.

We, too, may feel lost or untethered. There are feelings that have remained dormant within us that need revitalization. They need to come to life again. We thought we could do our jobs on Zoom and Teams and send a gift box with a customized water bottle and brownie brittle, and it would feel like a conference. But not until we entered this room, did we truly understand the loss, the grief, the disappointments of not being together.

So the *Shecheyanu* is *not* today’s blessing. We reserve that for people, sights and tastes we haven’t had for 30 days. Today we make the blessing “*Barukh meyahe ha-matim*.” Please turn to someone next to you, look in their eyes and recite with me, these three words: “*Barukh meyahe ha-matim*.”

One medieval commentator writes that you should only recite this blessing on “a friend who is beloved.” Another adds that the friend should be one who provides pleasure. This is because a blessing expresses our enduring astonishment. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in *And From There You Shall Seek*, observes that “The benediction always signifies a moment of grace, a great, sublime moment of the utterer of the benediction, in which…[to]…attain a deep vision and acute look though the miraculous portal, torn open by a hidden hand to reveal a world that is entirely good and pleasant, and entirely miraculous.”

The reunion of friends, of colleagues, is a sublime moment of grace. These days it can feel like a miracle. I asked myself, “Who would be the first person I’d say this blessing over and hug when COVID was over?” I obsessed about this question – I perseverated not so much about the identity of the person but what I’d feel in the physical presence of that person after such a prolonged separation. It did not disappoint. It was pure was joy: a tearful, divine, radiant happiness that renewed me, renewed us. And that feeling is one I experienced, in part, this morning in a state of anticipation of seeing all of you – such wonderful friends and devoted colleagues – here in one room. We, who entered this field because we love people and love spaces of meaning and growth are here to celebrate that love and to create – in the spirit of collaboration – a space of meaning and growth together.

To that end, I want to share a teaching of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, a mentor and teacher to so many all over the worls. In *Judaism’s Life-Changing Ideas*, a book published three months before he died, Rabbi Sacks wrote:

“Judaism has foundational beliefs, to be sure, but it is fundamentally about something else altogether. For us, faith is the redemption of solitude. It is about relationships – between us and God, us and our family, us and our neighbours, us and our people, us and humankind. Judaism is not about the lonely soul. It is about the bonds that bind us to one another and to the Author of all. It is, in the highest sense, about friendship.”

How, then, do we reconstitute our organizations and bring people back and new people in? Malcolm Gladwell, in his new book, *Talking to Strangers* writes that, “Because we do not know how to talk to strangers, what do we do when things go awry with strangers? We blame the stranger.” And this coarsening of our social fabric, aided by the pandemic and political turmoil, offers us a giant, new job, in addition to the giant jobs we already have. We need to rebuild trust, almost as if each of our business cards reads “trust-builder” in addition to our job titles. Gladwell reminds us that, “If you don’t begin in a state of trust, you can’t have meaningful social encounters.”

… So, I say to you, with every ounce of love I can muster, if you’re a leader, this *is* what you signed up for because true leadership is always about negotiating uncertainty for yourself and for others. It’s about traveling in the wilderness for a really, really long time before you get to the Promised Land.

*Dr.* *Erica Brown is director of the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks Center for Values and Leadership at Yeshiva University Article: Jewish Philanthropy (online)*