

PARSHAT RE'EH
AUGUST 18, 2012
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Our Torah reading this morning begins with the words: "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God." It tells us that when the Children of Israel enter and possess the Land of Canaan, "you shall pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Ebal." They are instructed in the portion of Ki Tavo exactly on the procedure as it is to serve as a warning to the Children of Israel of the necessity of following the commandments of God as they enter the Promised Land.

The text sets up the dichotomy between blessings and curses. It seems to suggest that they never come in contact with one another, instead blessings and curses are diametrically opposed. I would like to suggest that no one's life is totally cursed and no one's life is totally blessed. Instead, all of us live lives that have blessings and also at times have what we would consider to be curses. The question that stands before us is how we live with both. What do we do to overcome the trials, the tribulations, the challenges of life and, at the same time, understand that while we should be grateful for the blessings, we must recognize that they, too, can sometimes not be as blessed as they seem initially to be?

I think that around the world, at least I know this is the case in the United States, there is probably more work being done this week than in the last two weeks. All eyes were trained on London as we watched the games of 30th Olympiad and saw the exploits of athletes trained to perform in their specialties. Take away the commercialism and the jingoism that is part of today's Olympics and there are many wonderful stories: stories of great athletic prowess and great personal courage; stories of family sacrifices and individuals who overcame tremendous hurdles in order to be present at the Olympics, even if they did not ascend to the medal stand.

One of the great stories of the Olympics was that of Oscar Pistorius of South Africa. He had his lower legs amputated as a baby after he was born without either fibula and became the first amputee athlete to compete in a running event at the Olympics. He already was a Paralympic champion, but to run in the Olympics, itself, was truly a great achievement. He was chosen by his colleagues to carry the flag of South Africa at the closing ceremonies. While he didn't win a medal, nor did South Africa in the 4 by 40 relay, he truly was a winner. He taught all of us that you can overcome tremendous disability and shine on the world stage.

Pistorius, when interviewed stated: "If I took all the positive things that I could have thought about this and multiplied them by ten, it would still not even be close. This week has just been one of the biggest blessings for me. It's taught me a lot. I've been inspired by so many athletes here. Just to have had that opportunity to step outside, it's just been absolutely phenomenal. I'm sure in a week I am going to have the same emotions that I am going to have in 20 or 50 years time."

While there was some controversy about whether his Cheetah blades gave him an extra advantage over other athletes, the athletes themselves moved beyond it and recognized the very special nature of the person and the moment. One of the most emotional moments of these Olympic Games occurred after a 400 meter heat in which Pistorius did not qualify for the finals. As the heat was completed, the victor and eventual gold medal winner, Grenada's Kirani James, made his way to Pistorius. The two of them hugged, and in an Olympic first, exchanged bibs. It was a moment of high athletic drama. It showed that an athlete could surmount tremendous disabilities, trials and tribulations and, on the world stage, command respect from other athletes. It is but one example of many people who, because of illness,

tragedy or incarceration, should be overwhelmed with despondency and despair, yet, are able to rise with courageous human spirit and move on with their lives as they teach all of us some important lessons.

In November, we are making arrangements to host Yosef Mendelevich, a former prisoner of conscience from Riga, Latvia. He was one of those who in 1970 attempted to hijack a Soviet plane in Leningrad and was incarcerated for 11 years. He has written a book which is now translated into English entitled *Unbroken Spirit: A Heroic Story of Faith, Courage and Survival*. As I read the book, I could feel the despondency that could be present in Mendelevich's life as he was taken from a psychiatric ward to the Gulag, from one labor camp to another labor camp, spending much time in solitary confinement. Yet, he survived to make Aliyah in 1981 and to re-establish his life. He could have been a broken man, but his Jewish soul and deep religious faith persevered long beyond the KGB who incarcerated him and the Soviet system which took away his freedom. As he writes in his book, "My years in prison taught me how very far the world is from perfection and wholeness – myself very much included. This awareness stirred within me the desire to become whole, to live a more just life, even as I realized that the matter did not depend on me alone. I came to understand that wholeness is to be found only in clinging to God." Today, he is a Rabbi and teaches others the meaning of the Jewish faith. I know he will bring an important message to us when he joins us.

Many of us may be familiar with the story told of a King in ancient times who owned a diamond of unparalleled beauty. It was his most prized possession. In times of celebration or when he hosted foreign dignitaries, he would proudly display it. On one of those occasions, as he lifted it out of the case, it fell to the ground and suffered an ugly gash that severely marred its extraordinary beauty. The heartbroken King announced that whoever would repair his valued possession would be granted any request. But, should they undertake the task and fail, they would be summarily executed.

Artisans and craftsmen came from near and far, but upon viewing the extent of the damage, declined the attempt. Finally, a craftsman agreed to undertake the risky task. He was provided with a room and the requisite tools and after a long time emerged and presented the diamond to the King. The King gasped. The diamond still had the massive gash, but the artisan had turned it into a stem, around which he engraved petals that formed a magnificent flower. As striking as the diamond had been before, it was now manifold times more exquisite.

There are individuals who can take the curses and, if not make them into blessings, at least surmount the challenges and hurdles that come their way. The human spirit does not need to be broken if one has faith in oneself, in one's community and in God.

At the very same time, sometimes blessings are not necessarily what they seem to be. We live in a land of plenty. Yet, the number of obese people in the United States is overwhelming. At times there is too much of a good thing and our health becomes injured in the process. This past Monday the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the number of states with very high obesity rates has grown from 9 to 12. Over all, more than a third of American adults are obese. In those 12 states at least 30 percent of adults are considered as such.

Think of how we have gotten used to abusing all the wonderful gifts of nature that have come our way, and how now suffer because of that abuse. We have become over-dependent on gasoline and oil and have ended up supporting despotic regimes who threaten Israel and the West. Let us recall all the people who become rich overnight, either by winning the lottery or receiving an inheritance, and then, not knowing what to do with their money, come crashing

down to earth with a terrible thud. Unfortunately, in the same vein, there are athletes who stand on top of the world for a short period of time but simply can't manage life when their careers are completed, for they were never trained to do so. What sometimes seems to be a blessing has within it a kernel of possible curse. Again, the human spirit can overcome these trials and tribulations, but it takes resolute will and faith in oneself and in God to be able to do so.

I don't believe that anyone's life is totally blessed or totally cursed. Our lives are a mixture of both. We do not live in the proverbial rose garden or Garden of Eden and, at the same time, know people who can overcome tremendous challenges and tribulations.

I pray that our lives may be filled with blessings. Should times of distress or trouble come our way may we be able to have the fortitude of will and spirit, as well as faith, not only to endure those moments but to learn from them, creating the sense of beauty that was present in the diamond engraved with the rose.