

Good morning and Shabbat shalom.

This morning I'd like to ask each of you to take a moment to think of something in your life that was truly challenging. . . one thing or moment or event that you thought you'd never get through or you felt was so unfair or maybe even took you to the depths of despair. Maybe it's even something that just happened or is still ongoing. I'm not asking you to go back to that place, but just want you to hold onto that example for a few minutes while we continue.

Last month I received an email from an ulpan in Israel. I don't remember how I wound up on their mailing list, but the messages are usually focused on a Hebrew phrase or word that deals with an upcoming holiday or the weekly parsha. Well, almost exactly one month ago, we were reading "R'eh" from Deuteronomy and this message comes through with a subject of "Concealed Blessing."

The message went like this:

"This Shabbat we will be reading the portion "R'eh" of the fifth book of Torah - Devarim - דברים (words).

Moses tells the people of Israel, "See, I place before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that will come when they fulfill G-d's commandments, and the curse if they abandon them.

"Let's look closely at the opening verse.

רָאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה

"See: I give before you today blessing and curse." (11:26)

"We will notice the word "today" there.

"The Rebbi of Gur says that the word "today" in the verse hints to every day, for each and every day God renews the work of Creation, and when there is a new creation, there is also a new blessing. And therefore every day one needs to choose one of the ways (either blessing or curse).

"Every day we have dilemmas – good and evil, truth and falsehood, blessing and curse. What was yesterday is not valid today because the world of yesterday is not the world of today.

"The opinions change, the norms change, and also the people change.

"If we connect to "today", to the reality of today, we will be able to connect to the era when Torah was given out of the feeling of relevance to our generation and our era.

"But there is still a question we must ask:

“If G-d is all good, what does it mean that God gives a curse? How is it possible that the essence of G-d is connected to a curse?”

“It is interesting to point that the R' Yonatan Ben Uziel in his translation to Aramaic refers to the word:

קללה – curse as the 'replacement' of blessing.

“So, it appears that there is a blessing and then there is its “replacement.” On one hand similar, on the other - different. Maybe then, there are different kinds of blessings. There are open blessings we all easily see — those that we recognize as good. Then there is another type of blessing associated with a deeper good that comes into the world through challenges and difficulty.

“Usually one doesn't see them as blessings at the onset. In time, however, one recognizes that they are real blessings.

“So the opening verse could be understood like this: "See, I give before you an open-revealed blessing and a concealed blessing”

This email stuck with me for a few days and I wound up sharing it with a few friends and family who also found this interesting.

This week we're still in Deuteronomy, reading “N'tzavim-Vayelech.” Guess what, בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה appear two more times in this parsha.

And this reminds me of when the adults around me used to advise or counsel me to “count your blessings.” As a kid, that was usually a warning that I was being ungrateful. As an adult I've found this to be a useful exercise in difficult times. You look for the things in life that are going right. . . the big things like kids, family, and/or friends. . . the little things like, my car was where I left it when I came out of work or the store today, someone held the elevator for me today, or the sun came out today. One of the blessings we're supposed to count, in Jewish tradition, is the fact that we woke up breathing this morning.

Some days it's easier to count your blessings than on others. When I was out of work, living in a garage apartment, and my car was totaled after being rear-ended on the highway. . . in a rain storm, it was difficult. However, this past week I was thankful for each day of rain because we're growing pumpkins in the backyard and they need an awful lot of water to grow.

Now what if we use this interpretation of R' Yonatan Ben Uziel's interpretation? What if your mother told you to count your hidden or concealed blessings? Where would you look for those?

There's one other phrase that may be helpful in this search that I heard on a radio interview with a transgender person who had been through some really hard times. This person said that sometimes you just have to look for "where God hides." This person, after years of struggles, had come to a place where the wrongs of others and perhaps the sins of others could be recognized as concealed blessings, and this person had found the ability to forgive and, in the process, personal wholeness.

So, if you think about your difficult time, event, or challenge that I asked you to summon earlier, where are you with it today? As hard as it may have been or maybe as hard as it is, is it possible to look for the concealed blessing? I've learned that it's really hard to do this in the present tense – when the challenge is in front of you – but after some time has passed and you suddenly realize that things are more stable, what happened? Was there a blessing somewhere in all that mess? Was there some sort of lesson about yourself, the world, people, or life itself?

As we enter the Days of Awe, seeking forgiveness and engaging in introspection, God has reminded us three times that we've been given revealed blessings and concealed blessings. Perhaps this is a good exercise for the season: to search for the concealed blessings in our lives.

Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah.