



Self Blessing

When did the message that video games give you when you lose change? When I was a kid there were pinball machines that just turned their lights off and spun a dial when you lost. Then you waited to see whether the last two digits of your score matched the random numbers on the dial. Mostly they didn't, but you were still let down gently. Later, with the advent of video games, I remember the shock of receiving my first "You lose" on the screen. Now, I'll admit it's been awhile, but it seems video games have gotten meaner. I was watching my grandson play on his Xbox not long ago. He was fighting his way through a world that seemed to be filled with aggressors, and thoroughly enjoying himself. But, when one of the other knights sliced his man in two with a battleaxe and the corpse fell in two pieces, up came a message, in letters that covered most of the screen, "LOSER!"

While there are plenty of reasons I don't want my grandson spending too much time on video games, this is my latest. Think of the effect of seeing that message flashed at you many times each day. How many flashes does it take before you begin to internalize it? How many before it becomes a life script? It becomes a sort of subtle curse the player works on himself.

This may seem like simple semantics to you. And it is on one level. But it goes much deeper than that. New Age folks have made an old idea very popular of late, calling it "the law of attraction." Basically, the idea is that whatever you're focused on is what you get. Focus on good things and you get good things, focus on the bad stuff and you get bad stuff. Christians may recognize the "name it and claim it," theme of the 1980s. But, the idea goes much farther back than that.

The Psalmist said, "God, you are my God; I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water . . . Truly Your faithfulness is better than life; my lips declare your praise. I bless You all my life; I lift up my hands, invoking Your name. I am sated as with a rich feast . . ." (Psalm 63, JPS translation). This Psalm is attributed to David the King of Israel. And did he get what he focused on?

David was a hard living, hard driving man's man, equally at home whether engaged on the battlefield or in the boudoir. "David has slain his tens of thousands," a popular refrain of his time went. He famously paid "the foreskins of two hundred Philistines" as a bride price to marry his first wife. It's certain that those 200 Philistines did not cooperate with David's desire to obtain their foreskins. So, he was a warrior with

hands steeped in blood. David was politically savvy and a strong warlord for Israel, just what she needed. Israel was located at the crossroads of travel in ancient times. She could prosper and grow as she did in David's time or she could wither and be conquered as happened within a few generations. Israel, then as now, would never be ignored because she was just too important to the rest of the world.

David, whose name means "beloved," was also a ladies' man. His first wife was the daughter of Saul, the previous King of Israel. His second was a woman whose first husband wanted David dead. Instead, the man himself dropped dead and David married the widow. From there, he went on and on, collecting wives and concubines like the oriental potentate he was. Finally, we have the story of Bathsheba. Was he a grasping tyrant? Was she a scheming seductress? Does it matter? The outcome was bloody and terrible.

And yet, David yearned for God. Do we remember David as an iron-fisted ruler who united a confederation of tribes into an empire? Do we remember him as the bandit who harried the south? Do we remember him as the son-in-law of the King turned Philistine mercenary? Do we remember him as a scoundrel who hopped from bed to bed enjoying carnal pleasure? Perhaps. But mention King David and most people think of the shepherd boy fighting wild beasts with his sling. Or the young lad, too small for armor, going out to face the giant Goliath. Or the psalmist with his lyre. Despite David's hard-living, despite his sweat and swagger, despite his outright treachery at times, we remember first that he loved God. And so, David got what he yearned for, what he focused on. In our minds, as in eternity, David dwells in the house of God.

Now, come back to the video games, and so many other messages of hopelessness and helplessness in our culture. Ads make us aware of all the things we do not have that others do. Movies, television, music and pop culture magazines show us "the good life" so that we can be sure of the material blessings of others. If we focus on these things, we will be discontented and unfulfilled.

But, what if we focus on our blessings? What if, when we waken in the morning, we thank God for another day of life? And, looking at the life partner we chose those years ago, what if we look past the everydayness of that person's presence? Perhaps we would want to thank that person for believing in us enough to go through life's ups and downs with us. Perhaps we would find it in ourselves to work more toward being the person seen through the eyes of love, the one our partners are committed to. Perhaps if we think of all those who go hungry in a world filled with food, or those who must walk miles to reach a telephone, or those whose homes are little more than hovels by our standards—if we think of those people—perhaps we will be grateful for the blessings we have.

And then, as we are grateful for our blessings, we begin to focus on them. As we do, we begin to see ourselves in a different light. We are not the ones who must struggle to

get the good things in life; we are the ones who deserve showers of blessing. And blessings we get. They may not take the form of the latest iPhone or fancy cars and clothes or trips around the world. But, wouldn't you rather have a healthy, happy family? And enough food, clothing, and shelter for everyone you love to be secure? And happiness with what you have? I know I would.

When we learn to focus on the blessings in our lives, and to be grateful for what we have, we get a great reward. For the idols in our lives that make us unhappy begin to topple one by one. I am grateful for the car I own. And suddenly, I do not need that Cadillac Escalade. I can be happy with my 12 year old Toyota. And now, I do not need to figure out where to get the money for the payment on the Escalade, so my income is enough. This means less stress, more ease, and I can enjoy life a bit more. Imagine each one of the idols toppling, each one of the "LOSER!" messages in our lives being erased. Add enough of them together and pretty soon the feeling becomes "WINNER! WINNER! WINNER!"

But why do I need to feel like a winner? So that I will learn to value myself and treat myself as I should be treated. But, this is not about ego. Ego is the part that tries to keep up with the Joneses, the part that knows that life is a struggle for more of everything. The true self is the part that sees our blessings and is grateful. The true self can't be compared to anyone else, let alone their material possessions. And the true self, who you really are underneath all the image and ego, the true self is the person who attracts good things and finds its reward. St. Augustine put it this way in his *Confessions*, "Seek for yourself, O man; search for your true self. He who seeks shall find himself in God."

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, may he be remembered for blessing, who founded The House of Love in New York that brought many young people back to their Judaism, wrote this simple song:

Return again
Return again
Return to the land of your soul (2x)

Return to who you are
Return to what you are
Return to where you are
Born and reborn and reborn

We can all shed the old skin of ego and be reborn into our true selves, into our blessedness. What's more, we can do it time and time again, whenever we need to do it. And we already know a little about how to do it. *T'shuvah* is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "repent," in both Jewish and Christian liturgy

and scriptures. It comes from the root *shuv*, and has the meaning of “to turn back, to return, to restore.” So, let us return to ourselves and restore our sense of blessedness.

If this seems too “selfish” for some, just remember that blessings are like stones cast into water, they always cause ripples. Blessing ourselves is throwing the stone into the water, what we find within ourselves to give, what blessing overflows from us, these are the ripples. IF you’ve ever watched ripples on a pond, you know that a stone thrown in on this side will cause movement on the other side. So, blessing ourselves is just one step in blessing the world, but it is a vital one. Let blessings begin with each of us realizing our blessings, being grateful for them, and receiving more because they are ours.