

Today we will be sharing the third and final part of our Sermon Series entitled, "When You are Feeling Overwhelmed." In our very busy and often over-programmed lives we can find ourselves stressed out, overwhelmed and even burnt out. When that happens there are things we can do to get help. We can see doctors and get medications. We can see therapists and psychologists. There are professional life coaches who can give us direction. But, as we have spoken of these past couple of weeks, there are also spiritual ways to address the feelings of despair and even hopelessness that sometimes come our way. Torah, which means "teaching," can also be a strong source of support and direction. Part of it comes from faith, of course; the faith that things will not always stay the way they are. And last week we looked at ways of visioning the future that can help give us a spiritual perspective on our lives and the legacy we are creating for those who follow.

But today I want to focus on the here and now. I want to focus on getting through what you are going through on a day to day basis, right now. You know, we are approaching Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a time for us to give thanks, to show gratitude for the blessings that are ours. But some of us don't feel thankful. We are too busy, too stressed out, too overburdened to give thanks for blessings in a real and meaningful way. Sure, we say, "I am blessed," but it's hard to really mean it when you are feeling overwhelmed. And part of the problem is that by everyone else's measure, most of us are blessed. Any one of us could look at another person's life and point out all the blessings that they have, stuff we think that they take for granted. But you know what? When you, yourself are overwhelmed, none of that really matters. A nice house, a good family, even the blessing of good health, it's all important, but somehow, we can't see it. Deep down, we all, I suspect, go through times when we don't feel so blessed, no matter how good our lives look to someone else.

But I think part of the problem, and a big part of the solution, is understanding what blessings in our lives really are. The Torah portion today is all about "blessings." It's a phrase that repeats again and again. Jacob steals, or trades for the blessing of the first born from Esau. Then he and his mother conspire to get the blessing from Isaac that Isaac thinks he is giving to Esau. And this is a really troubling Torah portion because it seems to me that what Jacob does to get this "blessing" is just so downright immoral. And OK, you can say that Gd already said Jacob was the one who'd be blessed, even before he was born. But Jacob still lies to get this blessing. And we ask ourselves, "What did Jacob do to DESERVE this blessing?!" And the answer is: NOTHING. He did nothing worth being rewarded for. But, then again, he doesn't get rewarded, either. He doesn't leave his parents home any better off. He does not own more property, have more livestock, or precious gems, or really more of anything, even though he has the "blessing." In fact, he doesn't feel any better about himself for having gotten the blessing, either. He is still as insecure after getting it as he was before. And so, if that's the case - if getting the blessing doesn't give him immediate benefit - if it does not improve the quality of his life - then what's the point of the blessing AT ALL?!

And the answer, it seems to me, is that blessing is a test - will he come to deserve the blessing or not? The question of whether he deserves the blessing can't be answered right away. Clearly he does not deserve it for what he has done. The question is, both Jacob and for us, now that you have the blessing, what are you going to do with it? You have been blessed with a child, but are you a good parent? That question does not get answered until the child grows. You are blessed with intelligence, but are you "smart"? That question can only be answered when we see what you've done with your intelligence, with your brain. You've been blessed materially, but are you generous? That can only be determined after the fact. The blessing does not automatically change your life, and the question of whether you deserve it can only be answered after the fact.

This is so important because a lot of the time when we are overwhelmed we don't think we deserve to feel blessed. We don't feel it on the inside. We don't "own" those blessings because we think those blessings are going to automatically make us feel good. "Look at all the blessings you have," well-meaning people tell us. But we don't feel blessed. But, in part that's because that's not the way it works. The blessings are just potential. It's not, "Look at all the great stuff you have," - that's not going to help. But rather, "How can I use these

supposed blessings for good?" Because once you can start pushing outside of yourself, once you start "road-testing" these blessings; once you exercise and develop them, you come to appreciate them more. And then you can look back and say "Indeed I am truly blessed, because I had the opportunity to share this blessing with others. Thank You Gd for the ability to make something of myself."

Blessings are not automatic "feel good's." If they were, then most of us who are blessed far more than we likely deserve, would feel good all the time. And maybe you do. And if that's the case - Bravo! But for most of us, we are only going to appreciate how blessed we really are when we use our blessings productively, when we unleash the potential in our spirits and souls that Gd has put inside of us, and then look back at the job we've done. The blessings of a job well done mean more to us than the blessings of an undeserved gift. The blessing of knowing we have made something of ourselves, that we have enriched the lives of others, that we have tried to live up to our potential - that's what shows us where the blessings really are.

So yes, Thanksgiving is about gratitude. But we have to think spiritually about what gratitude really means. It's not simply, "Thank you Gd for this stuff." It's more, "Thank you Gd for giving me the ability to feel good about myself and my role in the life of others. Thank you for the ability to do something with my life. Thank you for the gift of enabling to see outside of myself and in the process learn more ABOUT myself. Thank you for the gift of helping me be a better me." That's best blessing of all.