

Shabbat Parashat Ki Tissa
Rabbi David Englander
Two Blessings

During daily davening recently I have found myself paying particular attention to two back-to-back brachot in the Amidah. Given the military operations in Iran, this has been especially true this week. They happen to be the eleventh and twelfth blessings, right in the middle of what we call the Shmoneh Esrei. Which is actually a slightly confusing name, because while Shmoneh Esrei means eighteen, there are in fact nineteen blessings in the Amidah as we recite it today.

The eleventh blessing ends with words that many of us know well: Baruch Atah Adonai, Melech ohev tzedakah u'mishpat, Blessed are You, God, Sovereign who loves righteousness and justice. Originally that blessing was followed by one about the righteous among our people, ending with praise for God as their protector. But sometime around the first century the rabbis inserted a new blessing in between, which is also how the 18 blessings became 19. Our daily daveners know how that one ends as well: Baruch Atah Adonai, Shoveir oyvim u'machneia zeidim, Blessed are You, God, who breaks enemies and humbles the arrogant.

Those two prayers sit right next to each other in the Amidah. One praises God as the source of righteousness and justice. The next asks God to break enemies and bring to heel those who threaten us. Most of us recognize how we can find ourselves moving between those two instincts, and not just in our prayer lives. There are moments when we want the world to be guided by justice and moral clarity, and moments when we simply want protection from those who wish us harm.

These days I will admit that the twelfth blessing against our enemies resonates a little more loudly for me than the more positively phrased eleventh. But we would be wise to think carefully about what happens when our hopes for the destruction of enemies begin to ring louder than our commitment to seek righteousness from and in ourselves and justice for everyone.

The news of the last week makes it easy to understand why that twelfth blessing exists at all. We are watching a military conflict unfold involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. For decades Iran's leadership has spoken openly of its hostility toward Israel, America, and the stability of the region itself. When people hear threats like that, when they see rockets, militias, and the possibility of a wider war, it is very natural to find oneself praying those words with real intensity. *Shoveir oyvim*. Break those enemies who seek destruction. There is a certain spiritual logic to that prayer. If those who threaten peace are defeated, perhaps peace itself will have a chance to emerge.

At the same time, history reminds us that the story is rarely that simple. Skeptics point out that attempts to reshape the Middle East from the outside have not always produced the outcomes people hoped for. Optimists remind us that nations that were once bitter enemies have become close allies in other moments of history. And anyone who knows even a little Iranian history knows it is an ancient, proud, and complicated civilization, not a society that has always been governed by radical clerics choosing confrontation and terror over the well-being of their own people.

So the question becomes how we hold those two impulses at the same time. How do we pray for safety and protection without allowing the entire story of Jewish life to revolve around our enemies?

Jewish history has faced this tension before, and one of the clearest examples appears in the holiday we just finished celebrating. As a rabbi friend of mine likes to say, Jews have a remarkable ability to take a one day holiday and turn it into a full week of programming. That holiday, of course, is Purim.

The Megillah tells an extraordinary story. Esther risks her life to reveal her identity. Haman's plot collapses. The Jewish people survive. But the dramatic climax happens in chapter seven, and the Megillah contains ten chapters. What happens afterward turns out to be just as important as the moment of danger itself.

The Jewish people had to decide what Purim would become. It could easily have become a holiday centered entirely on the defeat of an enemy. After all, Haman is the

villain of the story. Yet other than groggers, the practices the rabbis establish for Purim are not really about Haman at all. Instead they create mitzvot that strengthen Jewish life itself: reading the story together, sharing food with friends, giving gifts to the poor, and gathering for a celebratory meal.

Dr. Mijal Bitton, a sociologist and spiritual leader who serves as Rosh Kehilla of the Downtown Minyan in New York City, reflects on this and writes:

“Notice what none of these [Purim] mitzvot require: Haman.

None of them depend on the presence of an enemy. They are expressions of what we are to one another.”

She concludes with a line that captures the deeper lesson of Purim: “Purim does not teach us to defeat our enemies. It teaches us to outlive them by building a Jewish life too full, too joyful, too alive to be extinguished.”

In many ways that has been a pattern throughout Jewish history. Moments of danger have often pushed Jews to deepen Jewish life rather than narrow it. New schools were built, new forms of learning developed, and communities organized themselves around mitzvot and responsibility to one another. The answer to threat was not only survival. It was the determination to keep Jewish life vibrant.

That insight brings us back to those two blessings in the Amidah. Jewish tradition understands that there are moments when we pray sincerely that those who threaten destruction will be stopped. Our history has taught us that such prayers are sometimes necessary. But our tradition also places that prayer right next to another one, the blessing that praises God as the One who loves righteousness and justice.

Because while enemies may appear in every generation, the heart of Jewish life has never been the hope that they disappear.

The heart of Jewish life is what we build together as a people.

