Shehecheyanu

by Michael Gordon

I can't remember ever making it through the *Shehecheyanu* without losing composure. Truth be told, I don't think I have made it more than three or four words into the blessing before tears start flowing and my voice falters. It happened again recently at the rehearsal dinner for our younger son's wedding. This time, I at least had the presence of mind to anticipate the inevitable and ask that everyone join me so I could break down without consequence.

Why does this short prayer trigger such emotion in me? For many reasons, I'm sure. The most obvious is that its chanting invokes memories of my grandfather, an iconic figure in my life and the lives of my siblings and cousins. At holiday gatherings, weddings, and bar mitzvahs he would never fail to lead us in the prayer, singing it out slowly, almost operatically, and with emphasis on each word. It was his way of marking the occasion by making sure we all knew how good it was to be together. I'm sure he also wanted to envelop the moment in a Jewish tradition that was so much at the core of his being.

The blessing also brings alive the memories of all those who have not made it to the special occasion. Images of my parents, seated and smiling at festive dinners, dance through my head. So do the faces of my aunts, uncles and other extended family who passed away long ago or way too recently. I think it's the flashing of those bittersweet memories that most reliably interferes with my equanimity.

Here is a translation of the Hebrew blessing: *"Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us and allowed us to reach this day."*

I am no Jewish scholar and have little to offer regarding the blessing's origins or its place in our liturgy. Thanks to Wikipedia, I did learn that the prayer is at least 1500 years old (it's mentioned in the Talmud). I also know that it has long been intended to mark special and joyous occasions.

It's chanted at the beginning of most holidays (but not *Tisha B'av* because of the sadness it commemorates), the performance of various *mitzvot*, the birth of a child (although not at a circumcision due to the pain involved), upon arrival in Israel and even when you eat fruit for the first time after Rosh Hashanah. Whenever something exceptional transpires, a *Shehechiyanu* should follow. I'm thinking it might therefore be appropriate for those rare occasions I post a less-than-humiliating golf score.

For me the *Shehecheyanu* has become a kind of personal mantra. Sure, it's not in Sanskrit, and I don't consider it as a gateway to more expansive meditation. The fact is that I have no talent whatsoever for disciplined concentration. That requires far more *sitzfleisch* than I can manage.

But I do benefit from reminding myself that I'm lucky to be alive and should always act accordingly. It makes me focus on what makes life worth living, not what makes it burdensome or frightening. In that way, chanting it follows the current push from self-help books to be "present" and "in the moment." It's modern Stress Reduction 101 to strip regrets about the past and worries about the future from how you feel in the here and now.

Singing those eleven words reminds me that life is inherently unpredictable; that we should appreciate every day that unfolds before us; that we should focus on how to embrace opportunities for happiness, not cower in fear of inevitable sadness; that we should accept our mortality rather than strive for invincibility; that we should revel in the comfort that flows from being humble rather than falsely console ourselves by pretending we're the sole master of our fate; that acknowledging our good fortune is a way of instilling confidence that more might follow; that experiencing a sense of gratitude is far more productive than wallowing in resentment, remorse, and grievance; that life is indeed a gift that we should never take for granted; that faith is about the fervent hope we can sing a *Shehecheyanu* together on yet another day.

I'm aware that these *Shehecheyanu*-inspired sentiments are not the stuff of deep theological consideration or psychotherapeutic benefit. You'd be justified in dismissing them as kosher pablum, a Jewish way of saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Obviously, it's good to appreciate what you've got and make sure you're not seeing all glasses as half full and about to break. It would also be fair to respond, "Sure, maintaining a sense of gratitude and humility is commendable and maybe even productive, but it's a whole lot easier said than done." No doubt that's true.

Yet I'm pretty sure that many of us could benefit from at least trying to focus more on our good fortune than our bad luck. In my case, the words of the *Shehechaynu* spur those more positive thoughts. The older I get, the more I feel truly blessed that I was given a good and healthy life and that I have been allowed to reach this day.

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