Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning. In today’s class we are tackling the age-old philosophical question about how to react when bad things happen. It is interesting to note that Jewish tradition actually gives us a blessing to say when we receive bad news. Today, we will explore why.

Begin your class with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz’s insight into blessing the bad. Discuss what motivates someone to bless the bad.

Text #1: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz Article

It feels easier and more natural to give thanks when everything seems to be going well, when we have peace and security, health and bounty. But when we are in a situation of war and fear, of sickness and poverty, when our inclination is to cry and curse, it is much more difficult—but it is still possible and necessary. When he was poor and starving, the famous Reb Zushya is said to have thanked God for giving him such a good appetite! It is no coincidence that Reb Zushya’s profound capacity for gratitude was matched by a deep relationship with God. (Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, Thankful for Thanksgiving. November 2002.)

Opening Discussion

Meet David. David is a well-known lawyer. One night he is badly hurt in a car accident. His life falls to pieces. He has difficulty moving his hand and has nightmares. As a result, he leaves his job and sits at home doing nothing.

Ask:

1. How should David relate to his accident? How should he feel when he hears that his friends from work are being promoted and becoming partners in the law firm? Is it fair when bad things happen to people for seemingly random reasons? When you think about such an example, do you feel that there is order to the world? How do you feel about God in such situations?
2. Is there any way in which bad things that happen to us can be seen in a positive light?
3. This complex question lies at the basis of our human experience. How do we relate to bad things that happen? How should we relate to such events?

Leave the questions open, they are triggers and will accompany us during the different stages of our learning.
Text #2: Isaiah source vs. Prayer book: Mentioning Evil (10 minutes)

It’s interesting to note that the blessings before Shema are based on a verse from the book of Isaiah (45:7). The verse reads:

נוצר אור במדמה תחנה, עשה שלום במדמה רע. אני מachers POWER כלachers.

I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the LORD, that does all these things.

And yet in the prayer book the prayer reads:

נוצר אור במדמה תחנה, עשה שלום במדמה את hele.

(Blessed are you God, our Lord, King of the universe) who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things.

Ask:

1. What is the difference between the verse in Isaiah and the prayer we say?

In the verse God describes Himself as “I make peace and create evil…” whereas in the prayer we say “who makes peace and creates all things.” The “evil” is censored!

2. Can you suggest a reason why the Rabbis made such a change when they formulated the prayer?

Maybe it was deemed not humanly possible to make a blessing over “evil”? Maybe the actual idea of relating to the evil in the world directly was too daunting?

Despite these options and the tension that exists, we will continue to delve into this primary existential issue.

Imagine that as part of his physical and psychological therapy David starts to paint and finds that he has unusual talent. In light of this turn of events, do any of the answers you gave to the opening questions change? Was the accident a good or a bad thing for David?

Lead an open discussion. It’s likely students will suggest that the accident was a positive event for David.

Ask:

1. What if David had no talent for painting? Is it possible to find any positive benefit from something bad that happens to someone, when there is no “happy ending”?

2. And even if there is a “happy ending,” was it worth it for David? Should he embrace his pain and suffering?

Lead an open discussion.

Even if one is not expected to embrace suffering or pain, it is possible that one grew through such an experience. One discovered or developed traits of character they had not encountered before, one discovered an ability to deal with setbacks, to persevere and sometimes just the strength to continue to live.
The Mishna (basic codex of Oral Jewish Law, 200 C.E.) discusses different blessings we make on different occasions.

While reviewing this mishna from the tractate of Berakhot (blessings) below, consider all the contexts in which blessings are made. When do we make a blessing?

> Explore the mishna with your students, asking them how they understand each phrase and the connection between the two ideas.

תלמוד בבליל מפסכת ברכות דוד נ
משנה: ... רב יהודה אמר: ...על הגשמי ועל בוררות טובות, אמר: ברוך העוז והנМИיב. על בוררות
רזעף, אמר: בורוך דיניו האמת.

Rabbi Yehuda says: ...For rain and other good tidings, one says: Blessed... Who is good and Who does good.
Over bad tidings, one recites: Blessed (are you) the true Judge.

It is interesting to note that we make blessings for any number of reasons: to give thanks (on new clothes, when we hear good news), to praise God (when we see wondrous natural phenomenon) or to connect the spiritual to the physical (before food or drink). But this mishna raises an unusual point.

> Emphasize: The mishna discusses what blessing one makes over “bad things” (bad tidings). One wonders, why would we ever want to make a blessing in such a situation? It is this question that lies at the focus of our learning today.

> Ask: Let’s go back to David (our well-known lawyer).

1. Having learned the mishna, which blessing should he make?
2. This seems to depend on how he defines his accident, or does it?

How to define an event as bad or good is a complex issue. If we continue to learn the mishna, we can see that it deals with this question.

> Learn the next part of the mishna with your students.

בנה בית חדש, mamanIMAL thSHEM, אומר: ברוך שםך קמינו והנני עמי לה. [b] המברך על
הרשת מעני על thresholds, על thresholds מעני על תרצה.
[א] ... חיב אמס לברך על הרשת אח שמעון על thresholds, אמר: (זרם ר) "איוח פא של ראליק
בכל תלבר וגו". בכל תלבר ובני זיו, בצי תוצר וברית הרשת; בכל מיטך, אפליה זו גג הלון את פשך,
בכל מאמץ, בכל ממון. [c] דבר אחיו: בכל מאמץ, בכל מזון, אם זה מזון, או המאך, או המדה, או
When one builds a new house or purchased a new vessel, he recites: Blessed...Who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time. (The mishna articulates a general principle,) [b] Over bad things a blessing is said similar to that over good and over good a blessing is said similar to that over evil.

[a] ...One recites a blessing for the bad that befalls him just as he does for the good... as it is stated: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). (The mishna explains this verse as follows): “With all your heart” means with your two inclinations, with your good inclination and your evil inclination, both of which must be subjugated to the love of God. With all your soul means even if God takes your soul. “And with all your might” means with all your money, as money is referred to in the Bible as might. [c] Alternatively, it may be explained that “with all your might” means with every measure that He metes out to you; whether it is good or troublesome, thank Him.

After reading through the mishna, focus on the marked parts:

1. Read the part of the mishna marked [a]. How do you understand it?

   Maybe we should use the same words when blessing the bad, maybe the words are not important but the same mindset is what counts. Ask: If so, what should that mindset be when you are offering up a blessing over something bad?

2. Now, read the phrase marked [b]. How do you understand it? What words should we actually say?

   Do you believe that we should make the same blessing over events, either good or bad, since everything is from God? Can you think of another way to understand the expectation?

3. Read the part marked [c]. According to this directive, should one differentiate between good and bad things that happen to us?

The Gemara is a compilation of Rabbinic discussions of Oral Law that took place over a 500-year period and was codified around 700 CE. Its focus is to understand and clarify what the Mishna is teaching us.

Learn this part of the gemara’s discussion about the mishna with your students. It is important that they understand the question and the answer and their ramifications.
Blessing the Bad

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 60b (7 minutes)

We learned in the mishna: One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad that befalls him just as he recites a blessing for the good that befalls him. (The gemara asks): What does it mean: One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad just as for the good? If we say this means that just as one recites a blessing for a positive event, “Who is good and does good”, so too one recites a blessing for a calamity with the formula: “Who is good and does good”, didn’t we learn in our mishna that “over good tidings one recites “Who is good and does good” while over bad tidings one recites “Blessed…the true Judge”? Rather, Rava said: The mishna’s statement was only necessary to instruct us to accept bad tidings with (the same) joy (with which we accept good tidings).

Rav Aha said in the name of Rabbi Levi: What is the verse that alludes to this? “I will sing of loving-kindness and justice; unto You, O Lord, will I sing praises” (Psalms 101:1). Rav Aha explains: If it is loving-kindness, I will sing, and if it is justice, I will sing. (i.e. I will thank God in song for the bad just as for the good).

Ask and discuss each of the following questions:

1. Does the gemara suggest that we make the same blessing, regardless of circumstance?
2. Rava seems to believe that we accept bad findings and good findings with joy and acceptance. What do you think he means?
3. With which part of the mishna we learned does his opinion fit?
4. Is he talking about what we say or our mindset as we relate to the event? If the mindset—what is that mindset?
Text #5 (Continuation of Text #4, 60b-61a): Everything God Does, He Does for the Best (18 minutes)

The gemara continues with a directive, followed by a story.


Rav Huna said that Rav said that Rabbi Meir said; and so it was taught in a baraita (a tradition in the Jewish oral law not incorporated into the Mishna) in the name of Rabbi Akiva: One must always accustom oneself to say: Everything God does, He does for the best.

(The Gemara relates): Like this incident, when Rabbi Akiva was walking along the road and came to a certain city, he inquired about lodging and they did not give him any. He said: Everything that God does, He does for the best. He went and slept in a field, and he had with him a rooster, a donkey and a candle. A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle; a cat came and ate the rooster; and a lion came and ate the donkey. He said: Everything that God does, He does for the best. That night, an army came and took the city into captivity. It turned out that Rabbi Akiva alone, who was not in the city and had no lit candle, noisy rooster or donkey to give away his location, was saved. He said to them: Didn’t I tell you? Everything that God does, He does for the best.

**Ask:**

1. What message is the story about Rabbi Akiva teaching us?
2. In light of this story, how does the gemara think we should relate to bad things?

It seems that the gemara is suggesting that we should accept that everything is from God who ultimately is benevolent. We need to believe that things are in our best interest even if we cannot understand that at the time. That said… Rabbi Akiva was saved and felt gratitude to God for this. However, all inhabitants of the village were killed.

**Ask:**

3. Should this affect Rabbi Akiva’s perspective? Assuming that he is not totally callous and insensitive, how can you understand his philosophy on life?

If relevant to the level of the class and time restraints—connect Rabbi Akiva’s philosophy to the story of his death (flaked to death as a martyr, while reciting the Shema and accepting God’s decree —Tractate Berakhot 61b).

4. How does that directive (accepting everything that God sends our way, be it good or bad) fit in with what we learned in the mishna?
Blessing the Bad

It could mean that we say the same blessing over both bad and good since, ultimately, we are praising God for running the world in the best possible way. It seems to fit the opinion we learned before, marked [c], and Rav Aha’s perspective.

5. After what you have learned here, what blessing should David make? What difficulty arises?

According to this directive, there is nothing that can be defined as “bad” so when would one make the blessing “Dayan haEmet” (The true Judge)?

Later on, the gemara presents the following scenario: Your field is flooded. This is bad news now, all the crops are ruined. On the other hand, floods improve the quality of fields. They bring alluvial deposits and all fresh earth. So, when all the bad is over it is going to be good. You know this at the time you see the flood. You know it is bad now but it is good in the future.

Ask:

1. What blessing should you make? The Gemara answers that this is the example of מברך על הרא며 מאיNES ה Güncelle (blessing the Bad as one does the Good). He says "ד"י חמצות" (The Judge of Truth), even though his mindset should be the same as when he makes a blessing over good news.
2. Based on this gemara, which blessing do you think David should make?
3. Why did the gemara think that one could understand the mishna to mean that even over bad news one would say נטב האמתי (Who is good and does good)?

Like Rabbi Akiva—whatever happens is for the best, so I should give thanks for it.

Challenge your students: Try to think of something unpleasant that happened to you. How did you feel at the time? With perspective, can you see anything positive that happened as a result? How would you describe the event today?

At the crux of our learning lies a central philosophical quandary. If we believe everything is from God and that God is all-powerful and benevolent and is behind everything and has “a plan,” are there really “bad things” in the world? Is it legitimate to be upset? To feel that something terrible has happened. What do you think?

Despite the expectation that we acknowledge God being behind everything and running the world in the best possible way, the story about the flooded field takes a clear stand that contrasts Rabbi Akiva’s perspective. It seems that although we should believe that God is behind everything and that ultimately, “things are for the best,” we are not expected to pretend or negate our legitimate feelings. When bad things happen, we are allowed (and maybe obligated) to acknowledge the unpleasantness. This is the integrity that lies at the basis of our faith.
Conclusion (5 minutes)

» Summing up. Remind the students of the path our learning took (opening question, mishna, gemara, different opinions). Bring together the main points of discussion.

We began by thinking about the different contexts in which we make a blessing. The mishna directed us to think about whether one should make a blessing on a bad event as well as a good event. We debated how one defines a “bad event” and also pondered the philosophy behind God’s running of the world. In that context, we wondered whether someone who acknowledges God’s omnipotence and benevolence is also justified to have subjective feelings of suffering or pain.

We opened with David the lawyer. As he accompanied our learning, the blessing he should make changed. At first it seemed absurd to thank God for what befell him. Through Rabbi Akiva’s perspective, maybe he was expected to, thanking God for the accident and pain assuming it was for the best. Taking into account that in the end his life became more significant as a result of his accident, maybe this seems logical.

But then the Gemara taught us an important lesson. Beside our faith in God and His just running of the world, Jewish law and philosophy does not expect us to negate our feelings or perspectives. If things are perceived by us to be bad, then that is a legitimate way to relate to them. We also touched on the sensitive topic of finding value in the way we deal with travesty, even as we fight and reject it. Sometimes as we struggle to deal with hardship and are at odds with our Creator, we find strengths or character traits that surprise even us and sometimes inspire those around us. Maybe this dialectic is hinted to in our prayers. We are not able to openly praise evil but we acknowledge that everything, including evil, is from God. And on some level, which we may not even be able to articulate, we manage to integrate that knowledge into our lives.

This lesson goes beyond the specific topic we learned here. It seems that although from our human perspective we are supposed to put God in the center of the world, maybe from God’s perspective Man and Woman, with all their weaknesses and fallacies and subjective feelings, are the focal point.
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Text #2: Isaiah Source vs. Prayer Book

It's interesting to note that the blessings before Shema are based on a verse from the book of Isaiah (45:7). The verse reads:

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And yet in the prayer book the prayer reads:

יוצר את הפורטוקה, שמים ודרך היאו כל.

(Blessed are you God, our Lord, King of the universe) who forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things.

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 54a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות ד כ

משנה: רבי יהודה אמר: על הגשמים ועל בשורות טובות. אומרו: בורר הנבוב והמיסיב. על בשורות.

Rabbi Yehuda says: …For rain and other good tidings, one says: Blessed…Who is good and Who does good. Over bad tidings, one recites: Blessed (are you) the true Judge.
When one builds a new house or purchased a new vessel, he recites: Blessed...Who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time. (The mishna articulates a general principle,)

[b] Over bad things a blessing is said similar to that over good and over good a blessing is said similar to that over evil.

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[c] Alternatively, it may be explained that “with all your might” means with every measure that He metes out to you; whether it is good of troublesome, thank Him.

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 60b

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