

What is Grace?

Submitted by Rabbi A Brody

(A reflection on Joanna Macy’s quote: “Grace happens when we act with others on behalf of our world.”)

One of my grade school teachers used to have fun with our class by asking us ‘What is the most important word in the following sentence?’ She would give us a sentence and we would each choose the word we thought most important; we would then be invited to explain our choices.

I imagine the question ‘What is the most important word?’ for the sentence “Grace happens when we act with others on behalf of our world.” For me, the most important word is “happens.”

How do things “happen?” How does anything ever happen?

I spend a lot of time talking with people about difficulties they are having, and I often hear the question, “Why is this happening to me?”

Why do things happen? How do they happen?

In a commentary on the book of Genesis from the time of the Talmud (compiled almost 2,000 years ago) there is a parable spun from the first verse of chapter 5, which begins with the words “This is the book of the descendants of Adam...”



Here is a paraphrase from a section of this text:

God said: ‘I already gave Adam very few rules and he was unable to follow them. How, then, can he be ready to receive all of my revelation? I will not give my revelation to Adam, but rather to his descendants, who will be ready and able to accept my teachings.’ Therefore it is written: ‘This is the book of the descendants of Adam,’ because the revelation was given on account of the merit and readiness of Adam’s future generations.

Apparently people have been asking questions for a very long time about how and why things happen. The answer from this commentary, which speaks to us across generations, is that things can happen today because of possibilities in the future - revelation was given through Adam because of the future readiness of his descendants. How extraordinary that the future can contribute to our present! This way of understanding is reflected in a Talmudic era concept that ‘there is no before and after in revelation’ - in other words, time flows and causation occurs in all directions.

Which brings us back to grace - possibly grace happens when acting with others as our combined futures multiply the possibilities. As revelation was given through Adam because of the readiness of his future generations, possibly grace happens to us when we act together because of our combined future generations, multiplying exponentially through our combined efforts.

Years ago I attended seminary, during a time when women were first being admitted to take classes, though not being permitted the recognition of ordination. One of the male students asked another woman in our class why our small group of female students was submitting to the indignity of being allowed to take classes while not being granted ordination. “We women are the merit of future generations,” she answered.

And that is how grace happens.

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Submission Guidelines, 2025

Article submissions are always welcomed. Word count is 650 for a full page. Less is fine. *Please include short bio* for publication.

Pictures: Jpegs preferred. 300 dpi best. Color is fine, even if reproduced in BW.

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