

Gratitude or Gratification

Moshe Taragin

Thanksgiving is a non-Jewish holiday which is so charming that it deeply resonates with religious Jews. The holiday is not overtly Christian, but, instead, is pivoted upon the universal value of gratitude, a trait which is enshrined in Judaism through numerous experiences such as a "toda" sacrifice for escaping a perilous situation, or through chagim festivals which express gratitude for G-d having liberated us from slavery. Sitting around a Thanksgiving table and admiring the trait of gratitude feels deeply religious and is fully consonant with our own value system. For this reason, the holiday has been roundly adopted by Jews.

The original pilgrims who migrated to the new world, faced the prospect of a harsh winter without food or shelter. When they unexpectedly received a successful harvest, they shared an autumn feast of gratitude with their local native American neighbors. We live in a vastly different world, and very few of us face the threat of a freezing winter or the specter of starving to death. In our world of comfort, the trait of gratitude has become more elusive. How can we generate genuine gratitude in our less vulnerable world?

Facing Fragility

The Book of Beresihit narrates the story of the men and women who founded Judaism. Surprisingly, bearing children and perpetuating their legacy was harder than expected. With only one exception, each of these women went barren for extended periods, only bearing children after much effort. The gemara comments that their extended barrenness induced their fervent prayer and their deeper connection with Hashem. It is provocative to imagine that such surpassing people were exposed to suffering and hardship merely to elicit prayer and longing for divine assistance. This approach frames human struggle and suffering as a catalyst for religious growth. Without hardship we lose our dependency upon Hashem, and He slowly drifts out of consciousness.

Additionally, the barrenness of these women made them more grateful for the children they did bear. Sarah bore one child and Rachel bore two

(after which she deceased), and their struggle augmented their appreciation of childbearing. When we easily and effortlessly achieve our goals, we more easily take things for granted and don't properly cherish our success. Our lives have become too successful for gratitude and too comfortable for thankfulness.

Ironically, Thanksgiving is quickly morphing from a day of gratitude into a day of gratification, as a day which once embodied gratitude has been recast as a holiday of consumerism and the official launch of the coveted Black Friday sales. Too much gratification and gratitude fades. Black Friday has killed Thanksgiving.

Triumph and Heartache

The only matriarch who doesn't struggle to bear children is Leah, who effortlessly bears six boys and a girl to her husband. Despite the ease of her childbearing, she is depicted as the epitome of gratitude, as she named her fourth son Yehuda, which stems from the word "hoda'ah", or gratitude. The gemara remarks that before Leah, no one had fully expressed their gratitude to Hashem. What made her naming a superior example of gratitude? Others before Leah had, undoubtedly, expressed their gratitude, but there was something different and remarkable about her gratefulness.

Sadly, Leah led a tortured life, always slated to be her husband's second choice. Even after Rachel's death, a bereaved and nostalgic Ya'akov spends more time with Rachel's handmaiden than he does with Leah. Evidently, Leah will never fully win the heart of a husband who never intended to marry her in the first place. Her life will always remain imperfect, and she will always carry the pain of being the spurned wife.

Yet, instead of harping upon her pain she savors her role as the matron of the family. Instead of sorrowing over the romance she will never enjoy, she welcomes the opportunity she has been granted. Too often, we experience ingratitude because we stubbornly strive for perfection in a world which rarely offers it to us. Too often, when life offers its mixed bag of triumph and frustration, we obsess about our disappointments while ignoring the potential which lies beneath our own two feet. Leah isn't exasperated by her handicap but chooses to embrace her potential,

and this steely courage grants her realistic and authentic gratitude. If we delay gratitude until perfection arrives, it will be forever stalled.

It wasn't always this way. Previous generations labored under more harsh conditions, never dreaming of a perfect life, but instead, graciously celebrating whatever successes they did achieve. Modernity has created the illusion that with enough effort and determination we are capable of perfection. These outsized and unrealistic expectations blind us to healthy and realistic gratitude. Leah was the paradigm of gratitude precisely because she faced a complex situation, savored her successes, and expressed her gratitude in the face of her continuing struggles.

Thank you

There was a second distinct feature of Leah's gratitude. Others had already sensed gratitude and likely expressed it. Leah, however, didn't just express it, but embedded it into her child's name. Every time she called her son's name, she was reminded of everything in life that she had to be thankful for. She didn't just experience gratitude, she voiced it.

Though gratitude is an internal attitude and a long-term perspective upon life, the more we actually express our gratitude, the more deeply we feel it and the more frequently we sense it. The simple act of saying thank you sharpens our own sense of gratitude, just as Leah's calling her child's name accentuated her own appreciativeness. Thank yous should not be reserved for special occasions but should sprinkle our daily conversations and interactions. Gratitude grows the more that it is sounded.

During daily tefillah the *chazzan* repeats the 18 berachot of shmoneh esrei, while the congregation quietly listens, responding with "amen" at the conclusion of each blessing. When the *chazzan* recites the penultimate Beracha of modim which expresses gratitude to Hashem, the entire tzibbur chimes in, reciting their own version of the beracha. By personally uttering gratitude we hope to better internalize this cardinal trait.

Historical gratitude

The 11th century Spanish philosopher named Bachye Ibn Pakuda branded gratitude as the central trait of religious identity. Pondering our gratitude to Hashem makes us more thankful and thereby more obedient to His will. In the post-Holocaust world though, it became difficult to pivot religious experience upon the trait of gratitude. After the Holocaust, even Jews of sturdy faith were left with many questions about Hashem. The shock and trauma of the Holocaust created a potential vacuum of gratitude.

That vacuum of gratitude was filled by the emergence of the state of Israel which has increased our collective national gratitude. Our grandparents suffered through an endless tunnel of hopelessness and wandering while we have been chosen to return to our homeland and to return to history. As we have restored our national pride and rebuilt our historical narrative, our national experience is more vibrant than ever before. Living through this historical renaissance induces historical gratitude which should boost our personal gratitude. Gratitude is contagious. If we sense it in one area of our lives, we are more inclined to identify it in other aspects of our lives.

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