

Contemplating the blessings of gratitude

There is a story about a rabbi beginning his tenure with a new congregation. The president of the congregation took him aside and warned him to avoid certain themes from the pulpit, especially on the high holy days. The Hebrew School was a controversial issue. So many of the children were involved in sports or after-school programs in the arts, they were constantly missing Hebrew School. Don't talk about Shabbat, the president told him. It would be embarrassing to many of our congregants who work on Saturdays. Kashrut, the dietary laws, was another subject to avoid. The ladies don't want to bother with two sets of dishes or be guardians of what food came into the temple.

The anxious rabbi asked the president: "Sir, if not Hebrew School or Shabbat or kashrut, what can I talk about?" The president looked astonished. "That shouldn't be a problem, rabbi" he said. "Speak about Judaism."¹

Since at least theoretically, we Jews are all about praise and thanks, gratitude and blessings must be safe topics. They are also elusive. Prayer in general, does not come naturally to many of us-myself included. Only when I began to teach about Judaism did I realized two characteristics of gratitude: First, feeling and expressing it can bring a physical feeling of peace and even joy. Second, how hard saying "thank you" is to develop as a regular habit- especially to God. Self-imposed or otherwise, there are barriers that block us from being able to pray with gusto, from our hearts. We are self-conscious. Especially if the words are unfamiliar, it's hard not to daydream and be a passive recipient of a service. I have a friend who told me her custom was to recite a list of things for which she was grateful before she went to sleep. "Why?" I asked. "Because it's so boring," she told me. "I discovered that I fall asleep more easily counting my blessings than I did counting sheep!"² Boring maybe; emotionally healthy, totally; easily done-absolutely not.

Gratitude is subjective. It is determined not by what we have, but by how we *feel* about it. Saying a blessing helps us be present. It raises our awareness of the gifts that surround us. I wonder: Can we add meaning to our lives, come closer to our better selves, by recognizing and expressing gratitude; specifically, by finding the extraordinary in our "ordinary", everyday lives?

¹ Spectators or Participants, Rabbi Sam Chiel, p.12

² Sharon Cohen Anisfeld drash, Yom Kippur 5778

The human capacity for *ingratitude* is evident even in Torah. The Israelites were ungrateful to God during their wanderings in the wilderness. They complained about the manna, the food that rained down on them daily (Num.21:5) and the “lack of free fish” (Num. 11) they remembered having enjoyed in Egypt. As the Israelites approached the promised land, Moses warned them: “...As soon as you harvest your fields bring the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits, to the Sanctuary lest you become ungrateful, lest you take the gifts of your life for granted.”³ Moses probably intended those words as advice; a teachable moment. But to the people it felt like a reprimand. The only thing worse than haranguing myself for not loving and expressing gratitude to God, is for me to scold you. Telling you to count your blessings and be grateful for all that you have....or else, is not compassionate leadership.

It is no easy feat to feel gratitude for all the good in our lives-let alone express it. Biblical evidence shows God needed to shout in order to get attention. Moses required a burning bush. The disciples of Jesus couldn't *see* him until he had fed multitudes with a single fish. My holistic and completely organic prescription for expressing gratitude goes something like this: No need to change the way you walk through the world; just try to see familiar things in new ways. The world appears as it is, based almost solely on the sensitivity of the eyes that perceives it. We see what we have trained our eyes to see. Some of us are inclined to see only miracles. Others seem only to see times of crisis. But we can teach ourselves to perceive the miraculous in what feels mundane and familiar.

Let's explore the thankfulness aspect of human nature: what supports our being open to gratitude -- and what gets in the way? Why does the flow of gratitude within us and between us, get stuck --And when it does (because it will) --what can we do to nurture and refresh the channels of blessing? Is gratitude part of our community culture? If it is not, yet, can we acknowledge that *without* judgment? And have as a goal to incorporate it into our lives?

Recognizing that we humans are challenged when it comes to feeling and expressing gratitude to God-or even to each other, Judaism offers us a spiritual gift. We have *blessings*-for everything. They provide structure for creating a bond between the giver and the receiver; between Judaism, God and us. Traditionally, our first opportunity is when we open our eyes in the morning. “*Modeh ani l'fanecha*”, we say. “I thank you, living and enduring God, for you have graciously returned my soul within me”. When we eat bread, we thank God who provides sustenance from the earth. There are blessings for eating first fruits or vegetables of the season, for putting on a new article of clothing, for our parents

³ Living courageously, Rabbi Sam Chiel, p.42

who gave us life and who love and care for us; for our children who challenge us and simultaneously keep us young and make us old. As you may recall from Fiddler on the Roof, there is even a blessing for the Czar- “May the Lord keep the Czar far away for us!” One of my favorite blessings is all encompassing, non-judgmental and completely accepting. It celebrates all God’s creation from the beautiful to the bizarre. It includes what is awe inspiring and the regular things of our everyday lives. I will say it in the feminine-because I like to do that; and because Judaism generally, has a male dominated, patriarchal orientation:

ברוכה את יי אלהינו רוח העלם שככה לה בעולמה

Blessed are you Adonai our God, spirit of the universe, who has created her world in this way. I add my own commentary: Thank you, Creator of all life, for having created the ordinary and the extraordinary, including small and large wonders. Help us take none of your gifts for granted; express gratitude with our words, in our deeds and in all ways that are suitable for us.

The poet Lewis Hyde in his essay “The gift must always move”,⁴ writes about both material and spiritual gifts. Customs surrounding gift giving vary from one culture to another. But, he writes, “a cardinal property of the gift is that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept . . . Other forms of property may stand still, but ‘the gift must always move.’”⁵ It must be shared. When the gift moves on, “the real fruits of the [gift] begin to be felt.”⁶ Blessings and gratitude are spiritual gifts. Like love, when we give them away, we end up having more. Humans receive God’s blessings. We feel thankful. Our expressions of gratitude become magical, enhancing the mystery and the wonder of life itself.

Midrash, interpretation of biblical text, teaches that Abraham used to receive wayfarers. After they had eaten and drunk, he would suggest, “Say grace.” What shall I say?” they would ask. “[say] ‘Blessed be the everlasting God of the world, of whose bounty we have partaken’. If the wayfarer accepted the suggestion, he was allowed to depart. If he refused, Abraham would say, “Pay what you owe me.” ‘How much do I owe?’ he would ask, Abraham would reply “A jug of wine-so much; a pound of meat-so much; a loaf of bread-so much. *Who do you suppose is giving you wine, meat and bread in the*

⁴ Lewis Hyde, essay from the early 1980’s, *The Gift Must Always Move*; as quoted by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, YK sermon, 5778

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

wilderness?' The wayfarer, aware that he must pay or thank God, would say the blessing—just as Abraham had suggested.⁷ The short blessing Avraham suggested, is a short fragment of *Birkat HaMazon*, our grace *after* meals, which according to the midrash I just read, began with Abraham and continues to this day. Most religions or cultures have built into their spiritual practice, a blessing *before* eating. I don't know of any other that has a special blessing *after* eating. When we are hungry, it isn't hard to bless God for having created what is about to fill and nourish us. It is much less instinctive to express gratitude when we are satiated.

There is a story – probably urban legend, but full of truth nonetheless— concerning the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman.⁸ As a child, Perlman had polio, so getting on stage is no small feat. He was in New York to give a concert. Since he wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches, Perlman labored across the stage slowly, until he reached the chair in which he seated himself to play. He signaled the conductor to begin. No sooner had he finished the first few bars, than one of the strings on his violin snapped. Perlman had only three strings with which to play his solo part. He was close to the beginning of the piece. It would have been reasonable to stop the concert, replace the string and begin again. But that's not what he did. He waited a moment and signaled the conductor to pick up where they had left off. He found some missing notes on adjoining strings. Where that wasn't possible, he rearranged the music on the spot, in his head. He played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony through the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. Then, they rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had witnessed an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity. Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. "You know," he said, "it is an artist's task to make beautiful music with what we have left." I wonder: was he speaking of his violin strings or his crippled body?

We are each the artist behind our own lives. We all lack something. Can we appreciate and express gratitude for what we have? And, do our best to make something of beauty out of it, incomplete as it may be?

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, one of the pioneers of holistic and integrative medicine. In her books [Kitchen Table Wisdom, stories that heal](#) and [My Grandfather's Blessings, stories of strength, refuge and](#)

⁷ Gen.R. 49:4 and 54:6

⁸ Mussar Program: Reaching for a level where everything is for the good; Alan Morinis

belonging, she shares profound and compassionate wisdom from her life experience both as a patient with chronic crones disease and as a medical doctor who practices medicine truly, from her heart. Soon after Dr. Remen moved to California from Boston, she planted a vegetable garden. Even as an adult, that was the first time she'd seen fresh vegetables other than in the supermarket. One evening she went to harvest lettuce leaves. She found herself marveling at the vitality of the lettuce which appeared as if it were bubbling up out of the ground. "Suddenly", she writes, "words that I had heard countless times over the dinner table, and knew by heart," became words I heard now for the first time: *Blessed are you O Lord, King of the Universe, who brings forth food from the earth.* Those words had always been a meaningless mumble; something automatic in her life. Having planted and harvested her own food, they became part of a ritual which she realized was a description of something real and true. Her food was growing, out of the earth. Now, totally awake and present to the world, the blessings she mimicked as a child, were profoundly meaningful. She saw God's presence in her garden, deeply hidden in what was obvious.⁹ Gratitude nourished her. It flowed naturally. Her saying a blessing became a sacred act.

We are here together, to see and be seen by each other and by God, in all our humanity. Contemplating changes to how we walk through the world, even if they help us feel happier and more fulfilled, is difficult. So, we are also here to be supportive and vulnerable, to encourage the natural flow of gratitude for everything we have. We not only receive. We are also givers. The gifts of blessings and gratitude are ours to keep. We will share them because, only when the gift keeps moving, will its full fruits be realized.

Please sit back comfortably in your chair. If you are able, put your feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes, if you are comfortable doing that. Take a big deep breath and let it out slowly. If you have a partner or a friend sitting next to you, holding hands might help us feel we are in this together.

Today, we shared the challenge of encountering teshuva; contemplating the unfamiliar and difficult tasks of change and growth. Do we feel hopeful and optimistic in our ability to be truly present, and let gratitude naturally flow? Has our faith in something greater than ourselves been rekindled or strengthened? Do we appreciate that we are each the artist behind our own lives, each one lacking something? Do we recognize our ability to find and pass on blessings by sharing who we are and who we can become? Do we feel able to see and bless the extraordinary in our everyday lives? And will we bless ourselves with that gift?

⁹ Kitchen Table Wisdom, Rachel Naomi Remen, pp283-284

Let us -assess our lives, through the eye of a gardener. Underneath the surface lies rich, fertile soil waiting to nurture the seeds we sow. We grow inside, even more than we imagine, when we give ourselves the chance. Plant “possibility”. Cultivate it. Tend to it. Something WILL grow there – believe it. Recognize it in ourselves. Appreciate it. We will keep it moving. We will say “thank you”. And it will be magnificent. AMEN May it be so.