



**Friendly Reminder: Hanukkah begins at sundown on Sunday, November 28th!**

### Thanksgiving, Thank You!

By: Rabbi Cheryl Peretz

Note: This message was originally shared for Parashat Vayeshev.

As I re-read this week's Torah portion (the first of four which narrates the story of Joseph and his brother), I was struck anew by the Torah's description of Joseph's journey into slavery. The Torah speaks of the brothers: "And they sat down to eat bread; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing gum, balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt." ([Genesis 37:25](#)) From there, the story goes on to describe how Judah convinced his brothers not to kill Joseph; rather, to sell him to the passing Ishmaelites.

Full of anger, resentment, and hurt, the brothers sat down to their meal without pause, lifted up their eyes, and what did they see? Not God. Not the blessings of having food to eat (remember not long after this scene, they experience the worst famine Canaan has ever seen), and not even the people who helped make sure that food was on their table. Instead, they see only anger, resentment, and their opportunity for revenge. I am sure that the brothers must have thought they were completely justified in their hatred towards Joseph, but what might have happened had they stopped to express gratitude, to think about what they had, to reflect on their bounty?

With the coincidence of this week's Torah portion, I cannot help but think back to a Thanksgiving lesson I learned from writer Jeff Jacoby who wrote an article several years ago about Dennis Prager's book, *Happiness is a Serious Problem*. Imagine the year 1621, the year of the first Thanksgiving. Imagine being one of those pilgrims who first set sail for America. Despite warning of the hazards, they sailed through rough waters, accidentally ending up in Massachusetts instead of the intended destination of Virginia. Arriving in winter, these pilgrims endured cold weather, limited food, insufficient shelter - all leading to illness and despair for many. Within a short time, many had died. As spring approached, those remaining planted wheat and corn. Neither was successful, and other attempts to replenish their supplies were equally unsuccessful. Imagine being one of those pilgrims. Would there have been much for which to feel grateful?

And, today - many of us also struggle. Times are tough - some are unemployed, others underemployed. We experience personal challenges, illnesses, family conflicts, failures. And, for many, gratitude isn't an emotion that comes naturally. And so, Thanksgiving becomes more about turkey and football than about saying thank you.

Yet, Judaism reminds us that gratitude isn't really a choice. It is not conditional and it doesn't matter if I have all that I want or not. Each morning, we say *Modeh Ani Lefanecha* - I am grateful in front of you - we say at the start of each new morning. And, each time we recite the private Amidah, we say *Modim Anachnu Lach* - we are grateful to you. And, there are brachot (blessings) we say for almost everything we do - before we eat, before we perform an act of Torah origins (candle lighting, tefilin), upon seeing the wonders of nature, before studying, and even before seeing someone of great import.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Haolam - Blessed are You, Adonai, Sovereign of the universe... If you look at the words of our blessings, the six-word formula that the rabbis implore us to say 100 times a day, nowhere is the word thanks or gratitude even mentioned. In fact, if anything, our blessings are a statement of theological truth, an acknowledgment that without God's active participation, the bread that is in front of us would not be. And so we say, *Baruch Atah Adonai* - Blessed are you, Adonai Our God, Sovereign of the universe, who brings bread from the earth. Yet, blessings are our way of expressing delight, and gratitude, and appreciation.

The Talmud teaches us that each time we benefit from something in this world, it should be preceded by the recitation of a blessing - lest we be labeled a thief, stealing from God and/or from the society in which we live. Intentional gratitude transfers ownership from God to the one who says the blessing. So, we bring to the words of the blessing formula the feeling of thanks, and that changes our experience; it changes us. Perhaps it is for this reason that Midrash Vayikra Rabbah teaches: "In the World to Come all sacrifices will be annulled, but the Thanksgiving Sacrifice will not be annulled. All prayers will be annulled, but prayers of thanksgiving will not be annulled." (9:7)

We cannot really live, even in the utopian state of the world to come, without gratitude. Our lives are enriched, our experience more meaningful, when we acknowledge with gratitude the bounty we receive - health, food, shelter, the ability to make a living and live in comfort. On the other hand, failure to acknowledge, or living as if these blessings are our expectation, leads us to apathy or worse, living with a sense of entitlement. In the beautiful words of Abraham Joshua Heschel:

*Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers - wiser than all alphabets - clouds that die constantly for the sake of God's glory, we are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit glory in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great. (Heschel, Guest for God)*

It would have been so easy for the pilgrims of 1621 to focus on what they didn't have. Yet, their story reminds us that any moment is one to focus on what we have been given and to say thank you for it. Today, tomorrow, or each day in this week of Thanksgiving and beyond - we say the words of the Psalmist - *Hodu La'Adonai ki tov...* Give thanks to God for it is good.

May we each know the goodness of the day, and as we sit to eat our turkey (which in modern Hebrew is the same word - *hodu*), may we know just how good is our bounty, and how great is our blessing.

Shabbat Shalom, Happy Thanksgiving, and Todah Rabbah (Many thanks).



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