

## **Thanksgiving and the Essence of Judaism: An Essay**

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There is a subtle but crucial verse in this week's Torah portion concerning the birth of Judah, the fourth son of Leah and Jacob. It says in Genesis 29:35, "And she (Leah) conceived again, and bore a son; and she said: 'This time will I thank the Lord.' Therefore she called his name Judah; and she left off bearing." If one examines Genesis closely, this is the first time that someone, *anyone* actually turns to the Lord and says the two words that arguably may be both the simplest and hardest that any of us are capable of saying<sup>i</sup>: "thank you!" The name Judah is therefore closely associated with the act of giving thanks. The word Jew derives from the Hebrew *Yehudi* – a member of the tribe of Judah<sup>ii</sup>. Thus our very roots as a people and as a nation are a living reminder to give thanks, to be appreciative, to have gratitude. The very essence of Judaism itself is thanksgiving. The old Indians and Pilgrims have nothing on us! This leads to many questions concerning our place in the grand scheme of things, and I'd like to address a few of them here.

- What is it that we should be grateful for anyway?

The answer to this is generally obvious to most folks. If we choose to be thankful, we know *what* we should be thankful for: our lives, our families, our jobs (if they're "good enough"), our money, our happiness, our homes, etc. As Jews, many of us have a well-enough developed conscience leading to a sense of gratitude. But many of us tend to say thank you perfunctorily if at all and then go on our way. In this manner gratitude becomes an infrequent chore, certainly not an attitude or a way of living.

In Judaism however, thankfulness is intimately bound to daily life: each morning upon rising we are reminded to give thanks: *modeh ani lephanecha*: I gratefully thank You for returning my soul. This blessing implies that we have been gifted a soul which deserves gratitude, and it implies that every night our soul departs from us and may or may not return - a test run for

death! If you believe that you have a soul, it stands to reason that you received it as a gift. I am certain that there isn't anyone here who has had the following experience: you receive a gift from someone (say for your birthday or anniversary), before saying anything to the other person you open it to see what it is and if you like it. If so, then you say thank you for the gift, but if not you say nothing (or worse: I don't like this!). This leads to a second question:

- Why is it so hard to be grateful?

There are numerous potential reasons for this, all of which are instructive lessons in human psychology. We often perceive our world as a harsh and difficult place. Tragedies abound all around us. Sickness, disease, death, war, hardships of every kind are part and parcel of our daily landscape. One day a loved one is here, one day they are gone. Making a living is tough, let alone raising a family, or maintaining a marriage. We are furthermore under a constant barrage of pressure by society at large to acquire external things in order to measure up to "their" notion of success: these are material things like money, cars, houses, stocks, etc. as well as intangibles such as power, fame, glory, influence over others, and even love.

The pressures upon us to measure up to these external standards of reference are enormous. No wonder there is so much anxiety, depression, and in general, lack of health in our society today. We're all too bitter and angry to be appreciative of anything! It is so easy to see the glass half-empty. Under this pressure, when things don't go our way we often blame G-d for our problems. It seems we want our cake and to eat it too: on the one hand we believe that we have lots of control over our world, on the other hand, when the going gets too tough for us we ask why does G-d allow these bad things happen to us? So who is in charge here?

Because of my background in science, I often gaze up in awe at the night sky with its planets, stars, and galaxies, and have shared this with my son. Why don't more people share this feeling of awe and appreciation, not only for the night sky but also for the blessings of our earth, the trees, the flowers, and the animals? Perhaps it is that many people cannot derive pleasure from something if everyone else has it too<sup>iii</sup>.

Another interesting aspect of this relates back to what Leah proclaimed to the Lord: “I thank the Lord” – the word ‘thank’ comes from the Hebrew *hodah* which also means admitting or confessing as in the *Viddui* confession on Yom Kippur. Thus thanks-giving requires an admission that we are vulnerable and in need – that our success in life is highly dependent upon the contributions of others. That is something which is very hard for many of us to admit to. We hate to be beholden to someone else, especially if his or her contribution to our lives is significant. If we meditate on it we may realize that there is very little if anything that we accomplish on our own without the contributions of others. I am reminded of something Sir Isaac Newton, who was arguably the greatest mathematical physicist of both the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries said: “If I have been able to see further, it was only because I stood on the shoulders of giants.” This leads to the next question –

- So why should we be grateful?

With regards to the science of modern cosmology<sup>iv</sup>, our increasing accumulation of data from space-based telescopes points convincingly to the conclusion that the observable universe is *extremely* fine-tuned. To date, astrophysicists have identified 26 or more physical parameters of the universe that if they turned out to be just ever so slightly different from their actual measured value then life of any kind would simply not be able to exist. In some cases in fact, the universe as we know it would cease to exist.

For example, one of the most important of these parameters is the speed of expansion of the universe from the time of the big bang. If the expansion rate was too fast, matter would disperse so efficiently that galaxies would not coalesce. If galaxies don’t form, stars don’t form. And if stars don’t form, neither will planets. Therefore life as we know it would be unsustainable. On the other hand, if the universal expansion rate was too slow, then all the matter in the universe would collapse back into a superdense object before the galaxies could even begin to take shape. Remember, astrophysicists have identified over 26 such parameters that must be so finely-tuned like this to allow life of any kind conceivable to exist at all! So how come we’re here? Some would argue that life is possible simply by pure chance alone – in other words we’re just lucky to be here. However, the odds for any life to

exist at all are so infinitesimally small (like less than 1 part in 1 with 37 zeros) that it is not logical that we exist based on random chance alone. It is much more likely that some super intelligent and personal Entity is behind creation. I personally find this not only a reason to be grateful, but also a reason to be in awe.

Legend has it<sup>v</sup> that Adam was created by G-d using the finest clay taken from the “four corners” of the earth (*adamah* in Hebrew) and was initially imbued with an earthly nature. In other words, Adam was created as a golem – a being without a soul. When the Lord had created everything else the angels inquired: “aren’t You going to make the man You spoke of?” He replied: “I made him long ago, only the soul is missing.” And only then did the Lord cast the soul into Adam making him a *nefesh chayah* – a living soul. There is an additional gift we were given, one that I suspect makes a huge difference in our lives: not only are we created in G-d’s image, imbued with a soul, but we also have been **given the specific knowledge that this is so** through the gift of the written and oral Torah. Imagine what our lives would be like without the knowledge that the “spark of creation” is within each of us. Would not we effectively be golems ourselves?

It is likely that we do not own our souls, but rather that we are given a limited-time stewardship of them requiring that we return them to their rightful Owner. We have been gifted a perfect opportunity to make this stewardship the best it can be, or, because we have also been gifted free will, we can squander the opportunity – which would be a true sin. We may even choose to return our souls to the Owner in better shape than they were in when we received them! – a lovely thing to do when you “borrow” something. Of course, some say “I didn’t ask to be born, it was forced upon me!” Some folks will just never figure out how to say “thank you” – which leads to the next question.

- How does one practice gratefulness?

The easy answer to this one is to simply say thank you more often. But just as we tell the young people to “say no to drugs”, which while important and true, will not solve the drug problem alone, there is also more necessary to cultivate an *attitude of gratitude* – more than

just saying thank you. Like so much in life, certain things must be grasped through both learning and experience. This comes by engaging both hemispheres of the brain – the left analytical side and the right touchy-feely side. Both practice and *awareness* are the keys. Becoming aware of what is both inside of you and what is on the outside may seem like trivial pursuit, but have you ever really tried to sit quietly for just a few minutes and have a “look inside”? I know for me this is difficult even with a significant experience in meditation.

Our sages teach us that G-d is both immanent and transcendent<sup>vi</sup> - both within and without simultaneously. One can only get in touch with the within part by becoming aware of our inner life. Learning to sit quietly for a brief time each day and just looking inward may enable us to tune in to the “still small voice.”<sup>vii</sup> Practicing thinking “how does this external thing affecting me at this moment make me feel inside?” can help in cultivating a higher awareness of what’s in and outside of us. Who knows, by looking inward we might get more in touch with our souls and our G-d; then the “thank you’s” are up to us. We might also acquire a renewed appreciation of the miracles around us: our world and its people, and our loved ones.

- What is the picture of one who lacks an “attitude of gratitude”?

I contend that insufficient awareness is related to a lack of gratitude. This leads to closed-mindedness, and closed-heartedness. The ego tends to predominate and there is selfishness. Increased depression and anxiety follow along with a feeling of “is this all there is to life?” This in turn tends to correlate with physical ailments of all kinds such as heart disease, reduced immune competence, and diabetes to name a few. And this says nothing about the potential spiritual consequences!

- What is the benefit to be derived from a life lived in gratitude?

People who are aware and have an attitude of gratitude tend to have more of a sense of purpose in their lives. Although they are not perfect they tend to be healthier in mind, body and spirit. They are free to be themselves and to give of themselves. Their lives have a sense

of destiny and meaning. They control their egos, not the other way around. They are free to not have to answer to the materialistic demands of society. They eschew the “rat race.” They value what is important in their lives, particularly their families, all living things and the resources of the earth. They understand what our great sages taught – “who is rich?” they ask. “It is he who is content with his lot.”

In closing, may the Infinite One enable us to expand our awareness of the endless wonders and blessings that have been spread out before us, and may we respond with an attitude of gratitude and with thanksgiving!

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## References

- <sup>i</sup> R.P. Kletenik, “Of turkey, Leah and the Jewish people,” p. 44, *Jewish Herald Voice*, November 10, 1999.
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