A World Full of Miracles



We live in a world that's oversaturated with mental health advice. Every day, there is a new study, article, or podcast about ways to improve your mental health or treat mental illness—chief of which is nurturing a sense of gratitude in your life.

This advice can be very helpful, assuming you can actually follow through with the advice. As a father of two children (and a dog) who also manages symptoms of bipolar II, implementing the advice of therapists and online experts to add gratitude practices like journaling to my busy schedule is no easy feat. When I'm in the throes of a mental health crisis, it can be hard to break from my routine and try something new, even something as small as feeling gratitude.

However, a central piece of Jewish liturgy I already recite three times a day, and its surrounding literature, helped me realize that this problem isn't new, and that Jewish tradition offered a solution to this problem centuries ago.

Judaism has several daily prayer services: *Shacharis*, *Mincha*, and *Maariv*, and additional *Musaf* services on Shabbat and holidays. In each service, the central piece of liturgy is the *Shemonah Esrei,* a collection of prayers which praise God and request His assistance in everything from health, to business, to peace. However, among the myriad of requests in the *Shemonah Esrei*, one prayer offers a moment of gratitude—the *Modim*, or thanksgiving prayer.

We are thankful to You that You Hashem are our God and the God of our ancestors forever; Rock of our lives, You are the Shield of our deliverance in every generation. We will give thanks to You and recount Your praise, for our lives which are committed into Your hand, and for our souls which are entrusted to You, and for Your miracles of every day with us, and for Your wonders and benefactions at all times — evening, morning, and noon. [You are] the Beneficent One — for Your compassion is never withheld; And [You are] the Merciful One— for Your kindliness never ceases; we have always placed our hope in You.

Hedonic adaptation is a term describing how things that bring us joy tend to fade into the background of our lives. It's easy to take things for granted, especially when they appear routine. The sun rises and sets, our bodies generally function properly, and most of us have roofs over our heads. These are all things we need to live but rarely stop to appreciate. Instead, we reserve moments of wonder for the new, seemingly miraculous or supernatural moments in our lives.

The *Modim* prayer recited three times a day implores us to pause and recognize the "miracles of every day with us, and for Your wonders and benefactions at all times—evening, morning, and noon." This form of gratitude is one of wonder at the world around us, something Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel saw as foundational to religious life.

Wonder, or radical amazement, is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalms 118:23).

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.

—*God in Search of Man*, pp. 45-46

Hedonic adaptation also "describes how humans become insensitive to new stimuli, and quickly readjust to an emotional baseline. Therefore, the stimulus needed to create an emotion—like happiness or excitement—needs to be more intense than the last stimulus in order for someone to feel its effects," leading to pleasure-seeking lifestyles that have been shown to be disastrous for our mental health and wellness.

Rabbi Bachya ibn Pekudah, in his 11th-century work, *Duties of the Heart*, observed that a lack of gratitude inevitably leads to an obsession with materialism. Without gratitude for what we have, we can become obsessed with what we don't and endlessly pursue the next thing. To that point, it is precisely when we've recited nearly 10 petitionary prayers in the *Shemonah Esrei* asking God for the things that we want but have not yet received that we take a moment to thank God for what we've already received and trust that we will get what we need.

From the minute a Jew wakes up, they are supposed to express gratitude with the *Modeh Ani* prayer.

I thank You, living and enduring Ruler, for You have graciously returned my soul within me. Great is Your faithfulness.

However, while the *Modeh Ani* prayer helps us start our day with gratitude, the *Modim* prayer helps us maintain gratitude by offering moments of recalibration and reflection over the course of each day as we go about our lives. It serves as an act of attentional gratitude, training your mind to focus on the positive parts of life rather than the negative, shifting our outlook from one of anticipation to one of appreciation. This can help us maintain a sense of wonder, manage mental health challenges by incorporating gratitude into daily life, and stay off the hedonic treadmill so many of us get caught on.

There is a second part of this prayer—the *Modim DeRabbanan*, or the rabbinic *Modim*. Before the invention of prayer books, the Sages established a practice wherein the cantor would recite the *Shemonah Esrei* out loud for anyone in the congregation who didn't know how to pray but could respond, "amen," to the cantor at the conclusion of each blessing, viewing their affirmation of the prayer as if they said it themselves. However, along with the establishment of this practice came a separate prayer to be recited by the congregation when the cantor reached the *Modim* thanksgiving prayer, written by the Sages of the Talmud, that offers similar sentiments of gratitude. The Talmud doesn't offer an explicit reason for this additional prayer, but the 14th-century rabbi, Rabbi David Abudraham, suggested that their reason for asserting that individuals recite this prayer on their own is that nobody can express gratitude for someone else—we all need to express our own gratitude. Among the myriad of things the prayer lists that we are grateful for, the final thing we thank God for is our ability to give thanks, highlighting how much of a gift gratitude truly is.

In this spirit of contentment, the Sage, Ben Zoma, wrote:

Ben Zoma said … Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: "You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper" (Psalms 128:2).

—Ethics of Our Forefathers 4:1