This Thanksgiving, Let’s Grow in Gratitude



If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is ‘Thank you,’ it will be enough.

-Meister Eckhart

קטנתי מכל החסדים ומכל־האמת אשר עשית את־עבדך כי במקלי עברתי את־הירדן הזה ועתה הייתי לשני מחנות

> I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.
>
> – *Bereishis* 32:11

Maybe sometimes in life we are actually made smaller by the good things that happen to us. It's a sad and human truth that suffering can both deepen (*or is it broaden?*) and narrow someone's inner world, at times making people more giving, reflective, and righteous, and sometimes making people more cruel, narrow, and unkind. Perhaps the same is true for the opposite of suffering.

How many times have we met people who were kind and sweet, until they realized their net worth?

How many sweet people that were so sweet until they realized how desirable their sweetness makes them as potential partners, friends, content creators, businesspeople?

And not just with *chasadim*, gifts that we are granted, but with truths. How many people do we know that have become smaller by the truths that they have realized, the Torah they have learned, the wisdom that they have struggled for, but ultimately become imprisoned in?

So often in life, when we are granted *chasadim*, and even when we are granted truths, wisdom, we are not made larger from it, but smaller.

In the verse above, the patriarch Yaakov, at a particularly vulnerable position in his life, reflects on the gifts he was given in life. We tend to read, and sing, these words as a statement of gratitude to God, but perhaps it is also to be read at face value, with a hint of the melancholy that strikes so much of Yaakov's life. Perhaps Yaakov is also reflecting on the existential constriction that can occur in the wake of great blessing.

And like Yaakov, we too sometimes look at all we have, and to our rosebud, and wonder if we gained a world but lost our soul in the process. Maybe life would be a lot better if we still only had our stick while crossing the river.

The Jewish community, particularly in America, has been blessed by remarkable achievement, and has built communal infrastructure in the aftermath of the Holocaust at an astounding rate. We have become small in light of these gifts, as the shuls and schools we have built cast a long shadow on our present moment. And like the long lachrymose history that precedes this moment in the American Jewish story, we have the capability to cultivate a greater spiritual consciousness through this, but we must remain self-aware of the constriction of vision, the smallness, that can come with such gifts. Yaakov realized this truth; can we?

How then are we to become greater for the goodness that we are blessed with, become more for all that we have been given? In honor of the great American day of giving thanks, we are exploring the paths to gratitude, as we think about how we might cultivate more gratitude for the gifts of life, together.

The Low Hanging Fruits of Gratitude

Part of the challenge of maintaining a practice of recognizing gratitude is due to the sheer multiplicity of things, and the diffusion of our life experience through all the things in our life. Put in simpler words, there's just so much happening in life, and pausing for a moment long enough to whisper a *thank you* for the crunch in an apple or the tangy smell of a clementine can surpass our overstimulated sensibilities. Buddhists have a term for this: monkey mind, when we turn from click to click, tab to tab, app to app, each pulling our soul just a bit more apart at its fraying seam. In the face of such a fraying, our own center can barely hold itself together, and the art of survival takes so much from us.

In the face of such a casual, apathetic overwhelm that is contemporary life, I believe that one path to cultivating gratitude is local, hyper-local, specific to the smallest sensations and flavors of your life. When so much is occurring, and so many things occurring in and around your attention, let yourself pick up on just one of those things a day, just one small sensation, and allow yourself to smile for that and that alone. This could be the taste of a fruit, the smile on your child's face when they think you aren't looking, a particularly crunchy word you read in a book, or even that cacophony of horns that constitutes the great disharmony of traffic on the way to work. Let your attention follow a feeling to its conclusion, and smile with it. Elizabeth Gilbert, in a recent interview on the soul-stirring podcast *On Being*, puts it this way:

> And a friend of mine gave me a tip: to lower my standards [laughs] of gratitude, to lower the bar and to catch the low-hanging fruit so that it's not — it doesn't have to be these huge, epic, grandiose gratitudes. The more physical they are, the more I felt it in my body. My gratitude for these slippers that I have that have an insole that you can put in the microwave and you can warm up your feet, that's on my gratitude list almost every day. And I feel it neurologically. Even when I say it, I remember how comfortable those slippers feel, and remembering that doesn't necessarily send me into despair over the state of the world, and it starts to kind of rewire my brain.

Let us catch and appreciate these low-hanging fruit, and maybe we can become more grateful people for it.

Love Your Life

While the localities of appreciation are sure to help, for some people, these might feel too local, too small in character, too provincial. If you are such a person, I'd humbly suggest that you (*check your ego?*) consider a broader perspective and dedicate headspace to appreciating the broader stories in the world. I'm addition to appreciating the crunch of an apple, you may appreciate communicating more about your own personal path, and the steps that had to come together for you to reach your current position. Perhaps some of us might even hope to accept ourselves as we are, with all of our stresses and hopes and failures.

Acceptance and appreciation are related, overlapping siblings of a sort. Sometimes we are particularly vocal about appreciating aspects of ourselves that we have a hard time accepting, and sometimes we need to appreciate our own flaws just to accept them. Nietzsche, the philosopher that people hate to love and love to hate, had a term for some of this: *amor fati*, love of one's fate. Many of us fear self-acceptance, as we have a hunch that without that cruel voice of self-criticism, we would be ever farther behind on our journeys than we already think we are. Perhaps this is true. But more often than not, our own self-lacerating inner voice holds us back as much, if not more, than a smile turned inwards might. Who knows what happens if we accept ourselves, our families, our flaws and failures and hopeful attempts at a better tomorrow, with loving arms and an open smile? Change and acceptance live in dialectical balance; the great humanist psychologist said that one key paradox of therapy is that it is only when a person is accepted completely that they are capable of making change.

There is so much for each of us to appreciate in the small qualities of life, and also in the great qualities, in the more grand narratives of one's life, and in the life of this whole Jewish story of ours. We might as well appreciate it.

Make it All Sing

Ultimately, the what and why of gratitude may matter much less than the how. We can know what to appreciate, and know that we can and should appreciate our loved ones before it is ‘too late’ (as if love and life live in a stream that runs in only one direction), but all of that might not help us if we do not start putting a smile on our face and the smallest kick in our step. Reams of research have found the benefits of gratitude journaling to be significant, both for one’s overall wellbeing and for cultivating a more positive outlook. So try, for yourself, dedicating a daily practice of counting some good things. Put three down on a note on your phone on the way to work, on a post-it by your bedside, or on an ancient parchment in a dungeon, but put it down in the world. Perhaps day by day, these small notes of gratitude may form a song.

We are quick, so quick, to dismiss our own thoughts, particularly when they are positive. And the opposite too tempts us; when thinking of our own success, we have all made the mistake of over-identifying with our successes, the gifts of our stories, and have confused personal worth with results. Triumphalism is an ancient bedfellow to gratitude, if not a comfortable or loving one, as gratitude for what we have so often becomes inextricably linked to our belief that we somehow deserve it all, that our own actions and value have garnered our material and spiritual success. This is not a humble song of gratitude, but a loud, confident song, and one that is just a bit grating on sensitive ears. Studies have indicated that we are far more likely to attribute our own success to hard work and self worth, and the success of others to luck, which should tell us something about the fickle nature of these value judgements. Factors far beyond our own fragile awareness contribute to any success that we are blessed to have.

So when we sing our songs of gratitude, as we think about the gifts that we have been blessed with, let us sing this with hope, and humility, as we realize that suffering and success have a far more complex relationship than we would like to believe. And above all, let us do it together.