Finding Words for a New Year: A Rosh Hashanah Reader

18forty.org/articles/finding-words-for-a-new-year-a-rosh-hashanah-reader

By: Yehuda Fogel

"*For last year's words belong to last year's language*

And next year's words await another voice."

— T.S. Eliot (Four Quartets)

How do we find the words for a new year? Each year has a set of words, a language, that we use to speak to the moment that we are living in. In the narrow sense, we can find these words in headlines and trending tweets, the words that we will forever remember as being a part of the fabric of our lives this past year (vaccine, insurrection, variant). In the broader sense, the words and the way we use them form a broader fabric, a language of the year. We often don't realize how the words we use constitute the language we speak until it's all over, and beginning again, as the year ends. And as we reach this juncture, as we try to mind the gap between what was and what will be, we find ourselves between "last year's words" which "belong to last year's language" and "next year's words" which "await another voice."

We can turn back and think about the way we spoke this past year, the way we communicated, and the people that we were, and we can also think about the voice that we will have this coming year. How will we use our voice, our platforms, to build a better self, a better world inside and out? How will we magnify and support those whose voices we believe in? And on the other side – how have our words come together to form a language that we aren't comfortable with? So many times, the words we string together, one after another, seem divorced from the person we are, until we find at the end of the year that the words became a language and the language became a self – our selves.

So readers, fam, let's mind the gap. Let's think together about our words and our language, and maybe even our voice (*in all honesty not sure how to work that part into this pseudo-sermon, please say hello at yehudafogel1@gmail.com or @yehudahamaccabi if you have any suggestions).*

But how, we wonder? If the words and language are as slippery, as ephemerous, as they so often feel in our mouths, taking an honest accounting of them is no easy task. It's my humble, biased, and yet deep belief that writing helps. Whether you fashion yourself a 'writer' or not, putting words on paper or screen helps us see parts of ourselves, and parts of our language, that are often less visible. Writing about your year, perhaps with a prompt (*What am I proud*

of this past year? What pains me from this past year? What gives me hope for the coming year? Who was I this past year?), may be able to help you put to words some of the wordless feelings that bubble up during this time.

But remember, sweet reader, above all, that the tendency towards shame, guilt, and self-blame is not just a symptom of self-reflection, but an occupational hazard. Be kind with yourself. Forgive yourself, if only to show God how it's done. The writer Anais Nin once said that she believes that "one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live." As we put this past year to words, let us be kind in the world we construct, in the way that we look back, and forward, and inside.

To start this season of reflection on the words and language that we all use, I'm including in this *Rosh Hashanah* reader some of the words that I've used this past year to create a more meaningful world, along with one article on the communal nature of gratitude, as we come together in a community of prayer this holiday. The first was writing for this *Rosh Hashanah*, the second for the secular *Rosh Hashanah* of this past year, and the third is eternally interesting. I hope that we can all look together at the words we used, the language that we've cultivated for ourselves, as we build a world of kindness, together.

HOLIDAYS

Holding Hands With a Lonely King

Remembering last Rosh Hashanah, in the thick of the pandemic

BY YEHUDA FOGEL

SEPTEMBER 03, 2021

Rosh Hashanah, 2020. The crowd sits restlessly, shifting in their seats. The thick New York air of late summer drips down necks and under armpits, keeping everyone in a limbo state between uncomfortable temperature and uncomfortable movement. Outside, under the white canopy of a synagogue tent, a hazan leads a swelling song:

> *Uv'chen Yishtabach Shimcha L'ad Malkeinu*
> And thus may Your Name be praised forever, our King

The crowd hums along at the right moment, standing and sitting with the opening of the ark's curtains, along with the circadian rhythm of the prayers. Patiently impatient for the prayers to pick up, for the king to show up to claim his crown like every year, the crowd waits out the climax of the lengthy prayers in the late summer's slippery heat.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, a young man, unadorned by a tallis in a synagogue tent full of prayer shawls. My thoughts are far from open arks and siddurim, but on open articles and Twitter pages, on the many stark reminders of the harsh outlines of this new reality that have occupied my headspace this last year.

The tent feels stuffy, something muggier than the New York air constricting me. Something about the prayers, the hopes and expectations for a year that will somehow be better than this last hangs heavy in the air. Yehuda Amichai's words about Jerusalem pop into my head: "*the air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers/and dreams/like the air over industrial cities.*" That's this room, clogged up with prayer and hope and dreams of life and death, hopes in a king who gave us death to change his game all of a sudden. And then Amichai's words: "*It's hard to breathe*."

It is the assumption, the hope, of kingship that hits harder this year. Even after a year of destruction, we hope for this same king, as if nothing is different? Even after a year in which our king was strangely absent, we wait? (*Or is it still strange, after all these years of absence? Perhaps presence would be more jarring than absence, at this point, all things considered.*) But that's not really what this is about, I remember, sitting in my seat. Is reckoning with the question of kingship, of the role of the ruled in the decisions of the ruler, part of the game of Rosh Hashanah? Does the crowd question their complicity in their crowning of a king whose decisions seem to have killed so many of his own people? Should these people (*we?*) question (*ever, just once?)* their complicity with the capricious king's decisions, and their role in his rule?

I stand up as these questions run through my head, walking out of the shul as if in urgent need of the restroom, walking instead off of the shul's property, past the two off-duty police officers paid from some government grant or another (yet another stark reminder), past the little boys playing an aggressive game of football, out to a long stretch of quiet street.

With each lengthening stride I lighten up, as my thoughts move up from the grounded songs of the synagogue, the gender-separated rooms of white garments and tablecloths, beyond it all. My thoughts move up over the rows of quiet houses dressed up like homes, the parked cars and golf courses and quiet suffering, crying softly everywhere. Up, like a light mist, like the rising giggle of an infant, to the big blue sky, to the improbable vastness of it all. I drift up to the shining beyond, to

a crowded hall of people clad in white. I look around, seeing throngs of people that seem to be full of a nervous anticipation, chattering quietly with that soft buzz that lives between the opening act of a concert and the headliner. *A pregnant wait, those are nice words for the mood,* I think to myself, as I look to the middle of the hall, where there is a small pedestal—no, a cushion, with an ornate crown resting on it. Overly ornate, almost comically overwrought with precious stones and metals, it seems out of place with the simple dress of most of the room.

I take a moment to breathe in the crowd, tasting their patient impatience in my mouth, before wandering outside. Even here, I feel like a visitor, a tourist to their eagerness. I walk out, past the pearly balustrades, behind the palace, where I find a shady spot to sit down against the high walls. A bit down from me, I spot a man anxiously smoking a cigarette. I sit and watch him, finding a strange comfort in his nervousness in this peaceful spot. Dressed in faded robes that might have once been stately, they are now ragged, tearing at the stitching, his cigarette not the only sign of the toll this year had taken on him. He sports long, greasy hair and a beard just past socially acceptable; he's clearly drained, weakened from the quarantine.

The overgrown man spots me spotting him, and takes a few moments checking me out as I check him out. People always tell me that I make it too obvious when I'm people-watching. Shaking his head, he grinds out his cigarette with an old leather boot and sits down next to me.

"Everything all right?" I ask, feeling his discomfort.

He sighs, letting out a soft heave of a sigh that reminds me that anxiety and anger share a place in angst.

"It's been a tough year," he murmurs, more to himself than to me, looking down at the ground.

"It has," I reply.

"Lost anyone?" he asks.

"Thank God," I respond. I see him visibly flinch at these words. "My family has been safe, healthy. How about yours?"

Long silence.

We sit, and I turn to see a thick tear pooling up in the corner of his eye. I turn back quickly.

"I've lost some people close to me," he finally says. I hear in his voice something beyond the weightless suffering of loss; something of the weightier suffering of self-recrimination. He feels responsible.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say, feeling inadequate.

"Thanks. Yeah," He responds, with more of a grunt than anything else.

"Hard to know what God was thinking this year," I offer half-heartedly, filling up our painful silence with sound, any sound.

He glances at me sharply, his eye catching mine. What's that I see in his eyes? A glimpse of something impossibly hurting, damaged, wounded, no: *alone*. A solitude so deep, almost as if he has never tasted love, compassion, togetherness.

"Yes, it is," he whispers.

"Who knows, maybe he wants us to feel connected, unity in times of crisis and all that jazz?" I get the sense that this man is too tired for my recycled apologetics.

With a soft smile, he says, "How'd that work out for you?"

Now I grunt my response, "Yeah …"

We sit in the silence for another moment, as the late summer sun bakes our feet, alone together.

"Well maybe it's the opposite then," I say, trying again, this time more heatedly, with an urgency that feels true to this moment. "So maybe it's not connection we were meant to feel, but loneliness—his loneliness. Maybe he wants us to feel how alone he must feel, trapped up in his great divine omniscience, that palace of grief or joy or whatever the hell happens in the pearly gates of His Aloneness."

He looks at me with his impossibly hurting eyes, impossibly soft eyes, impossibly broken eyes.

My eyes well up, and I catch my breath, look down. A tear crawls down my cheek, as I think of the long days that bled into impossibly long nights of this past year, week after week, month after month after month. I breathe deeply, swallowing my tears down, swallowing down the long walks when walks were still remotely satisfying, swallowing down all the grief and hurt and pain and loneliness, the impossibly long loneliness that sits lodged in my throat, pressing against my thin levees to burst out.

My hands ball up, sweaty, and I feel another hand find mine, squeezing my hand gently. I feel his body shaking through his hand, as we cry together in the warm sun, rising against our shade. I have held in these tears for so long, for so many months of staring at screens deep into the night to ward off what might come in those moments before sleep. I feel my desperate tears rushing out now, long awaited. It feels as if the sun's warm waves of light are its own humble attempts at crying along with us, fat heavy tears of sunshine rolling along our faces.

We sit quietly together, like this, two broken people pretending no longer.

"Nothing makes any sense, does it?" he says, trying for a painful laugh.

"I guess not," I say, and we look at each other, smiling through our warm tears.

"Think this year will be any better?" I ask.

His grip on my hands tightens for a moment, uncomfortably.

"I hope so. I'm not sure if I … I'm not sure if I can take any more of this, to be honest. I … yeah."

We stay like this for another moment, for what feels like the fastest eternity I have ever felt.

"I better go," I say, pulling my hand back.

"Me, too," he says, getting up.

"Think we'll make it?"

He smiles softly at me yet again, as we stand up and stretch out our pain.

"Whatever happens, I hope that you find joy, and that you find yourself somewhere in the sadness," he says, his eyes searching mine.

"Maybe we will both find ourselves in all of this loneliness," I say as I pull him into a hug.

With one last look into his hurting eyes, which feel just a bit more settled, less stormy than before, more wind than rain, we say goodbye, and I turn to leave.

I walk past the hall, past the crowd's noise, the off-duty cops, the kids playing football a tad too aggressively.

My thoughts drift down, falling softly from the impossible vastness, from the big blue sky, to the quiet streets of homes dressed like houses, to the parked cars and soft sadness of golf courses and full synagogues. As I make my way back into the white, mundane tent full of prayers and people, I feel just a bit lighter. The prayers, after the hour and a half of my absent-minded walk, feel just a little less urgent, less needy, more hopeful. How can the people choose again a leader that made the questionable decision to throw our world into pain, confusion, and grief? I'm not sure, and I'm not sure the leader knows either. I'm not sure anyone in this game

knows the answer or even the question, but for a moment I find myself caring less about the headlines and trending tweets, as I feel the echoing reminder of a soft, sweaty hand holding my own, remembering the impossibly hurting eyes that I saw.

Even if I can't make sense of any of it, the wafting breeze of prayer feels kinder now. I pick up the book I hide under my Machzor, a collection of poetry by Rilke, and read a few of my favorite lines, lines that have clung to me desperately in the long moments of this past year.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

I will keep going. I will let it all happen to me, the beauty and the terror. Somewhere nearby is the country of life—a dark, desperate, hopeful country. I have been there, I have reached out my hand. Maybe someone will still find my hand in this earth-bound country that they call life, hold it, and we can be lonely together for just a moment. Perhaps I might again hold hands with a lonely king.

Yehuda Fogel is a writer and editor at 18Forty, a Jewish media company, and was formerly an editor at the Lehrhaus, an online forum for Jewish thought and ideas.

#ROSH HASHANAH #ROSH HASHANAH READ #CORONAVIRUS

BELIEF

When Great Trees Fall

Lessons from a year of losses from Maya Angelou and the Talmud

BY YEHUDA FOGEL

DECEMBER 31, 2020

THERE IS A LONG AND STORIED HISTORY TO SEEING PARALLELS between trees and great people, from Psalms ("the righteous blossom like a date palm") to Thailand's Buddhist monks, who ordained trees as monks in an attempt at warding off foresters. Deep-rooted, standing firm in the wind, and reaching ever upward, there is a certain natural kinship between trees and great leaders. The historian Benedicta Ward, writing about the desert anchorites of fourth-century Egypt, put it this way: "the monks were like trees, purifying the atmosphere by their presence."

This year, the world has lost many such trees, and the Jewish world is no exception. From academic scholars to Hasidic leaders, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the countless more whose departure has been no less painful for those in their midst, many luminaries, great and small, have passed this year.

How have we emerged from the losses of so many of our greatest teachers this year? How have we experienced the pain of these losses, and how might we look back on this year? Considering how the sages of the Talmud, and Maya Angelou, consider the loss of a leader might just offer us insight into how to think about this ongoing year of losses that we are experiencing now.

The question itself provides intimations of the answer, but to fully appreciate this dynamic, we turn to the great American poet, Maya Angelou.

She died in 2014, but her poem "When Great Trees Fall" might as well have been written for 2020. This deeply stirring reflection speaks directly to this moment, haunted as it is by the loss of too many souls, great and small. Angelou offers us a glimmer of hope in a year of losses, and a touch of how we might seek wisdom as this year reaches its conclusion. Here is a fragment of her poem:

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.
When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear …

She sidesteps speaking of great people or flawed leaders, speaking human truths through the natural world as she is most adept at doing. "Eroded beyond fear"—how else could we put the indelible feeling that crowds our pandemic world? She continues:

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity …

The Talmud questions whether eulogies are primarily intended for the honor of the deceased or for the honor of the living. In important ways it might be for both, as it offers respect to the mourned-for and closure to the mourners. But perhaps mourning is vital for the living for another reason as well: It is vital that we mourn those that we lose so that we know who we must become in their departure. When we lose truly great people, their departure leaves a gaping absence, in which we might grow, learn, become. We encounter greatness not only in the presence of great people, but also in the very real absence of great people. "Our eyes, briefly/see with/a hurtful clarity ..."

This truth is ancient. In a creative reading of a verse from Kohelet (12:11), the sages of the Talmud make the following observation about the words of Torah in the wake of great trees:

> When are they [words of Torah] rooted in a person? When their masters are gathered in [deceased]. As long as one's teacher is extant, one equivocates, saying "any time that I need [to know something], I will go to my teacher and ask them." When one's teacher dies, one has to strive day and night to study on one's own. She knows that there is no one to ask.

When great trees fall, we no longer have their shade to rest in. We hear the crash, and we are invited to become greater because of it. We can no longer be dependent on the deeds of earlier generations.

There is something searingly beautiful about the eulogy-hunting and documentaries watched after great leaders pass. This is the aftermath of the fall of great trees. We hear the crash. We can learn to respect greatness, devotion to the advancement of humanity in the form of personhood—how far they came. How far we might come.

The sages of the Talmud—a work with a remarkable degree of narrative circumambulation—are surprisingly invested in figuring out issues of positioning. Questioning why some passages in the Torah neighbor each other is a great pastime to these sages of ancient Babylon, who ultimately conclude that "there is no before or after in the Torah," and events might have happened in an order different from how they appear in the text. That doesn't stop them, and questioning the temporally disjointed juxtapositions that constitute so much of the Torah is a calling card of the Babylonian Talmud.

In Hagigah (28a), the sages question one such instance:

> Rabbi Elazar said: Why was the Torah portion that describes the death of Aaron juxtaposed to the portion discussing the priestly garments? This teaches that just as the priestly garments atone for sin, so too, the death of the righteous atones for sin.

We are thus provided with two thought-provoking roads to atonement: the priestly garments and the death of the righteous. We are not offered an explanation by the Talmudists about the reasoning behind these atonements, nor of the nature of the relationship between these two processes. Esoteric as this question might seem, deeper consideration of this question offers us a powerful lesson about life in our leadership-starved society.

The priestly vestments might signify that best sense of obligation associated with public office. When the priest serves the people, dressed in the clothes of office, self-interest is far behind other-interest. Sin, in its privileging of the local, self-oriented gratification above the broader considerations of responsibility and mutuality, is thus atoned for by the symbol of true mutuality and responsibility: the priestly vestments. Irresponsibility and self-centeredness are thus atoned for by a deepened dedication to responsibility and other-focusedness.

Some might see the atonement of the loss of the righteous as cosmic or metaphysical, but I prefer to consider instead how this atonement might be earthly

and eminently responsibility-inducing. If the priestly garments provide atonement in the expression of responsibility and mutuality they inspire, why then might the death of the righteous provide atonement?

The parallel to the priestly garments is illuminating. If the priestly garments atone because they are reminders of that best sense of duty, obligation, and mutuality associated with public office, perhaps the death of great people also can serve as a similar reminder.

What are the *bigedei kehuna*, the priestly vestments, of our age? The public offices of church and state, the garments of too many of our leaders, have long been soiled. We know too deeply that those very same priestly vestments (or cassocks) can too often hide abuses of the very same power and office they represent. And our great trees—too many have fallen this year. But in the sacred air of their departure, may we seek betterment. Not an otherworldly atonement, but a deeply humble, human atonement. An atonement for our fragmentation and self-serving natures, for our failure to contribute more to the painfully beautiful idea that is community.

These atonements might be small, quiet. After Rep. John Lewis passed this year, one friend, humbled by his ignorance about this icon of civil rights, immediately purchased books by Lewis, and set out to learn more about the work accomplished by this great man. Another friend, a conservative law student, following the departure of Ruth Bader Ginsburg from the halls of justice, was inspired to buy her book, and was soon immersed in thinking and writing of the late, great justice. These are two small ripples of the great waves made when we lose great trees. This past year, we have been confronted with an unwanted blessing—the blessing of learning about those that we lost.

America has young roots and tall branches, with a trunk stretching high to seem older. The patina on our capital domes is newly aged, our flags barely tattered. The history of this land is old, but the history of this country is young. In the rush toward the faint blue line of the horizon, the storied future folded into American success, America has centuries of experience in underappreciating our origins.

This past year, America has looked in the mirror. The Black Lives Matter movement has raised the question of the still-unpaid costs for America's freedom and founding, COVID-19 has taken so many people from us. It has been a year of death and life, of life in the shadow of death. We lost many in the great complicated hope that is America.

As the gyre turns and this year reaches its long-awaited endpoint, how might we look back at 2020? After all the panic, anger, mourning, and challenges that constituted the days and headlines of this past year, how might we look back at 2020 with open eyes, hoping to learn from this year of losses? Perhaps we can look to the fallen trees, and grow into our own great trees, practicing the hard work of mutuality, dedication, and responsibility. Maybe we can be better for it.

Maya Angelou finishes with these words. Let us whisper a prayer that her words carry us into a more hopeful 2021.

... And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.

We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

Yehuda Fogel is a writer and editor at 18Forty, a Jewish media company, and was formerly an editor at the Lehrhaus, an online forum for Jewish thought and ideas.

#TALMUD #POETRY

True gratitude is a communal emotion, not a wellness practice

Applause in support of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wattsville, Wales, 7 May 2020. *Photo by Rebecca Naden/Reuters*

by Michal Zechariah + BIO

In March 2020, Europeans started gathering on balconies and by windows to cheer, applaud and show gratitude to their healthcare workers providing life-saving services during the pandemic. The regular cheering and clapping became a symbol of hope: human solidarity triumphing over fear and enforced isolation. Contrast that scene with another. Following the remission of her COVID-19 symptoms in July, Jazmin Grimaldi (daughter of Albert II, Prince of Monaco) told her thousands of followers on Instagram: 'I am so thankful that I am starting to finally feel like myself today … I am grateful to be alive and healthy at this present moment.'

How were these situations different? Why is it inspiring to hear about the people of Europe shouting thankfulness from their rooftops, whereas Grimaldi's message, while it

induces sympathy, doesn't inspire?

Besides the obvious discrepancy in the magnitude of the two displays, another clue is found in the question: to *whom* were these people thankful? The gratitude of the European public toward their healthcare workers is highly relatable. We understand the sacrifices that medical professionals make, and know that we owe them a debt that can never be paid in full. Our inability to adequately reciprocate their efforts only increases our gratefulness. By contrast, Grimaldi's gratitude, however heartfelt, lacked an addressee – as do similar public utterances made by countless others. It wafted into digital space and dispersed, clinging to no one in particular. Grimaldi's message conveyed an understandable sense of happiness and relief, but her sentiment didn't necessarily establish a bond with other people.

Grimaldi's style of gratitude is part of a wider societal pattern. The disappearance of benefactors (or donors) from scenes of thanksgiving has become particularly endemic to current American thought about gratitude, as its focus has shifted from the interpersonal function of thankfulness to its personal advantages. This is partly down to the influence of positive psychology: in the past two decades, scientists have grown increasingly attuned to the contribution of gratitude to both personal and interpersonal flourishing, crediting it with improving emotional wellbeing and promoting prosocial behaviours, changing our brains to help emotion regulation, and even with relieving symptoms of asthma. However, only a minority of studies have highlighted the social nature of gratitude, with most focusing on its benefits for the grateful subject. The aforementioned studies privileged personal rather than interpersonal aspects of gratitude. Test subjects were instructed to keep a written record of things for which they felt grateful or to perform a gratitude meditation, rather than to share their thankfulness with anyone else.

Seen as a personal emotion with considerable benefits, gratitude is increasingly marketed as a self-help instrument, as epitomised in the popularity of gratitude journals such as *Good Days Start with Gratitude* (2017): diaries designed to keep track of events, people and circumstances for which one feels grateful. With promises that they will bring a host of personal benefits, these journals translate some of the scientific findings about thankfulness and wellbeing into a wellness practice. And since the journal is a private document meant only for the writer's eyes, any benefactors mentioned in it will probably never learn about the journal-keeper's feelings.

As I cupped my hands to take the coins, an image of holding burning coals flashed through my mind

The contemporary preoccupation with gratitude as an individual experience, and viewing it as a path to psychological wellness, is significantly different from how the emotion was understood historically. Whereas earlier theories of gratitude also concentrated on the importance of gratitude as an inward disposition, such theories nevertheless emphasised that gratitude derived its value from its interpersonal nature. In his treatise on religious affections, the 18th-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards described gratitude as a natural affection felt toward another who has benefited us. The power of gratitude is so great, according to Edwards, that it can momentarily induce positive feelings even toward our enemies (Edwards gives an example from the Old Testament with Saul's thankfulness to his enemy David for sparing his life). By this view, although our gratitude might be rooted in a basic concern for our personal interests, its effect is decidedly interpersonal. Edwards considered gratitude one of the 'better principles of human nature' and viewed ingratitude as an especially heinous sin for its unnaturalness.

Recognition of the importance of gratitude as an interpersonal sentiment extends into antiquity, when bestowing gifts and reciprocating them was a central aspect of economic life. The Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca's book *On Benefits* (composed after the year 56 CE, and newly translated by Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood in 2011) offered the most extensive discussion of gratitude in the ancient world, and it continued to shape the Western concept of gratitude for centuries. In it, Seneca treats gratitude as a virtue that ought to be cultivated for social purposes:

> That gratitude is an attitude to be chosen for itself follows from the fact that ingratitude is something to be avoided in itself, because nothing so dissolves and disrupts the harmony of mankind as this vice. For what else keeps us safe, except helping each other by reciprocal services? Only one thing protects our lives and fortifies them against sudden attacks: the exchange of benefits.

Seneca argues that the generosity of benefactors and the gratitude of recipients are the glue that holds society together and guarantees its survival. As a Stoic thinker who prioritised inner dispositions over outward circumstances, Seneca emphasised that feeling gratitude was more important than acting to reciprocate benefits received, but that the feeling was morally virtuous only insofar as it was directed at a benefactor. This

interpersonal aspect of gratitude is essential: if a person only feels fortunate without crediting anyone for their good fortune (as in the social media messages and gratitude diary entries written by so many), they are not really being grateful at all. Contemporary philosophers even propose that being grateful for general states of affairs, rather than to any specific person, is a misnomer: when I am grateful for my general health, or grateful that it didn't rain on my wedding day, what I'm actually feeling is not gratitude but appreciation.

Aside from positive psychology's influence, why else is gratitude coming to be understood as a personal rather than interpersonal emotion, and even less as a virtue? Another part of the answer is surely that the interpersonal bonds and duties with which true gratitude saddles us are not always pleasant.

I remember a time when I was visiting my hometown in Israel and ran into a relative with whom I had a strained relationship. I'd popped into a coffee shop to change a large bill for coins for the bus, and she was there waiting on her order. Surprised but happy to see me, my relative insisted on giving me the change herself. It was a modest act of goodwill on her part but I found myself struggling to receive it: as I suppressed my instinct to refuse the gesture and cupped my hands to take the coins, an image of holding burning coals flashed through my mind. Why was I reacting so dramatically to such a small kindness? It wasn't the monetary value of the gift that made me reluctant to accept it, but rather the interpersonal bond that accepting it would imply.

Like any emotion that connects us to other people, gratitude can also be psychologically challenging

The French sociologist Marcel Mauss captured the essence of my predicament when he wrote in 1950 that a gift is received 'with a burden attached' because it binds the recipient to the donor. My mother tongue, Hebrew, reflects this hold of benefactors over their recipients in the expression *assir todah* – the equivalent of the English word 'grateful', it means literally a prisoner of thankfulness. The coins my relative gave me had little value, but taking them placed me in a debt of gratitude that, given the history of our relationship, I found hard to accept. On this occasion, gratitude did not feel good.

Literature too sometimes pushes against the claims of positive psychology about the personal benefits of gratitude. For example, in Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy* (1951), the titular protagonist, old and disabled, is apprehended by the police and interrogated

aggressively at the police station. At last, he is approached by a woman whom he suspects to be a social worker. When she offers him a cup of tea, Molloy reflects:

> Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady.

The feeling that Molloy identifies with effusive thanksgiving is not gratitude in the contemporary sense, nor appreciation even, but rather humiliation. Even if he hadn't wanted a cup of tea in the first place and preferred to be left alone, the cultural expectation to reciprocate the social worker's kindness with an equal or greater measure of gratitude placed him in her immediate debt. To be grateful, Molloy says, is to cede power to the benefactor. By extension, Beckett's protagonist offers a troubling alternative to Seneca's egalitarian vision: for Seneca, gratitude offers a way in which even the poorest members of society can reciprocate the greatest benefits bestowed on them, simply by being thankful. But Molloy suggests that the expectation of gratitude risks deepening existing social gaps, since the less powerful in society will be forced into perpetual humiliating indebtedness, with the more powerful left to enjoy the role of charitable benefactors.

A similar concern about this aspect of gratitude is blown to an epic scale in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). After leading an unsuccessful rebellion against God that cost him his heavenly position, Satan is on the brink of repentance:

> What could be less than to afford him [God] praise,
> The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,
> How due! Yet all his good proved ill in me,
> And wrought but malice; lifted up so high
> I sdeign'd subjection, and thought one step higher
> Would set me high'st, and in a moment quit
> The debt immense of endless gratitude, …

Satan faces a difficult problem: he understands that he ought to be grateful to God for everything he has received from him, but he can't bear the emotional consequences. To be grateful would mean being burdened by the endless, joyless debt he owes his creator.

The recent popularity of gratitude as an instrument for enhancing personal wellbeing has obscured some of the complexity of this mental phenomenon: far from being only a personal emotion that points us to our blessings, it is primarily an interpersonal emotion

that points us to our benefactors. This doesn't mean that gratitude can't feel good. More often than not, it does feel good to acknowledge others' kindness toward us. But like any emotion that connects us to other people, gratitude can also be psychologically challenging. If as a society, we can recover the interpersonal significance of gratitude, it will confront us with the extent of our dependence on other people and their power over us. At the same time, and as Seneca argued, recognising this aspect of gratitude has the potential to bind us closer to one another, to strengthen our communities and relationships.

16 DECEMBER 2020