

## **Thanksgiving – Parashat Vayetzei**

In his wonderful book, Born to Kvetch, author Michael Wex tells the following story with which just a few of us here this morning might possibly identify. He writes of a passenger on a train from Grand Central Station who sits down next to an older gentleman reading a Yiddish newspaper. Just thirty minutes into their journey, the man puts down his journal and starts to whine like a frightened child: “Oy, am I thirsty...Oy, am I thirsty... Oy, am I thirsty....” The seat-mate is at the end of his rope within just a few minutes. He makes his way to the water cooler at the far end of the car, quickly fills two cups, and starts gingerly walking back to his seat, taking great pains to keep the drinks from spilling. He stops in front of the old man and clears his throat. The gentleman looks up mid-oy, his eyes beaming with gratitude as he drains both cups in a single gulp. Breathing a sigh of relief, the traveler settles himself back down with a smile and closes his eyes, hoping to catch a much-needed nap. No sooner does he begin to doze off when he starts to hear the words, just as loud as they were before: “Oy, was I thirsty...Oy, was I thirsty...Oy, was I thirsty.”

We laugh at, and perhaps even recognize a bit of ourselves, in this story of the whiny man for it illustrates just how deeply human an instinct it is to focus on what we lack rather than on what we have. It is far more common to hear the “if onlys” and “why can’ts” as many of us wish for more time, more money, less stress, easier jobs, more helpful spouses or children, less rapidly aging bodies, larger homes, fancier vacations, and the list goes on and on. How often do we, too, fixate not on the glorious feeling of having our needs met but rather on experiences of longing and want, the quintessential glass half-empty rather than glass half-full. Despite all the many

blessings in our lives, how often does the voice of “Oy, was I thirsty” beat out the voice of “Wow, I am quenched.”

This morning we read *Parashat Vayetzei*, one of our Torah’s sweetest meditations on the theme of gratitude and appreciation. Our portion begins with the powerful episode known as Jacob’s Ladder, the patriarch’s nocturnal vision of a staircase beset by angels and the proffering of God’s renewed covenant and promise in the dark of night. Awakening from his sleep, Jacob proclaims some of the most famous words in all of Scripture: “*Achen yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v’ani lo yadati* - Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16) “How awesome is this place!,” says Jacob. “This is none other than the abode of God and that is the gateway to heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

Jacob’s words would be poignant under any circumstance, but let us remember for a moment the context in which our patriarch finds himself on the night of his miraculous dream. He has just duped his dying father along with his brother, conspiring with mother, Rebekah, to steal parental blessing from Esau. This treachery has ignited his brother’s wrath and Jacob is now on the run, fleeing to Haran in order to escape Esau’s murderous rage. At the moment of his vision, Jacob is lying in the cold desert with a stone under his head for a pillow; he has stopped in an unnamed place and is utterly alone. Despite his considerable *tzuris*, however, Jacob is able to remember the fundamental good in his life – the connection he has to his God, the great beauty of the natural world, the sheer miracle of being alive. “Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it!,” he exclaims (Genesis 28:16). How often do we, too, find ourselves in the midst of incredible blessing that we nevertheless fail to recognize?

If Jacob presents one example of gratitude in this week's *parasha*, a second embodiment of this value is found in the character of Leah who chooses the name *Yehudah* (Judah) for her fourth son. Like the modern Hebrew word *todah*, *Yehudah* is related to the Hebrew root meaning praise or thankfulness. Upon giving birth to this child Leah cries out, "This time I will extol the Lord!" (Genesis 29:35)

Again, we must remember the context under which Leah is able to make her remarkable statement. Forced by her father to switch places with her younger sister on what was to have been Rachel's wedding night, Leah has married a man who shows her no love. The names of Leah's first three children reflect the matriarch's pain and longing to be recognized by her husband: Reuben - "because God has seen my affliction," Simeon - "because the Lord heard that I was unloved," Levi - "this time perhaps my husband will become attached to me." Suddenly with her fourth baby, Leah is able to acknowledge the great good in her life - four beautiful children, a fertile womb unlike that of her sister, a sustaining relationship with the Divine. In the Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot*, Rabbi Yohanan states: "From the beginning of time, no one ever thanked God as Leah did." Perhaps this is one of the reasons that we, as Jews, are *Yehudim* - the descendents of Judah - this child named out of gratitude. Our name reminds us that we must strive to recognize blessing always.

It is worth noting when the secular and Jewish calendars align in certain ways, and so we recognize today the synchronicity that exists as *Parashat Vayetzei* - this Torah portion filled with stories of gratitude - coincides with the American observance of Thanksgiving. And there's more! Rabbi David Kalb, of the Jewish Learning Center of New York, posits that the template

for the very first Thanksgiving way back in 1621 might actually have been our own festival of Sukkot, Judaism's harvest holiday and celebration of abundance. Kalb writes, "The Pilgrims saw themselves as the New Israelites escaping religious persecution in England, their 'Egypt,' and creating a new home for themselves in America, their 'Israel.' Sukkot marks the time when the Israelites wandered in the desert – on their way to Canaan after escaping slavery. The Pilgrims could have very well seen their story reflected in the holiday of Sukkot. When they achieved a successful harvest, they perhaps looked at their Bibles (Deuteronomy 16:13-15) and...[saw a] blueprint for their own 'modern' celebration of freedom."<sup>1</sup>

While scholars are divided about how much influence Biblical Sukkot actually had upon the development of Thanksgiving, it is certainly true that the holiday we celebrated this past Thursday is consistent with so many different Jewish ideas and values. Thanksgiving is a time to bless our abundance - expressing gratitude for friends and family, for full tables laden with food, for the many freedoms, religious and otherwise, that we enjoy as proud Americans. While the secular calendar singles out one special day out for expressing appreciation and thanks, the Jewish calendar rather incorporates elements of gratitude into every day with the tradition that each individual should recite no fewer than 100 blessings daily – blessings upon waking up and going to sleep, blessings for food and for clothing, blessings for seeing wondrous things, for studying Torah, even for going to the bathroom. Walking through the world looking for things which to bless is a powerful way of cultivating gratitude and priming our spirits for wonder and appreciation rather than for want. For us as Jews, every day is Thanksgiving!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.627995>

And so this morning we give thanks – for blessings of security and comfort, faith and community, family, friends, good health, and full bellies. We give thanks for being the descendents of Judah, the Jewish People, named by an unloved matriarch who nevertheless found it in her heart to celebrate the miracle of what she had. We give thanks for being the descendents of Jacob, the Children of Israel, calling ourselves after a man estranged from his family, alone in the wilderness, who was still able to acknowledge the wonder of knowing God. May we, too, find repositories of gratitude within our souls. May we merit saying with conviction: *Achen yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v'ani lo yadati* - Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it!”

On this Shabbat *Vayetzei*, this Shabbat after Thanksgiving, may our satiety always overwhelm our longing, our quenched thirst overwhelming our kvetches for water.

Wishing you a very happy holiday weekend!

Shabbat Shalom.