

Yom Kippur 5779/2018, Rabbi Edward Elkin

“Attitude of Gratitude”

I’m a news junkie, and I confess that looking back on the past year, I sometimes felt that following the news was an exercise in masochism. Fires and floods and extinctions caused or exacerbated by climate change. Populists and demagogues on the loose. Shameful MeToo revelations and accusations. Shocking celebrity suicides. Millions of refugees and migrants finding a *None is Too Many* welcome in too many countries. Humanitarian catastrophes for the Rohingya, and in Yemen, Venezuela, Syria. Digital technologies increasingly used to exploit and manipulate people in a “truth-isn’t-truth” world. In Israel, trouble on the borders north and south, minority Druze and Israeli Arabs alienated by the recent Nation-State bill, potential solutions for the African asylum seekers and for religious pluralism at the Kotel first agreed to and then nixed, and of course zero diplomatic progress with the Palestinians. Here in Canada, bitter divisions over pipelines, the van attack and shootings on Toronto’s streets, a trade war with our closest ally, a tragic opioid epidemic in our families and on our streets that only gets worse and worse, continuing deprivation in many indigenous communities, and that poor endangered whale in BC that carried her dead calf on her nose for 17 days before letting it slip away into the water. So much sad news and bad news, accessible 24/7 with our 21st century technology, that it’s very hard not to despair. In such an environment, it’s tempting to just tune out the world and turn inwards instead.

But we can’t as easily tune out our personal lives, can we? Some of those headlines I’ve just reeled off impinge directly on us, or on people we know and care about. And even if not, we ourselves, or people we know, are living with afflictions that don’t make the evening news but which affect our lives in countless ways: physical and mental illness and disability, loss and grief, broken relationships, loneliness, abuse, financial hardship, addiction, anxiety, burnout, and so much more. It is so easy to get pulled down into a state of despondency by considering all our suffering, and the suffering all around us, and in the world.

But there *is* good news out there -- not all is gloom and doom. There is actually a lot to be grateful for. I’ve been thinking a lot about gratitude this year in the lead-up to Yom Kippur. As Steven Pinker and a few other contemporary writers remind us, there are many ways in which the state of the world is actually way better than we often assume it to be, and not just in terms of one-off Good News events like the rescue of the boys’ soccer team in the cave in Thailand, which moved and inspired me and millions of people around the world. On the health front -- life expectancy in the world

is way up, infant mortality is way down, and horrible diseases that used to snuff out millions of lives have been wiped from the face of the earth. Socioeconomically, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has been halved in the past 20 years.¹ The chance that a particular human being will die a violent death, as opposed to death from illness or old age is way lower now than it has ever been in the entire course of human history.² Technological innovations are allowing people with a range of disabilities to communicate and participate and contribute in the community in ways that were unimaginable in previous generations. Other tech innovations are helping humanity clean up the same environment it has been despoiling, and to uncover more of the secrets of this wondrous universe we inhabit. And while many individuals in our midst are indeed suffering in various ways, usually there are aspects of their lives which are good as well, people for whom they feel grateful, moments of joy that can bring consolation in the midst of the challenges. And yet, despite so much Good News, we so often find ourselves focusing on the negative.

I concede that my own Rosh Hashanah sermon last week, in which I shared my worries about the future of the Jewish people, may be part of this phenomenon. For all my concern about the Jewish community's level of commitment to maintaining the boundaries necessary to preserve our particular identity, in many ways, the Jewish world has never in its long history been more alive and more dynamic and creative and wonderfully diverse than it is today. Just a few examples of so many which I could cite: In Jewish culture, we need only think of the Ashkenaz Festival right here in Toronto recently completed, which showcased the vitality of contemporary Jewish arts and culture around the world. In Jewish learning, we call to mind the amazing Torah that is emanating from the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem where I like to study, the traditional-egalitarian Mechon Hadar yeshiva in New York and Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox seminary ordaining woman rabbis! Locally in the GTA, we finally have a determined effort underway to lower the cost of Jewish day school education to make that option affordable for more families. On the web we have Tablet magazine and Jewcy and other innovative sites which are drawing people in, especially young Jews who don't access traditional Jewish media. In tzedakah and social justice work there are all the amazing organizations that we are supporting through our Yom Kippur tzedakah appeal, including to spotlight one, Kehillah-- which has a major initiative underway for desperately needed affordable housing in our community. Among the most exciting areas of Jewish life right now is the Jewish environmental movement including Shoresh here in Ontario with its Jewish organic farm, and Hazon in the States, and the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies in Israel which

¹ Marcus Gee, "Even Without Rose-Tinted Glasses, Life's Still a Lot Rosier", Globe and Mail August 25, 2018.

² Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, p.49, 61 et al.

brings together Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Diaspora Jewish students and faculty to study and address the many environmental problems of the Middle East. Religiously, there is a renaissance of Jewish spirituality with people reviving ancient Jewish mystical practices such as meditation and chanting and movement to bring them closer to the wellsprings of our faith. There are innovative new models of Jewish community springing up in cities around the world, including if I dare mention our own little Narayever shul which is thriving in downtown Toronto, looking for ways to share our very special community with more people – including those with physical disabilities which have till now barred them from entering our beautiful, heritage, non-accessible building. And there are many other minyanim and congregations which are attracting participants of all ages who are interested in exploring what it means to be Jewish in the context of a religious community. Chabad – for all that I passionately disagree with its stance on so many issues – has shlichim present in dozens of out of the way places around the world, offering Jewish life and community to locals and tourists who would otherwise go unserved. Groups of Jews who have been marginalized for centuries such as women, LGBT, the intermarried, the poor, and those with disabilities are making their voices heard, claiming their rightful place in the Jewish world as never before. In Israel activism, there are organizations for every spot on the political spectrum for people to learn, express, and act on their convictions about the direction of the Jewish state – and many different frameworks for visiting Israel as well, and making aliyah. Israel itself celebrated 70 years of independence this past year, and for all its problems, there is so much vitality in its cultural, religious, educational, economic, and political life, so much to be grateful for. From this perspective, the worries about the future of Jewish life which I expressed on Rosh Hashanah should at least be balanced by, and possibly outweighed by, the pride and delight which we should all take in the extraordinary level of aspiration and energy present in our community, which in many key ways exceeds that of the past, and bodes well for the future.

So with all this good news, in the outside world and in the Jewish world, why does the mind tend to focus on the negative? There are various theories as to why we gravitate to Bad News, when there is so much that is positive out there. Some ascribe it to an intellectual climate in which in order to sound serious, you have to go on about what a mess everything is. Some people blame the media and its tendency to focus on what is wrong rather than on what is right. Some say this tendency to gravitate to bad news became wired into human brains as a survival mechanism over our millions of years as hunter-gatherers: on the savannah, bad news confirms just how vulnerable you are and therefore how alert you need to continue to be to

keep yourself safe, whereas good news will only lead you to relax and therefore will expose you to ever-present danger.

For whatever reason, it is often very hard for us to keep Bad News from dominating our consciousness. But objectively, as we've seen, there is much to be grateful for. And if we needed some extra motivation to try and overcome all those obstacles and feel grateful, it turns out there's good scientific reason for us to do so. Have you read about the Nun Study of the 1990's? Turns out that in a group of 700 elderly nuns, those who had expressed positive emotions early in their lives – emotions such as contentment, happiness, love, hope, and Gratitude – were far more likely to be alive and well sixty years later than the negative nuns. The difference was as much as seven years in life expectancy. So remarkable was this finding that it has led, since then, to a whole new field of gratitude research, which has shown that gratitude is associated with reduced incidence of such afflictions as depression and stress and PTSD.

In fact, Gratitude, according to all this research, sounds like a true wonder drug.³ So why don't we practice it more than we do? Well, a state of gratitude may come naturally for some, but others find it not so simple to attain. I'd like to explore three obstacles which often stand in the way.

First is our experience and awareness of actual suffering. How to feel grateful while going through chemotherapy or chronic pain or a degenerative illness for which there is no good treatment? How to feel grateful while standing at the grave of a life partner or a child? How to feel grateful when one feels that one's society in which one lives has elected the wrong leaders, and is going in exactly the wrong direction in fundamentally important ways? It's not impossible, I've known people who've been through terrible suffering or despondency and who manage to hang on to an appreciation for all the things they do have. Such individuals have a true gift for Gratitude. But for many of us, we become weighed down when the suffering or despair is so deep and we have to work very, very hard to will ourselves into a state of gratitude, if we can do it at all.

A second obstacle to gratitude is associated with the fact that essential to achieving a state of gratitude is the realization that we are dependent on others. Gratitude implies an acknowledgment that we can't do it all ourselves. Another person, or God, has helped us, been generous to us. But often we are reluctant to acknowledge our dependency on others, with the loss of control over our lives and our fate which that implies. The verb "to give thanks" in Hebrew, להודות, is the same as the verb "to admit." When we

³ Ibid., p.81.

express gratitude, we're often admitting a dependency that might make us feel uncomfortable.

A third obstacle to achieving a sustainable feeling of gratitude is illustrated by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, when he writes about the "non-toothache". We all know how painful it is to experience a toothache, and we know how grateful we are when it stops. But most days, most of us walk around with a "non-toothache", and we're not even conscious of it. We're not grateful for our non-toothache. Thich Nhat Hanh says that on those "non-toothache days" we should practice mindfulness techniques, in order to appreciate the well-being that we are experiencing when we don't have a toothache.

This technique for achieving a state of gratitude may work for some people. But as the writer Philip Garrity notes, for others it is less a recipe for enlightenment and more for exhaustion.⁴ Garrity, who as a 24 year old overcame a rare and aggressive bone cancer, found that after he went into remission he was so determined to continue to be grateful that it pulled him away from living in the world of wellness, a world where getting stuck in traffic or forgetting our keys, or burning the soup, or getting a C on a paper are incredibly annoying -- even if on the grand scale of things, compared to cancer, they aren't so terrible. The thing is, most of us find we can't always live in the Grand Scale of Things, and when we're not there, achieving a state of Gratitude becomes a real challenge.

In many ways, this challenge is at the heart of what Moses had to say to the Israelites, as he stood with them on the far side of the Jordan River, getting them ready to enter the Land without him. He knew that gratitude had not exactly been the people of Israel's strong suit in the desert.⁵ After experiencing an extraordinary deliverance from Egyptian bondage, they sang one ecstatic Song of thanks at the Sea -- and then almost immediately started complaining about the lack of food and water, about the lack of meat and vegetables, about the fearsomeness of the inhabitants of the land they were about to enter. This was their MO for the 40 years of desert wanderings. Our ancestors seem to have been incapable of perceiving the good news in their lives in the midst of all the challenges they were experiencing -- the fact that God had delivered them, the fact that they were now free, the fact that the miraculous manna appeared on their doorsteps each morning to sustain them. They repeatedly expressed a preference to return to Egypt, which they looked back on nostalgically as a land flowing with milk and honey.⁶ God and Moses were experienced not as their

⁴ New York Times, Dec.18, 2017.

⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Power of Gratitude, August 3, 2015.

⁶ Num.16:13.

Redeemers, but as the ones to blame for their suffering and for their anxiety about the future. Given this track record, it's not surprising that Moses anticipates that they would also have trouble achieving a state of gratitude once they entered the Land of Israel. He warned them that once they settled in Eretz Yisrael, they would start to attribute their achievements to themselves alone. They would come to say *בחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החייל הזה* "my power and the might of my own hand" did all this⁷ – forgetting to ascribe their victories, their sustenance, indeed their very existence, to something higher than themselves: to God. But despite Moses' exhortations, the people failed time and again to achieve a state of Gratitude.

The ancient rabbis also knew about the human propensity to avoid gratitude. One midrash⁸ imagines Abraham receiving wayfarers in his tent. After they had eaten and drunk, he would suggest that they give thanks to God. When they asked him what they should say, he would reply *ברוך אל עליון שאכלנו משלו* "Say, 'Blessed be the everlasting God of the world, of whose bounty we have partaken.' If the wayfarer accepted the suggestion and said those words of gratitude, he would be allowed to depart. But if he refused, Abraham would say 'Pay what you owe me.' When the wayfarer asked how much, Abraham would reply 'A jug of wine, so much; a pound of meat, so much; a loaf of bread, so much. For who do you suppose is giving you wine, meat and bread in the wilderness?'" The wayfarer, now aware that he must either pay or thank God by saying the blessing, would recite the words. This midrash reflects the rabbis' awareness of how very reluctant people are to express gratitude for what they receive.

So given all the obstacles, how do we achieve a true state of Gratitude? Perhaps one way in, building on the insight of the midrash, is to participate in the system of blessings we have inherited from Jewish tradition. *Birkot ha-Shachar*, 'the Dawn Blessings' said at the start of morning prayers each day, form a litany of thanksgiving for life itself: for the human body, the physical world, land to stand on and eyes to see with. The first words we say each morning – *Modeh/Modah ani Lefanekha*, "I thank you" – mean that we begin each day by giving thanks. When Aretha Franklin z"l sang "the moment I wake up, before I put on my make-up, I say a little prayer for you" she may not have been thinking about the Modeh Ani but that's essentially what it was. What a simple, beautiful, Jewishly traditional way, to cultivate our Gratitude by waking up each morning and giving thanks to some "You", someone out there beyond yourself whose existence in the world makes your life better, richer, someone who gives you hope.

⁷ Deut.8:17.

⁸ Gen. Rabbah 49:4.

My spiritual practice of Gratitude is to daven three times a day. To put on my tefillin before I eat breakfast, and to give thanks. After I eat, to recite birkat hamazon and give thanks for my sustenance. To find a few minutes in the midst of a busy afternoon to daven mincha and give thanks. Once the sun sets, after I've watched the news and absorbed the mostly bad stuff that was reported, to recite maariv and give thanks. And, as I lay my head down on the pillow, preparing for unconsciousness and the vulnerability that goes along with that state, to recite Shema and the last line of Adon Olam בידו אפיקיד רוחי נעת אישן ואעירה ועם רוחי גוויתי ה' לי ולא אירא – into God's hands I entrust my spirit when I am asleep and when I am awake, I will not fear. It took me many, many years to reach the point where I was expressing gratitude through prayer so many times a day. It's possible to start with just one moment in the course of a day, whenever works for you, to just stop – and give thanks.

Ritual helps. But the ritual nature of expressions of gratitude, or to use a more negative characterization, the rote recitation of prayers, doesn't always generate a transformed spiritual state, I concede. Abraham's wayfarer, forced to choose between paying or praying, decides to pray – what effect the recitation of those words had on him we don't know. As for me -- sometimes I don't feel it deeply, sometimes perhaps I'm just ticking the box – Mincha? Check. Now back to my busy day. Just like for those who take on the obligation of reciting kaddish daily for a loved one -- sometimes they feel very connected to the person they are mourning as they recite the ancient Aramaic words, and sometimes they're thinking about all the things they have to do that day, or about their golf game, or about what they need to pick up at the store for dinner, or about the fight they had with their spouse the night before, or whatever.

I think that's okay. As long as our ritual, or whatever technique we use, *sometimes* wakes us up, as long as it *sometimes* helps us to feel genuine gratitude, that's enough. Every culture has its ritualized expressions of gratitude. We all train our young people to say the words "Thank You" when they receive something. We've all done the "What do you say?" thing with kids who don't spit it out in a timely enough fashion. Sometimes when we use the words "thank you", it does well up from the depths of our souls, and at other times we are simply performing a ritual that is expected of us by the culture which we inhabit. We are only human after all. Every culture has its words and its rituals for the expression of gratitude. On Yom Kippur, we read about the elaborate ritual practiced by our ancestors on this day in ancient times, a day in which the High Priest acknowledged the people's utter dependence on God's gracious kindness to them and forbearance of their transgressions. Canadian and American societies have a day set aside every year for Thanksgiving, and on Sukkot next week Jews will give thanks

for the harvest that sustains us. Rituals, from the simplest expression of the words “thank you” to the most elaborate ceremony of the High Priest or national holiday, potentially have power to change us, over the long run. But it’s really hard.

One of the hardest things is to feel grateful for the hard stuff. I’ve been connecting Gratitude with Good News, and as we’ve seen it’s hard enough sometimes to achieve a state of Gratitude for the good stuff, given all the obstacles. But there is another *madrega*, another spiritual level, which is to feel grateful for our challenges -- including this very challenging day of Yom Kippur, with all the difficult work it is asking us to do. The writer Merle Feld writes about Yom Kippur: “I am grateful for this, a moment of truth, grateful to stand before You in judgement. You know me as a liar and I am flooded with relief to have my darkest self exposed at last. Every day I break my vows – to be the dutiful child, selfless parent, caring friend, responsible citizen of the world. No one sees, no one knows, how often I take the easy way, I let myself off the hook, give myself the benefit of the doubt – every day, every day. On this day, this one day, I stand before You naked, without disguise, without embellishment, naked, shivering, ridiculous. I implore You – let me try again.”⁹ I ask, how can she be grateful for having her darkest self exposed, when so many of us expend so much effort to keep it buried? What a great Yom Kippur question for us to consider! Thinking of all our personal challenges in the world around us, can we reframe them into something we can be grateful for? That is not easy, but what a gift if we can get there, at least some of the time. And on that note, how about feeling gratitude for perhaps the hardest thing of all, the thing we spend so much effort trying to stave off, namely our own mortality? We might say that it is our awareness that we will one day die that allows us to live fully and vividly and urgently in the limited time we have on earth. Yom Kippur, in its denial of the body through the fast, helps us to surface that reality and, perhaps, recognize it for the gift that it is.¹⁰

We don’t necessarily deserve our gifts, and this insight can motivate us to in turn generously bestow blessing on others, which they do not necessarily deserve either. That is called *hesed*, and there is so much more of it that we can shed all around us, if we leave behind an apathetic state of despair over the Bad News and enter a place of hope, grounded in Gratitude. Gratitude is not about denying that all that Bad News is real, it is. There are a lot of really awful things going on out there, there’s a lot of world-fixing to be done, a lot of suffering to be relieved if we at all can. My premise is that we will have more energy for that important work if we start from a place of Gratitude than if we come from a place of cynicism and despair. That same

⁹ Lev Shalem machzor, p.204.

¹⁰ Calev Ben David, Haaretz, Sept.17, 2015.

Hebrew word להודות meaning “to give thanks” is etymologically related to the word יהודי, “Jew”. A Jew is someone who gives thanks.

At this moment, I would like to give thanks that you are all here this Yom Kippur, once again taking part in the ancient rituals of this holy day in the context of the Narayever congregation, your presence giving me encouragement in the face of my worries about assimilation, your willingness to listen to some of my thoughts and reflections challenging me to learn and grow so I can articulate them as best I can. I’m grateful that amidst all the Bad News, all the tzoers, there are so many truly positive things that are happening both in the Jewish community and in the world at large, and so many amazing individuals who are doing, seeking, learning, contributing, advocating, working, and inspiring in so many different ways. They help our community and society to thrive, and live up to our God-given mandate for holiness. I’m grateful I don’t have a toothache today. And I’m grateful that, at the end of this fast, there will be plenty of food waiting for me to fill my belly.

It’s Yom Kippur, the culmination of our annual period of teshuvah, repentance. Some of us have spent the weeks leading up to today trying to repair the breaches in our relationships with other people and with God; some of us haven’t. Some of us have spent this period of time in self-reflection, a full-frontal encounter with the deep and hidden contents of our hearts; some of us haven’t. Some of us have been deeply engaged in Jewish life and Jewish community over the past year; some of us have been quite removed. At this point, it doesn’t matter. We’re all here, for a wide variety of reasons. In whatever spiritual state we’ve come, and for whatever reason, let’s strengthen each other this day to find opportunities to give thanks and to compassionately forgive ourselves when we just can’t honestly muster the “Attitude of Gratitude”, when it’s just too hard. When we beat our chests during the Yom Kippur confessional prayer the Vidui, that’s like a Jewish defibrillator.¹¹ We’re getting our hearts going, getting our neshomes going – recognizing all our imperfections, noticing what truly matters, all in the context of a supportive community. Yes there’s lots of Bad News in the world; that cannot be denied. But once our hearts have been moved, there’s no telling what blessings may flow forth, for which we will want to give thanks.

¹¹ David Wolpe, Huffington Post, September 4, 2012.