

“Speak Your Gratitude”

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Each year, around the middle of November, someone circulates on email or social media, a list of conversation starters for the Thanksgiving table. They are usually prompts or questions that are intended to get people talking about gratitude while they are fessing on turkey, in between bites of stuffing, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie. Sometimes at our Thanksgiving meals we do this exercise, asking people to go around the table and say what they are thankful for...other years we are less programmed. The truth is I'm a bit ambivalent about the whole exercise. What am I thankful for? How long have you got? One of my favorite prayers in the whole siddur comes right after *Nishmat kol chai* where we say “*v'siftoteinu shevach k'merchavei rakia*” could our lips utter thanks as limitless as the sky...*ain anachnu maspikim le'hodot lecha*...We could never fully state our gratitude for even a fraction of the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. So when it's my turn to share what I'm grateful for, it always sounds incomplete, or trite, or abbreviated for the sake of not monopolizing the whole conversation! My heart bursts with gratitude. I think I'm pretty aware of all the people, all the opportunities, all the good fortune in my life. A major part of my davenning, my personal prayers involves calling to mind all of those many blessings in my life.

But then I came across a commentary by Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, one of the great leaders of American and Israeli Jewry in the first half of the 20th Century. Rav Hutner said that the word *hoda'ah*, which means gratitude or thanksgiving, comes from the word, *modeh*, which means to admit or to acknowledge. The idea is that to truly demonstrate gratitude, you have to articulate what it is that you're grateful for! It's not enough to just know it in your heart, or to feel it inside, or even to pray to God about it; you have to say it; you have to articulate it. This is the ultimate source-text for all Thanksgiving conversation starters! It's not such a gimmick after all!

Recall the beginning of this morning's parasha: Jacob sends a message to Esau that says the following: *Vayhi li shor vechamor, tzon v'aved v'shifcha*...Jacob says, during all that time that I stayed with Lavan, in the course of 20 long years in his household, I amassed cattle, donkeys, sheep, male servants, female servants... Why does he feel compelled to share this information with his estranged brother Esau? Many commentaries suggest that Jacob is trying to placate

Esau by implying that Esau could have anything he wants from Jacob's many assets. Esau could think to himself, 'for a couple dozen cattle, a herd of sheep and a few servants I could forget about the whole birthright thing.' The problem with this interpretation is that Esau himself has become quite wealthy during that same time. He doesn't need anything from Jacob.

Furthermore, he is not coming to seek revenge, but reconciliation. Perhaps what Jacob is communicating by listing, articulating, acknowledging his good fortune is that he wants Esau to know that he is different now from the conniving, selfish, Jacob he once knew. Now, Jacob is much more contemplative; much more aware of his good fortune because he worked so long and hard to amass it; and much for thankful for all that is his. Jacob even turns to God and exclaims: *katonti mikol ha'chasadim u'mikol ha'emet asher asita et avdecha...* God I am so unworthy of all the kindness that you have consistently shown to me! Perhaps Jacob is demonstrating to us Rav Hutner's teaching about gratitude: You can't just keep it to yourself. You have to say it out loud.

And when you stop and think about it, this is consistent with so much of Jewish life. The Rambam teaches that t'shuva, repentance and reconciliation only really happens when we say out loud to the injured party what we are sorry for, and verbally ask for that person's forgiveness. There is something so much more authentic about forcing yourself to say those words to another person, something that brings about healing precisely because you verbally acknowledged the wrongdoing and took responsibility for it. In fact the act of verbal acknowledgment accounts for most of the t'shuva process. Because even if the injured party refuses to forgive you, if you've managed to sincerely ask them three times, out loud, to their face for forgiveness, the tradition considers you as being forgiven even if that person—for whatever reason—can't manage to tell you that you're forgiven! So too when it comes to *tefillah*...we Jews are not meant to pray quietly. Prayer is supposed to be heard, even the so-called 'silent' prayers. I've actually tried to stop referring to the "Silent Amidah," or instructing people to 'continue silently.' It's more accurate to say continue with the *personal* Amidah. But the tradition is clear that prayer is more effective when the person praying can hear the words cross their lips. That's why in many traditional shuls or shtiebels, even when the congregation is not joined in unison for a particular part of the service, there is still a din of voices of the people steeped in their own personal prayer. The message is that prayer is more effective, more real when it is spoken out loud.

And when an accident is averted, a dangerous situation is survived, or a recovery takes place we come forward to recite the *birkat ha'gomel*, words of public acknowledgment *she'gmalani kol tuv*, for the goodness that has been bestowed upon me. And the congregation responds: *Hu yigmalcha* or *Hu yigmalech kol tov, selah*, that God should continue to favor you with all that is good. In that famous Psalm of Thanksgiving, Psalm 100, it says when it comes to giving thanks: *bo'u lifanav bir'nana*, come into God's presence with shouts of joy. Gratitude is not meant to be kept inside...it is meant to be shared with God, with family, with friends; even with the distant cousins that you only see once a year at Thanksgiving dinner.

The Seer of Lublin, Rabbi Ya'akov Yitzchak Horowitz, was the most influential Hasidic master of Poland and Galicia at the beginning of the 19th Century. He was called 'the seer,' the *chozeh*, because it was said that he could look at a person's forehead and see directly into his soul. He once speculated about the order of the prayers in the siddur. When we recite Musaf in a few moments, notice how the prayer *Modim*, the thanksgiving prayer, comes right before the prayer *Sim Shalom*, the prayer for peace. The Chozeh of Lublin said that shalom, peace, is the greatest of all blessings...if you have peace, you have everything. But, he said, it is thankfulness that creates the opportunity to pray for peace. It is thankfulness that opens the gates, thankfulness that creates an *eit ratzon* an ideal time to ask God for the blessing of peace. It's as if to say, when God sees that we are thankful, God is prepared to reward us with even more.

As a parent, I can certainly identify with that. When my kids simply say thank you, when they just acknowledge their gratitude for even the smallest things, I am so much more willing, so much more in the mood to do more for them. The feeling of not being appreciated pretty much has the opposite effect! So I offer you the encouragement, the exhortation, the charge to speak your gratitude; tell the people you're thankful for how you feel about them; recount all the blessings in your life so that not only others hear it, but so that you hear it...and by hearing it, may you come to believe it as well. Because each one of us is, in fact, uniquely and abundantly blessed.