

Sermon | Parshat Vayishlach
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Grateful for Grace

One of the aspects of Judaism that I have always found most compelling is that we have relatively little in the way of dogma. To be a Jewish person, one need not affirm a litany of beliefs or affirmations. Judaism is more occupied by actions than by beliefs. We spend much more time pondering the intricacies of practices, customs, laws, and *mitzvot*, than we do worrying about beliefs. This is not to say that beliefs are irrelevant or unimportant! On the contrary, much has been written in the past two thousand years about the nature of God, the question of theodicy, and various other components of Jewish philosophy and theology. What I appreciate is that, with few exceptions, the conclusions drawn by our sages and scholars throughout Jewish history have not been singularly focused or dogmatic. There are many ways to conceive of God, a multitude of paths to reach the Divine, and manifold opportunities to sense the Presence of the Holy Blessed One animating the universe around us. It is with this in mind that I want to direct your attention to the notion of grace—unmerited divine assistance; the idea that God’s love for us, as individuals and as a people, is beyond what we merit, that sometimes we are rewarded in life beyond what we deserve.

Parshat Vayishlach begins with the reunion of Jacob and Esau—one that was shrouded in uncertainty and trepidation, at least for Jacob. In the end, it appears that their meeting was amicable and cordial. In the course of their conversation, Esau asks Jacob a question: “Looking about, he saw the women and the children. He asked, ‘Who are these with you?’ He answered, הילדים אשר-חנן אלהים את-עבדך ‘The children with whom God has **graciously given** your

servant’.”¹ If you are reading the translation of the Torah set before you in the *Etz Hayim Humash*, then you will see a slightly different translation: “God has favored.” Another translation offers “God was kind enough to grant.” But I prefer the translation “graciously given,” because it emphasizes the idea that Jacob understood that his children, his legacy, his family, was a gift from God—not a reward or something due to him, but the result of God’s grace. Jacob could have answered Esau’s question differently. He could have simply said, “These are my children.” But he adds that the blessing of his life was a gift from God, a demonstration of divine grace. It was a recognition that, sometimes, we are granted things in life beyond what we ourselves imagine we might deserve.

Grace, *chein* in Hebrew, may be considered parallel to the concept of mercy, *rahamim*. In Judaism, grace and mercy are contrasted with justice, *din*, because the strict application of God’s justice in the world would require God to hold us fully accountable for each and every misstep. Such a world we could not endure. But neither could we live peacefully in a world where only God’s mercy and grace prevailed; justice is required to hold accountable those who are most guilty. In Judaism, we merit God’s mercy and grace not necessarily because of our own actions. Perhaps we merit God’s grace because of the actions of our ancestors. Perhaps we do not merit it at all, but receive it nonetheless. That is what I sense Jacob believed when he stood before his estranged brother and humbly answered his question, “This is what God has graciously given.” Jacob was overwhelmed by God’s mercy and grace. Knowing full well that he had tricked his father, escaped from his brother, and lived to see the day where they would face each other once more, and this time with many others at their sides, this was a moment

¹ Genesis 33:5.

“Adonai! Adonai! A God compassionate and **gracious**, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness.”² On our most sacred days of the year, we remind ourselves and God that one of the essential attributes of the Divine is that God is gracious, *hanun*, that sometimes God grants us in life much more than we believe we may otherwise deserve. In that context of the High Holidays, we look back at our year that has passed and consider all of the moments when we erred and when we could have done better. In that moment we do not ask God to be just! We do not wish to be held accountable for all that we have done wrong. Rather, we ask for mercy. We ask God to forgive. We ask for grace.

Next week, many of us will gather with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving. Indeed, the origins of the festival are storied and of great debate amongst historians. There has been much ink spilled on the matter, and it is worthwhile to consider just how whatever good intentions may have existed at that early time in our nation’s history may have led to the horrors of the relationship between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the years which followed. But most accounts of these “First Thanksgivings” point to similar conditions: a group of people from markedly different backgrounds, dining together to demonstrate their gratitude for grace. It was a recognition that they endured hardships and were graciously given a chance by God and by one another to live another year and see another season.

In that spirit, I encourage each of you to go beyond the custom of mentioning only the things for which you are thankful and grateful at your Thanksgiving table. I ask you to consider in what ways you have experienced grace. What have you experienced this past year that humbled you, that felt as if you were given more than you necessarily deserved? I feel God’s

² Exodus 34:6.

grace when I come home at night to my family. I felt God's grace about two months ago with the birth of our second child, a strong and healthy baby. I feel God's grace in my continued health and my family's health. Only a person with incredible hubris would suggest that these are things that I deserve, that I merited, or that I earned. No, on the contrary, these are the things that God has graciously given to me in spite of the fact that I may not deserve them, and these are the things for which I express my gratitude. On this Thanksgiving, I encourage you to share your stories, and be grateful for grace.