

**The Importance of Gratitude**  
*Parashat Hayei Sarah*  
**(Post Thanksgiving Day)**  
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Just the other day, I read a beautiful essay by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In it he describes a famous scientific study. It's called the "Nun Study." (That's "N-U-N," not "N-O-N-E.") It's a study of about 700 elderly nuns, all members of the same order, conducted in the 1990's. The study looked at their health and well-being.

What makes the study so fascinating and so revealing is that the members of this same group, way back in the 1930's, had been asked by their Mother Superior to write a brief autobiographical account of their life and their reasons for entering the convent.

The researchers analyzed those responses and assessed those nuns' emotional states back in the 1930's. Then, the researchers tried to determine whether the nuns' emotional states in 1930 had an effect on their health and well-being some sixty years later. Because this was a very homogenous group, it was an ideal group for testing hypotheses about the relationship between emotional attitudes and health.

The results were published in 2001 and they were startling. The more positive emotions, e.g., contentment, gratitude, happiness, love and hope, that the nuns expressed back in their youth, the more likely they were to be alive and well sixty years later. The difference was as much as seven years in life expectancy.

This remarkable finding has led to a new field of what is called, "gratitude research," as well as a deepening understanding of the impact of emotions on physical health.



Gratitude, and the importance of expressing it, is at the core of a key passage in the Bible, which we almost always read at our ecumenical TG service. (Deut. 8:11-17).

**11** Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, ... **12** When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, **13** and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, **14** [beware lest] your heart becomes proud and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **17** [Beware lest] you say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.”

Rabbi Sacks points out that grateful people are more likely to exercise regularly and go for regular check-ups. Gratitude improves physical health and immunity against disease. It helps us avoid over-reacting to negative experiences by seeking revenge. It even tends to help us sleep better. It enhances self-respect, making it less likely that we will envy others for their achievements or success.

Saying “Thank you” enhances friendships and elicits better performance from employees. It strengthens resilience.

Maybe that’s why we Jews pray as much as we do! After all, at its core, Jewish prayer is about feeling and expressing gratitude.

It starts at the very beginning: **Modeh Ani -- I thank you.**

Gratitude also lies behind a fascinating feature of the Amidah. When -- as we did it today, the amidah is repeated out loud by the prayer leader, our role is to be silent, to listen to each *brachah*, each blessing, and to say “amen” after each one -- with one exception. When the leader says, “**Modim anachnu lach,**” “**We give thanks to You,**” we murmur a parallel passage, a parallel “**Modim anachnu lach,**” a parallel expression of thanksgiving. We actually break into, we interrupt, the repetition to say our own prayer at that time. For every other blessing, it’s

sufficient to assent to the words of the leader by saying Amen. The one exception is **Modim**, “**We give thanks.**” Why is this?

Rabbi Elijah Spira (1660-1712) in his work, *Eliyahu Rabbah* (Orach Chayyim 127:1), explains that when it comes to saying thank you, we cannot delegate this away to someone else to do it on our behalf. Thanks have to come directly from us:

שוחזין וכו' ואומרים מודים דרבנן וכו'. שאין דרך העבד להודות לרב ולומר אדוני אתה ע"י שליח, אבל בשאר, מלכות שמים שיוכל להכחישו ולומר לא שלחתי, אלא כל אדם צריך לקבל בפיו עול התפלה שהיא בקשה יכול לתבוע צרכיו ע"י שליח, שכל אדם חפץ בטובתו ולא יכחיש ויאמר לא אבודרהם עמוד קטן] שלחתי.

(The same, incidentally, is true of saying “I’m sorry.” Can we imagine apologizing for someone else? It just doesn’t work.)

The American holiday of Thanksgiving goes back to 1863 when Lincoln issued a Thanksgiving proclamation, thanking God that though the nation was at war with itself, there were still blessings for which both sides could express gratitude: a fruitful harvest, no foreign invasion, and so on.

Interesting, there are rabbinic leaders who have been against Jews celebrating Thanksgiving. After all, it isn’t explicitly a Jewish holiday. Should we adopt a holiday that was created by non-Jews?

But then there were rabbis who believed, to the contrary, that this is a holiday that has at its core a universal religious impulse: the need and the urge to give thanks. I agree with that. We should, I believe, give thanks, and we should observe Thanksgiving. If you happen not to have done so this past Thursday, I urge you to put it on your calendar for next year.

Thanksgiving is not only important to individuals; it’s also important to societies. It protects us from resentments and the arrogance of power. It reminds us how dependent we are on others and on a force greater than ourselves.

We as a nation have much to be thankful for. We should be acknowledging and expressing thanks that we live in a nation founded on fundamental freedoms, that law and justice are central to our identity, and that our nation is a democracy. In that we live in such an exceptional, blessed nation, we are luckier than the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived. Of course, with that good fortune comes the responsibility to make use of our rights to protect our freedom and to further the values we hold dear. But that is a privilege we should never take for granted.

As we have seen, Thanksgiving is essential to our individual and collective health and happiness. Let's try to remember that, not only once a year, not only once a week, but each and every day.

Shabbat shalom!