

Being Grateful Before, During and After Thanksgiving
Parashat Vayishlach
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

(Based on a *drashah* by Rabbi Efrem Goldberg:
<http://rabbisblog.brsonline.org/celebrating-thanksgiving-each-every-day/>)

There are different opinions about when, where and how the idea of a national American day of Thanksgiving arose. Some say it goes back to Abraham Lincoln's proclamation in 1863, others say it goes back to George Washington in 1789, and still others say it goes all the way back to the Pilgrims in 1622.

I myself have always loved Thanksgiving. I always felt as though it is a day on which my Jewish and my American identities can be fully expressed.

A few years ago, I was studying the life and work of Rabbi J.D. Eisenstein (1854-1956; the author of *Otzar Yisrael*, *Otzar Dinim u'Minhagim*, etc.), an immensely learned and prolific Orthodox rabbi who was born in Russia in 1854, came to this country in 1872, and lived to be *102 years old!* Think about that: born before the Civil War, he died in 1956, three years after the Korean War came to an end. Along the way, he became a great American patriot. He loved Judaism, and he loved being a Jew, but he also loved the United States, and the freedom it offered to people from all over the world, including many Jews. The other day, I came across some beautiful words he wrote about Thanksgiving. He wrote them in 1905, shortly after attending a celebration of the 250th anniversary of the settlement of Jews in America, at Carnegie Hall in New York City. He said the following:

ב־12 באוקטובר, 1892. כשחל יובל 250 שנה להתיישבות היהודים באמריקה נכח בתגיגה שנערכה בקארנגי הול ב־30 בנובמבר, 1905, ותיאר את מהלכת. מתוך רגש פטריוטי כתב בשבח הנהגת חגיגת יום ההודיה השנתי:
הרבנים הריפורמים שומרים את החג הזה בתפילה בבתי כנסיותיהם, וראוי הוא שגם רבנים חרדים יעשו כן, כי אין ביום תודה זה סימן לנצרות. והחג הזה מזכיר לנו שארצות הברית הוא מקום מפלט לנרדפים ונגזשים על אמונתם, ומקום מנוחה להיות נהגים מיגיע כפים לכל איש מבלי הבדל בין נוצרי ליהודי.

"Reform Rabbis observe Thanksgiving with worship services in their synagogues, and it would be proper for *Hareidi* (i.e., Orthodox) rabbis to do the same, for there is nothing about this day of giving thanks which is symbolic of Christianity. The holiday reminds us that the United States is a sanctuary for refugees of all faiths, and a place of repose for all, where everyone can enjoy the fruit of his labor, whether he be a Jew or a gentile."

(Source: J. Kabakoff, *Shoharim VeNemanim*, Hebrew Studies 22, (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1978), p. 288.)

It's quite a coincidence, isn't it, hearing those words at a time when the country is debating whether, and if so how many, and under what conditions, to accept Syrian refugees. That's not why I quoted them. I quoted them because what I want to talk about today is the Jewishness of saying "Thank you." It's part and parcel of what it means to be a Jew.

The other day, I joined our pre-schoolers at their Thanksgiving feast. It began at about 11:15 am on Tuesday and I think it was over about fifteen minutes later. But before we ate, I reminded the children that the very first words we say when we get up in the morning are "Thank you!" We say, and it's on the first page of every siddur, "*Modeh [or Modah] ani l'fanecha, melekh hai v'kayam, she-he-chezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah, rabbah emunatecha.*"

"Thank you, ever-living sovereign, for so kindly restoring my soul to me; great is your faithfulness."

So saying thank you is very, very Jewish. But that raises an interesting trivia question: According to our tradition, who's the first person to say, "Thank you"?

It's an interesting question. According to the Talmud, the answer is: the matriarch Leah. In last week's Torah portion, we read what she said when she was blessed with her fourth child.

What does she say? "*This* time, I'm going to thank God." And she names him "*yehudah*," which comes from the root "*l'hodot*," meaning, to express thanksgiving or gratitude. The Talmud (in Berachot 7b) quotes Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai as teaching that in fact Leah was the first person in history to say, "Thank you" to God.

Now, this doesn't seem reasonable.

After all, there is a midrash that Adam (the husband of Eve), when he was exiled from the Garden of Eden but realized that he wasn't going to die right away, recited the Psalm of Shabbat (Psalm 92) which begins, "*It is good to give thanks to God.*" And we have a tradition that Noah expressed his gratitude to God. And Eliezer, Abraham's servant, thanked God for helping him to find a bride for Isaac. And so on, and so forth.

So what does the Talmud mean by saying that Leah was the first person to give thanks to God?

Rabbi Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, the son of the famous Hungarian rabbi, the *Hatam Sofer*, offered a nice resolution of this conundrum. He said, yes, there are those who, prior to Leah, expressed gratitude to God. But their gratitude was in response to some kind of supernatural phenomenon that revealed the presence of God in their life. Leah was the first to say "Thank you" for a completely natural phenomenon, namely, childbirth.

Her words make it clear that we should be thanking God for the *ordinary* way that the natural world functions. For even the ordinary things of life are the result of the extraordinary presence of God. (As we recite in the *Amidah*, we are thankful for God's miracles *she-b'chol yom imanu* – that are with us every day.)

On this, the Shabbat of Thanksgiving weekend, it's an opportunity to remind ourselves that the most authentic "Thank you" is for that which we are tempted to take for granted and not even recognize at all.

If we woke up this morning and we have all your faculties, we should give thanks.
If we have a roof over our head and food to eat, we should give thanks.
If we are blessed with family or friends, we should give thanks.

In this world filled with violence and chaos, if when we go to sleep at night, everyone in our home is as healthy and well as they were when we and they woke up, we should give tremendous thanks.

The great Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz of Mir gave another answer to this question about how and why Leah was considered so exceptional.

He explains that most people say thank you in order to pay off their debt of gratitude. Someone does something nice for us and, in a *quid pro quo*, we say "Thank you" to them to settle the score. Indeed, in each of the incidents that

preceded Leah saying thank you, the speaker offered a one-time expression of appreciation and moved on.

Leah did something categorically different. She named her son Yehudah. She named him, “I am grateful.” Every time she called out his name – “Yehudah, come for supper!” “Yehudah: Did you do your homework?” “Yehudah, What time will you be home tonight?” she *reawakened* her sense of appreciation. Unlike the others who said “Thank you” and paid off their debt of gratitude, Leah formulated a feeling of thanks that was sustained, perpetual, and that was felt each and every day on a consistent basis.

Rav Yerucham explains that this is what Leah meant when she gave him his name. Instead of reading her words, “*Hapa’am odeh et Hashem,*” as a statement, namely, “This time I will thank God,” Rav Yerucham reads those words as a rhetorical question: “*Hapa’am odeh et Hashem?*” Should I only thank God this one time and move on? No! I will continue to thank him over and over again!

We in the States may officially celebrate Thanksgiving one day a year, but to be a Jew, to be a spiritual descendant of our Matriarch Leah, is to be overflowing with thanks each and every day. Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Alter (the author of the *Hiddushei Ha-Rim*), points out that we are called *yehudim* after Yehudah specifically because we as a nation are to be characterized by an ever-present sense of gratitude.

Though we read of Leah naming Yehudah last week, may her message continues to resonate into this week, the week of Thanksgiving, and into the weeks beyond. May we live up to our name as Yehudim, and rather than be consumed by only worry and concern, feel deep and profound gratitude for all of the blessings in our lives, particularly those that we too often take for granted and fail to appreciate.

Shabbat shalom!