

Conversation Guide

WELCOME

We begin, as Jewish gatherings do, with a blessing for our time together:

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech
hadam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'tzorchei tzibur.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּצָרְכֵי צְבוּר:

We praise you, Holy One of Blessing, who sanctifies us through mitzvot and has commanded us to engage with the needs of the community.

Now, let's briefly review our *b'rit* – the shared commitments about how we will interact that we agreed on at our first meeting. The *b'rit* helps us create a brave space for meaningful conversation and deep listening.

ASK AND SHARE

Thank you for joining our conversation. Please think of a time when you said a genuine thank-you to someone else. It could be as small as saying thank you for a cup of coffee, or something much more profound. Take a moment to bring a story to mind, and then we'll each share what we thought of.

What Are You Thankful For?



LEARN

We learn as children that saying “thank you” is a basic part of good manners. We say “thank you” to the barista who makes our coffee and the bus driver who safely transports us from home to work and back again. That automatic, habitual expression of thanks is societally useful, but it doesn’t do much by way of introspection.

Being thankful *can* be a spiritual experience that opens us up to ourselves, to others, and to God. “Gratitude bestows reverence,” the English poet John Milton wrote, “allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.”

Another Englishman, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l, has said, “Though you don’t have to be religious to be grateful, there is something about belief in God as creator of the universe, shaper of history and author of the laws of life that directs and facilitates our gratitude. It is hard to feel grateful to a universe that came into existence for no reason and is blind to us and our fate. It is precisely our faith in a personal God that gives force and focus to our thanks.”¹

And for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, thankfulness was a source of radical amazement: “We are struck with an awareness of the immense preciousness of being; a preciousness which is not an object of analysis but a cause of wonder; it is inexplicable, nameless, and cannot be specified or put in one of our categories.”²

By enabling us to focus on the details, thankfulness sharpens our awareness of what it means to be alive and makes it possible to open our hearts to transformation. We realize that we can feel thankful even when our lives are really challenging.

¹ <https://rabbisacks.org/the-power-of-gratitude-ekev-5775/>

² *Man is Not Alone*, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1976)

What Are You Thankful For?



The following essay, "[It's All in the Details](#)," aired on the *This I Believe* podcast in August 2015.

I believe in details. I know this runs counter to well-meaning advice that seeks to liberate us from sweating the little stuff. I am painfully aware that my conviction places me at risk for lost sleep and moments of distraction. Dare I say it may even make this forty-one-year-old a bit old-fashioned. So be it.

It's in my blood. My grandmothers remembered everyone's birthday and acknowledged all sicknesses, deaths, weddings, and other major life events with handwritten notes. My father, a lawyer and one-time English teacher, edited my early writing diligently and, along with my ninth grade grammar teacher, instilled in me the importance of a comma, the difference one word choice can make. My mother wrote a special message on the paper napkin in my lunch box each birthday during every school year.

Details bring me joy – the feel of quality paper, the heft of a rocks glass, the foam on a well-made latte. These are little gifts that lift my spirit and elevate ordinary experiences. But I also recognize that my commitment to particulars has a dark side. I feel compelled to try on three pairs of the same size jeans before making my final choice. I have to read every greeting card in the store to find just the right one. And discovering I've committed a typo nearly kills me.

Yes, it's hard work to focus on details, but focus I must, for details are fleeting – the circumstances of a first kiss, a lost loved one's laugh, that shortcut we always used to take. Unless purposefully tended to, the components of even the most important of life's events are apt to fade and then disappear.

Okay, I'm a bit obsessed, but let's face it, it's the sum of all these details that add up to the whole person we are—the eyeglass frames we select, the unique flair of our signature, our choice of seat on a roller coaster—these things provide each of us with our own unique identity. They tell the world in a million tiny ways who we are, what we value.

This is why those things play such an important role in relationships. Taking the time to notice, acknowledge, and recall details makes those around us feel appreciated and understood. We draw on the best of our humanity when we slow down enough to listen—really listen—to a story being told. I certainly notice when someone does that for me.

And so, I pledge to try my best to remember whether you like the toilet paper to roll under or over, whether you are a cat or dog person, and the date of that big birthday you have coming up. I'll be grateful if you remember that my ears are not pierced, I like peppermint tea, and chocolate is always the right answer. Yes, I believe in details.

What Are You Thankful For?



Interpretive Questions

- What does the author mean when she says, “Yes, it’s hard work to focus on details, but focus I must”?
- What is the connection the author draws between gratitude and being aware of details?

Reflective Questions

- What enables you to experience gratitude?
- Are there ways, other than noticing details, that you feel a sense of gratitude? If so, can you describe the experience?
- Does gratitude ever feel challenging or burdensome?

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

In Judaism, gratitude moves us into a prayerful attitude. So many of the prayers we say are specific prayers of thanksgiving: for the food we eat, for creating our bodies and our souls, for returning our consciousness to us each morning.

And there is one all-purpose “thank you” prayer. The *Shehecheyanu* is recited at the beginning of a holy day, and at the first performance of certain annual *mitzvot*³. It is also said in more personal or intimate occasions from which one derives pleasure or benefit, such as eating a fruit for the first time in the year; seeing a friend for the first time in a month; acquiring a new home or clothes; at the birth of a child; or during a conversion or gender transition.

In leading us to be mindful of marking these special times, the *Shehecheyanu* makes us more aware of what it means to be alive. Let’s read it together:

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
shehecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higianu laz'man
hazeh.*

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם,
שהחיינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

Interpretive Questions

- What does the text of this blessing tell you about gratitude?
- What do the various ways in which this blessing is used tell you about the way Judaism understands thankfulness?

Reflective Questions

- How can this blessing – or blessings in general – enable you to think about being thankful?
- As described above, the *Shehecheyanu* is used in both communal and individual settings. Are you more open to expressing gratitude in one setting or the other – or both?
- In making us more aware of being alive, how does prayer open us up to transformation?

³ A *mitzva* (plural: *mitzvot*) is an obligation or positive commandment. It is also commonly used in the sense of “a good deed.”

What Are You Thankful For?



DO

The Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 9:7) suggests that, in the World to Come, “all sacrifices will be annulled, but the Thanksgiving Sacrifice will not be annulled. All prayers will be annulled, but prayers of thanksgiving will not be annulled.” Our ability to express gratitude and thankfulness for what we have is, perhaps, one of the most eternal aspects of our humanity. When we come from a place of thankfulness, it gives us the strength to be vulnerable and open ourselves to the introspection that is the work of Elul.

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What’s one insight that you’ve gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you’re taking from this conversation?
- What’s one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Please take a moment to think about these questions, and if you’d like, to share them with the group.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.