



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bereshit

Parshat Vayishlach

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Gratitude is Attitude

By Sara Blechner

Next week we will be celebrating one of the most "Jewish" American holidays - Thanksgiving. Americans generally trace the origins of Thanksgiving to a feast that took place in Plymouth Plantation in 1621 between the Pilgrims and Wampanoag people to celebrate a successful harvest and their mutually beneficial friendship. Many *rabbeim* discuss whether it is permissible for Jews to celebrate Thanksgiving. Most modern-day *poskim* conclude that we can celebrate Thanksgiving as there are no religious origins in the holiday. This seems like a logical conclusion because we have so much "thanksgiving" built into our lives as a religion. We take time multiple times each day to thank *Hashem* for everything, from waking up in the morning to the food we are able to put in our mouths and to witnessing the wonders of His creations.

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This week's *parsha*, like so many others, demonstrates how gratitude is at the core of who we are as a people.

The highlight of *Vayishlach* is the emotional reunion between estranged brothers *Yaakov* and *Esav*. Before their meeting, *Yaakov* turns to *Hashem* and says,

קִטְנֹתִי מִכָּל הַחַסְדִּים וּמִכָּל-הַחֲמִלָּה אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֵת-עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְּמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי
אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וַעֲתָה הִנְיָה לִּי שְׁנֵי מַחֲנֵי:

I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone, I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.

According to Rabbi Dov Linzer, there is a key lesson here about gratitude. We learn from *Yaakov* that gratitude becomes possible when we forgo our sense of entitlement and embrace a sense of unworthiness for all that is good in our lives, not unworthiness in the sense of low self-esteem, which is never good, but as a profound sense of awe: "What did I do to deserve all this?" Gratitude becomes possible when we stop focusing on what we do not have and begin to appreciate how blessed we are for what we do have.

How was *Yaakov* able to feel overcome with gratitude instead of fear at the moment when he was about to reunite with his brother, who vowed to kill him the last time they laid eyes upon each other? The *Sefat Emet* highlights the second part of the *pasuk*:

כִּי בְמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה

For with my staff alone I passed over this Jordan.

This event occurred twenty years earlier, but it is still fresh in *Yaakov's* mind. "It is no small thing," says *Sefat Emet*, "that a successful person will remember what little he had twenty years prior." By focusing on what we did not have in the past rather than on what we do not have in the present, we are able to recognize all that we have as a blessing.

As we head into this *Shabbos* and witness the loving reunion of brothers and later next week celebrate Thanksgiving, let us all be reminded of everything we have to be thankful for. Let us follow in *Yaakov's* footsteps and be humble enough to appreciate all that we have, instead of what we do not have, and remember to express our gratitude to *Hashem*, our family, our friends, and everyone who bestows happiness upon us.

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Shabbat Shalom and Happy Thanksgiving.

Sara and Elisha Blechner have been active members at YIS since they moved to Scarsdale in 2005. They have four kids; Gabby, Ari, Jonah, and Kira, who have grown up in our special community.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

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The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund
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