

Complacency, Fragility, Gratitude.

This past week, Ethan and I had the opportunity to travel to Oregon and Washington to celebrate the wedding of a friend and explore. I learned that in the Pacific Northwest there are two famous Harry Trumans: the first of course is Harry S. Truman, the 33rd president of the United States, implementor of the Marshall Plan and founder of NATO. The second is Harry R. Truman, who died on May 18th, 1980. There are a couple of folk songs about him and also a docudrama.

Harry R. Truman ran a lodge on spirit lake, in the shadow of Mt. St. Helens. In 1980, as it became clear that Mt. St Helens would erupt any minute and all other people evacuated, Harry R. Truman stayed put. Children in schools wrote him letters, begging him to evacuate. He told the press, “If the mountain goes, I’m going with it. This area is heavily timbered, Spirit Lake is in between me and the mountain, and the mountain is a mile away, the mountain ain’t gonna hurt me.” On May 18th, Mt Saint Helens erupted, causing the largest landslide in recorded history. Harry R. Truman died under 150 feet of mountain that landed atop his lodge.

Truman loved Spirit Lake and he loved the mountain, but he grew complacent, he forgot the fragility of it all.

Our Parsha knows that people can grow complacent when things are good.

פְּרֹתֶיךָ אָכַל וְשִׁבְעָתָהּ וּבָתִּים טוֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבְּתָהּ:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in,

וּבְקִרְיָהּ וּצְאֵנֶיהָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבֶּה-לָּךְ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-לָךְ יִרְבֶּה:

and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered,

וְרַם לִבְּךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת-יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמוֹצִיאֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the LORD your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage;

When things are good, says Moshe in our Parsha, it’s easy to forget where it comes from. It’s hard to feel grateful for “normal.” Fortunately, the Torah offers us a solution: Birkat Hamazon.

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשִׂבַּעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת-יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל-הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לָךְ:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

The Torah suggests that there are two ways that שׂוֹבֵעַ, satiation, can go: either you eat, are satisfied and become haughty. OR, you eat, are satisfied, and you bless Hashem. Our Parsha doesn’t leave any neutral ground between those two options. That’s pretty interesting.

produce from around the planet, let alone the miracle that is the existence of this fruit at all, it's ability to spring forth from the earth? I always say a blessing, boreh pri haetz, but when did I really think about the details?

We're complacent.

When you're complacent, you forget about the fragility of it all. You forget that it's all a miracle, that it can't be taken for granted, that it could disappear at any moment. Like Harry R. Truman, you say, "the mountain ain't gonna hurt me" not because you know that it won't but because it's been good to you up until now and that has made you forget that it's **a literal volcano**, fragile, on the edge, about to explode.

To be grateful for the land is to realize it's fragility. To have counter-factual awareness, and know that it could easily be different. And in fact, we are all epically fragile. As if it knew that Ethan and I were having a volcano themed week, the New York Times published an [Op-Ed](#) this week about the supervolcano bubbling beneath Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone most recently erupted 640,000 years ago, but scientists believe that if it erupted today it would be "the greatest catastrophe since the dawn of civilization" -- plunging much of the world into darkness and mass starvation.

The site of Mt St Helens is much less extreme, but still, forty years later, the profound destruction was visible to the eye. The mountain has a hole at the top. You can see where all that earth landed, in formations called "hummocks." Every piece of flora and fauna in sight is new since 1980, when the volcano wiped out every living thing.

But the fascinating result of my recognition of this fragility was...gratitude. Gratitude that it hadn't been worse. Gratitude that I and my loved ones were safe. Gratitude that now we could visit, learn, hike, see it for ourselves.

The structure of our weekday Amidah reflects this very truth: we only express gratitude at the end, after we've put forward a long series of requests. Why not begin with gratitude? Because the bakashot, the requests we make in our Tefillah, are supposed to be a deep expression of fragility and need. And only once we've broken out of our "everything is okay" complacency and recognized our fragility, can we actually be grateful.

In weeks like this one, it's easier than ever to realize our fragility. My father was on the local news in Boston this past week because he discovered that his face and the faces of some of his students were posted on a White Supremacist website, the Vanguard News Network. Brandeis took it to the FBI, but it's just a reminder: we are all incredibly fragile. But there's an upside to fragility, because you become grateful for things you didn't know you needed to be grateful for. I'm actively grateful no white

surpremacist crazy person took any action based on that picture. I'm grateful that the FBI cares enough to investigate. I'm glad that Brandeis has my dad's back.

So here's an argument for fragility. For going out looking for it, wherever it can be found-- whether outside in nature or inside in our hearts. For achieving counter-factual awareness, knowledge that our lives could easily be otherwise, and celebrating the fragile balances we've struck. That feeling of fragility serves us, it wakes us up, and pushes us to gratitude.

