

Leah's Gratitude

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Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

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In 2015, the Atlantic columnist Deepak Singh wrote an [article](#) entitled "'I've Never Thanked My Parents for Anything'".

"I have been living in the United States for more than a decade," he noted, "and I now say thank you about 50 times a day. Most of the time, I do it without thinking. I say thank you to the bus driver who takes me from point A to point B along with 20 other people. He usually can't even hear me. I say thank you to the cashier at the coffee shop. I say thank you to the stranger who holds the door open for me at a restaurant..."

When I first moved to the United States, all this took some getting used to. I didn't know I was supposed to thank someone who took my money for something I bought at a store...I had no idea how I was supposed to respond to the police officer who gave me a speeding ticket and then said, "Thanks, and have a good day."

Singh describes how he grew up in the Indian city of Lucknow, "in a culture in which saying thank you is not done lightly...I learned to say thank you in English in elementary school, and when I thanked anyone, I said it in English, which was less awkward and more casual than doing so in Hindi..."

Saying *dhanyavaad*, or "thank you" in Hindi, would almost be sarcastic. It seems inadequate. When I thank anyone in Hindi, I make sure to look the person in the eye. Saying *dhanyavaad* to someone without looking at him or her is just as good as not saying it at all. As a kid, I never heard anyone my age say thank you in Hindi. I did hear my father say *dhanyavaad* to people his age, but he did it as sincerely as possible, with his hands joined in front of his chest in the solemn gesture of *namaste*. He wasn't just thanking someone for something, but asking for an opportunity to return the favor. That's how I came to understand expressions of gratitude.

As Singh observes, saying thank you is not such a simple thing and different cultures contain very different meanings and messages for what it means to say thank you.

The Gemara in Brachot (7b) makes a perplexing statement regarding gratitude in Judaism:

וַאֲמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוֹם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחִי: מִיּוֹם שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ לֹא הָיָה אָדָם שֶׁהוֹדָה לַהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא,

And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: From the day the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, no one thanked the Holy One,

עד שֶׁבָּאָתָה לֵאָה וְהוֹדִתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת ה'."

Blessed be He, until Leah came and thanked Him, as it is stated: ("And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son,) and she said, 'This time I will give thanks to God,' and thus he was called Judah" (Genesis 29:35).

This is a strange statement in the Gemara on two levels. First, there have been lots of people in Breishit before Leah comes along in Parshat Vayeitzei. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yacov have all prayed to God, did they never express gratitude? If we look past our patriarchs, there are even other figures in Breishit who have already expressed gratitude:

In last week's parsha, we read (24:27):

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרָהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֲסִדּוֹ...

"Blessed be ה', the God of my master Abraham's [house], who has not withheld steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by יהוה, to the house of my master's kin."

Or what about the king Malkitzedek (14:15) all the way back in Lech Lecha, who says,

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ אֲבִרָם לֹא־ל עֲלִיּוֹן קִנָּה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: וּבְרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר־מִגֵּן צָרֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ
He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand."

There were people in the Torah before Leah who literally thanked God, so it's a bit odd that the Gemara says that Leah was the first to thank God.

Then there is another question of course: Leah had a pretty difficult life. She does not appear in our narrative as an overly joyful, thankful person. Much of her life is summarized in a painful pasuk in the middle of our parsha: וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי־שָׂנְאָהּ לֵאָה: *God saw that Leah was hated, and opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.*

So what is the Gemara teaching us? What is the Gemara talking about when it says no one thanked God until Leah came and said, "הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת ה'?"

Rabbi Yosef Patzanovski, author of the commentary *Pardes Yosef* [notes](#) (based on the *Tiv Gittin*, a commentary on Gittin) that in Judaism, there are really two kinds of gratitude.

The first is what we could call *shevach*, or praise. A familiar example of this occurs at the beginning of every *amidah*, when we offer three blessings of praise, *shevach*, thank God and praise God's attributes: מֶלֶךְ עֹזֵר וּמוֹשִׁיעַ וּמַגֵּן: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מִגֵּן אֲבִרָהָם: *God is sovereign, helper, deliverer and shield. Blessed are you God shield of Avraham. Shevach* is an unalloyed and effusive praise. We are extolling God's virtues and recognizing the good that God bestows.

The *Pardes Yosef* explains however that there is another kind of gratitude, which started with Leah and that is called *Hoda'ah*. This form of gratitude is different. It is also thankful, but *hoda'ah* also means to admit something. And what is being admitted, it means recognizing that which is positive, and even more than that: that good can emerge out of the bad.

When Leah gives birth to her fourth son, she has not had a good life, or a positive life. And yet, in this moment, when she gives birth to Yehuda, her perspective shifts.

וַתֵּהֱרַ עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֹּאמֶר הִפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־ה' עַל־כֵּן קָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וַתַּעֲמֵד מִלֵּדָתָ:
She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, "This time I will praise ה'."
Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

The *Pardes Yosef* writes that yes, Leah had a difficult life and she was not favored. We should not take away from the pain of this experience. But somehow, when she had a fourth child - Yehuda - she realized that she was blessed to be the mother of four of the tribes of Israel, and that genuine good had come out of a very painful situation. This is Leah's *hoda'ah*, Leah was the first one to offer thanks in this way, according to the Gemara.

Our weekday *amidah* is constructed to help us experience this dynamic as well, albeit in a small measure. Our first three blessings offer praise, followed by twelve *bakashot*, twelve blessings of request. Then, suddenly, we are back to saying thank you to God, "modim anachnu lach". When we think about Leah's type of gratitude, this blessing of Thanksgiving makes a lot more sense. We are aware of all the things we are asking for - healing for others, a year of bounty, rebuilding Jerusalem and Zion - and out of these brushes with what we lack, we offer thanks for what we have.

Since we are still in the midst of Thanksgiving weekend, it is worth noting that these same two forms of gratitude - sheva and hoda'ah - exist in the narratives around Thanksgiving as well. The "first Thanksgiving" was a three day feast celebrated by pilgrims from the Mayflower following their first harvest, in November of 1621. At least on the surface, and certainly in many popular imaginations, this was a holiday of joy, praise and gratitude.

However, more than two centuries would pass before Thanksgiving as we know it became a national holiday. The context of the holiday was highly significant: In 1863, amidst the horrific Civil War, President Lincoln proclaimed a national day of "Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens", calling on the American people to also, "with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience ... fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation." The first "official" Thanksgiving was celebrated within days of the Gettysburg address, and in the middle of tremendous pain, suffering and loss.

Yesterday, we witnessed the first return of 13 Israeli hostages, as well as 10 Thai hostages, God willing the beginning of the complete return of all the hostages. I'm in a WhatsApp group of halakhic questions addressed to Rav Zvi Rimon, a leading religious Zionist thinker and leader. Rav Rimon was asked the simple yet powerful question: is there a bracha that we should say over the return of the hostages. Here was his response:

אמנם יש מקום לא לומר כלום, כי הכל מורכב ולא ברור, אבל יש גם מקום לומר הטוב והמטיב על שחרור החטופים. ודיין האמת על שחרור המחבלים.

Indeed, there is a position to not say anything, since everything is complex and unclear. However, there is also a position to say "HaTov V'hametiv" [the blessing of that which is good and the One who makes good on the release of captives. And, "Dayan ha'emet", Blessed is the true Judge, over the release of the terrorists.

In Judaism and in life there are moments of *shevach*, of pure praise and joy. But our matriarch Leah teaches us a powerful lesson that it is possible to be grateful, and for there to be true good, even amidst struggle and tragedy.

הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־ה' עַל־כֵּן קָרָאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה

"This time I will praise ה'." Therefore she named him Judah.

This type of gratitude, hoda'ah in the context of great struggle, was first practiced by Leah. It is the capacity to be grateful and offer gratitude even when our hearts are broken. It was encoded in our spiritual DNA, for we are all *yehudim*, named after Leah's

son Judah and this expression of gratitude. Throughout Jewish history, we have called on this capability within ourselves and our people, to recognize blessing even when some much is wrong and broken around us.

In accordance with Rav Rimon and in keeping with the Mishna in Brachot I will conclude with the blessings over bad tidings and good news, *besorot ra'ot and besorot tovo*. (Please join me if you know the brachot.)

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם דיין האמת

Blessed are you God, Ruler of the universe, the True Judge.

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם הטוב והמטיב.

Blessed are you God, Ruler of the universe, Who is good and does good.

May we continue to hear *besorot tovo*, only good news, in the days to come.