

The First Thanksgiving
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Parshat Vayetze, Thanksgiving Weekend, 2009

It is at times like Thanksgiving Day that being an Englishman in New York is the most challenging. There are all the rituals to get used to, like the parade of all the great American heroes – Mickey Mouse, Spiderman and Kermit the Frog. My wife, Lynn, is American and we spend thanksgiving with her family. I am slowly becoming acculturated to the proper etiquette on Thanksgiving; I have developed a fondness for cranberry sauce and become appropriately sluggish after eating turkey.

In fact I learnt an important lesson in American manners on Thursday morning. I was going to a special Thanksgiving service at Shearith Israel synagogue which is 2 blocks away from where I live. But because of the Thanksgiving Day parade, the sidewalk was completely packed and it was impossible to move an inch. Thinking like an Englishman, I had an idea, and I planned out in my head what I was going to say to all the people in front of me: ‘Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. There are a few people trying to get through. So would you please make a small gap to allow us to pass?’ A polite, well phrased request, I thought to myself. Courtesy is everything. But scarcely had I opened my mouth – ‘Excuse me, ladies and...’ when a man behind me shouted, very loudly: ‘Get outta the way.’ This is perhaps not the best story to learn from. The American tradition does, however, offer very important lessons about gratitude, to which I will return shortly.

The underlying sentiment behind Thanksgiving Day is, of course, gratitude. A virtue of the utmost importance for the proper functioning of society, and a natural outgrowth of a religious mindset. David Hume, the great Scottish philosopher, said that ingratitude is ‘of all crimes that human beings are capable of committing, the most horrid and unnatural.’ And the reason for this is clear: when we have achieved something, whether it be surviving the winter and building a republic, or raising a family, or getting a new job, it is only appropriate to step back and express gratitude to God and also to the people who helped us achieve that goal.

But the idea of gratitude also has a more profound texture, one that the Jewish tradition elaborates on with great wisdom.

By coincidence, this week's Torah reading contains the very first thanksgiving recorded in the Bible.

וַתֵּהָר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן, וַתֹּאמֶר הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת-ה' עַל-כֵּן קָרָאתָהּ שֵׁמוֹ, יְהוּדָה; וַתַּעֲמֹד, מִלְּדוֹת.

And she [Leah] conceived again, and bore a son; and she said: ‘This time will I thank God.’ Therefore she called him Judah; and she stopped giving birth.

Now this in itself is a moving and instructive episode. Leah had a difficult start to her life. The Chumash describes her as less attractive than her younger sister. And her husband Jacob preferred her sister to her. But finally she has achieved some peace. In that society, bearing four sons gave her substantial social standing and it seems that Jacob

began to warm to her. She was so satisfied, in fact, that the verse tells us that she stopped giving birth, which Ibn Ezra interprets to mean that she herself chose to stop. She no longer felt the need to bear children in order to increase her position or her self-esteem. And at this point she made the important step to recognize that she had not done this on her own. She owed her thanks to God, and she even named the child with the Hebrew word for thanks: from the root *hodaya*, thanks (the same root as the word *today*, thank you), comes the name Yehudah, Judah.

But questions remain: But Yehudah was Leah's 4th child. Was she not thankful with the births of Reuven, Shimon and Levi? There is no mention of thanks when they were born. In fact, it may surprise you to know that there is no mention of thanks from any of the other patriarchs or matriarchs. Indeed, the Bible makes no reference of thanks at all before this point: Adam does not thank God for the creation of the world. Noah does not thank God for saving him and his family from the flood. Abraham does thank God for choosing him to begin the Israelite nation. They bless and praise God, to be sure, but they do not display gratitude.

Our sages recognize something unique about Leah's thanks, the first Thanksgiving in history:

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי: מיום שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו לא היה אדם שהודה להקדוש ברוך הוא עד שבאתה לאה והודתו, שנאמר הפעם אודה את ה'.

In tractate Berachot (7b), R Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai: from the day that God created the world, no one thanked God until Leah came and thanked him, as it says "This time I will thank God."

This of course begs the question: What was it about Judah that his birth was the cause of the first thanksgiving in human history? The Midrash, offers some suggestions, and in doing so develops the theme of gratitude with great insight.

The Midrash ties this moment of thanks for the birth of Judah to two other moments in Judah's life. The first is a low time for Judah: he has separated himself from Jacob's family. He is living alone, away from his brothers. He has lost touch with the rest of society and his responsibility to it. Then an incredibly important episode occurs, one which is a turning point in the whole Genesis narrative: Judah sleeps with an anonymous prostitute, whom he does not know is his daughter-in-law Tamar, the widow of two of his sons. Shortly afterwards, Tamar is put on trial for having illicit sex and becoming pregnant and Judah agrees that she should be put to death. At the last moment, Tamar shows Judah proof that he is the father of the child and thereby presents him with a choice: He can continue to consider himself apart from society, to imagine his liaison as a brief affair with an anonymous woman, to refuse to recognize his interconnectedness and responsibility for others. Or he can take note of the impact he has on other people's lives, and the impact they have on his. He makes the right choice. The Bible tells us that

וַיֵּבֶר יְהוּדָה, וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי

Judah acknowledged it, and said: she is more righteous than me. This moment marks the beginning of Judah's rejoining society, his reconciliation with his family, his taking responsibility for his brother Benjamin, and thereby the felicitous unfolding of the entire episode of Joseph in Egypt.

Let us keep that episode in mind as we move to the second one that the Sages associate with Leah's thanks:

Jacob is on his deathbed and blessing all his sons. When he comes to Judah, he promises him:

אַתָּה יוֹדוּךָ אֶחָיִךְ

Your brothers will praise you; they will hold you in esteem. And he goes on to say that the tribe of Judah will be the source of the everlasting dynasty of King David.

At the foundation of this Midrash is a play on words: the word *hodaya*, thanks, also has two other meanings: It means recognizing a debt to another person, as someone in court might admit that they owe money. The word *vidui* – confession – comes from this same root. And it also means estimation or glorification. Like the phrase in Psalms:

הוֹדוּ לַה' כִּי-טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ

Give praise to God for God is good. According to some, this meaning of *hodaya* or *todah* is related to the word *הוד*, meaning glory.

By linking these two episodes in Judah's life, the Midrash associates these meanings of *todah*: In the episode of Tamar, Judah came to understand his debts to others and his responsibilities to them. And this recognition meant that in time he was ennobled; held in very high esteem by his brothers.

To cement the connection between these two ideas, it is worth noting that Judah's royal descendent, David, was a direct descendent of his offspring with Tamar. Had Judah continued to treat the people with whom he interacted as anonymous and irrelevant to his own life, Tamar and her child would have been burnt to death. Judah himself would have died alone and his name would probably have died with him. But by embracing his relationship with Tamar, by recognizing his indebtedness to other people and his responsibilities towards them, he assured the survival of his son with Tamar and became a father of kings.

Judah's retreat into a lonely individualism blocked his road to royalty; his rededication to his family and his people opened up the path to the future.

It is this which explains why the birth of Judah is the moment of the first thanksgiving. The episodes of his life brought together so beautifully by the Midrash remind us of the multiple and complex dimensions of gratitude, all stemming from the word *hodaya*, *todah*. This word encompasses indebtedness, responsibility for others and connection to society. This in turn results in nobility, self-esteem and glory. And all of this orients properly our connection with and dependence on God. As Leah said, 'הַפַּעַם אֹדְתָה אֶת-ה', this time I will thank God.

Finally, I would like to return to the theme of my American education, and to something else I learnt about America this past week, something even more important than Kermit the Frog. If we look carefully, this approach to gratitude from within the Jewish tradition also has its counterparts in the American tradition. The American hero, we are sometimes led to believe, is the self-made man, the person who owes nothing to anyone, who did it

all on his own. He has no need to thank others because he has achieved everything without any help. But the term 'self made man' was coined in an 1859 speech by the great thinker and statesman, Frederick Douglass. It was a speech in which he rightly praised the value of hard work and personal responsibility. But he opened with another sentiment, and I can do no better than to quote his own words:

”It must in truth be said, though it may not accord well with self-conscious individuality and self-conceit, that no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen, and no generation of men can be independent of the preceding generation. The brotherhood and interdependence of mankind are guarded and defended at all points.”

This focus on ‘the interdependence of mankind’ is an American message, and one which accords perfectly with the Jewish tradition.

So as we continue to enjoy this thanksgiving weekend we do well to meditate on this deeper meaning of thanks. We consider the life of Judah, the man after whom we, Yehudim, are named, and the lesson that he learned: that our own nobility, our connection to other people, and our dependence on God are all deeply connected. And they are all wrapped up in the one little word – todah, thank you.