

Thanksgiving!

Nov 29, 2021

Our service began this evening with Cantor Shpall singing the prayer Modim Anachnu Lach. – a song of gratitude for the blessings that come our way. It's part of our daily liturgy, a prayer to be recited three times a day if we'd like. It parallels the prayer that can be said each -- morning - Modeh or Modah ani – thank you God for restoring my soul after what I hope was a good night's rest.

It seems that the ancient liturgists were concerned that folks might not be so good at saying thanks so better to put it in the script, so we would be sure to express it a few times a day. They probably felt people weren't hard wired to express gratitude so it was something of which we needed to be continually reminded to do.

So, before I go further, let me remember to pause and express my deep appreciation to all in the Beth Am community who have been a part of our family for so many years. I continue to feel gratitude for being part of this very special synagogue.

And, while I'm on a roll - to my clergy colleagues and the Beth Am staff who make me a better rabbi and whose study and practice of Judaism inspires and challenges us to "do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God"

And let me on all of our behalf, express gratitude for both the technology that preserved community during the pandemic and now especially for the vaccinations that have enabled many of us to be together.

Perhaps I should echo our matriarch Leah's words after she gives birth to her fourth son – "I give thanks to the Eternal" – she therefore named him Yehudah – Judah. The root of the word Judah and therefore Jew is –"odeh"—meaning thanks. It is taught that this is the first time in the Torah that anyone says thank you!.

The [Talmud](#) notes this explicitly:

“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, Blessed be He, until Leah came and thanked Him, as it is stated: ‘This time I will give thanks to God’” (Brachot 7b).

Judah is prominent in our torah portion - one that largely deals with the Joseph narrative. It’s a terrific Torah Portion - aren’t they all - one filled with dreams and multi-colored coats, seduction and deception. Judah is the one who convinces his brothers not to leave Joseph in a pit to die. Judah also appears in chapter 38 in a rather strange interlude to the Joseph story with Tamar. At the end of the book Genesis it will be Judah who steps forward to free his brother Benjamin - demonstrating that the brothers do change.

Judah - to be a Jew - meaning - to give thanks. In English, to thank “often becomes praise” and Leah’s emphasis on gratitude is repeated in other texts — like the Psalms and the prayers. Generally, what people are thankful for is God, and from that, gratitude for everything else flows. The attitude of gratitude is repeatedly praised.

As I mentioned earlier, when we rise in the morning, we are expected to recite Modeh Ani, "I am grateful" to God for bringing life to me each and every day. In Birkat HaMazon, the Blessing after Meals, we thank God for sustaining the world with goodness, kindness, and mercy. Many a Shabbat we sing the words of psalm 92 - tov l’hodot adonai, It is good to give thanks to God. During the day or at night, through the prayer Modim Anachnu Lach, "We are grateful to You," we thank God "for our souls, which are in Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence we encounter every day; and for Your wondrous gifts at all time." (Rifat Sonsino)

Modim Anachnu Lach, in the liturgy, it’s one of the concluding prayers of the Amidah, which calls us to awareness to the constant miracles that are with us each day. As the Yom Kippur Mahzor teaches “what is ever-present soon becomes commonplace, and its wonders are too often ignored. The thanksgiving blessing reminds us that miracles need not be supernatural or extraordinary events. If we pay attention, the smallest details of our surroundings and the very regularity of nature's laws can evoke awe.”

Modim anachu lach. An interesting structure too. Generally, in Hebrew like in English the verb does not come before the subject. Thanks we are to you. Thanks I am. An odd sentence structure but Rabbi Shai Held teaches that the phrasing is actually instructive. One cannot acknowledge the self, the I, the me, the us – until one has first said thanks.

On this weekend of our holiday of thanksgiving – it is good to remember the daily importance of expressing our gratitude --- whether it is in a time of blessing or a time of trial. A Yehudi – a Jew, - the descendants of Judah, ideally, is a human being who, like our matriarch Leah, can find her way to gratitude.

Switching gears slightly - and on this Thanksgiving - with a tribute to our matriarch Leah - and my mother and wife on this Thanksgiving - let me share one of my favorite poems about gratitude by the former US Poet Lauriat Billy Collins.

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy

red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.