

Cultivating Gratitude

Kol Nidre, 5774 – September 13, 2013 – Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple

Adam and Eve were nervous. They knew they had done wrong. That whole “eating of the fruit” thing seemed like a good idea a few minutes ago. Now they were putting on fig leaves, when suddenly they hear God walking in the garden. Adam was scared and said, “Let's hide.” “What do you mean hide?” says Eve. “Don't you think God can find us, whether we are behind a bush or not?” “Let's do it anyhow,” he replied. At that moment, God called out and said, “אֵיכָהָּ? Ayeka, Where are you?”

The first question of the Torah: Where are you? Of course God knew where they were, but did they? Neither said to God that most powerful of responses: *Hineini*, I am here.

The second question God poses to humanity is a chapter later.

Abel and Cain offer sacrifices to God. Abel's is accepted, Cain's is not. Cain kills Abel and God says, “אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ? Ay, Hevel achicha? Where is Abel, your brother?” Again, a rhetorical question that cuts to the core. Cain's profoundly disappointing answer echoes through eternity: “Am I my brother's keeper?” Cain only saw what he didn't have; his sacrifice was not accepted. From his loss, that emptiness, he had no space for the other.

For us, these two questions frame a meaningful life. אֵיכָהָּ? אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ? Ayeka? Ay, Hevel achicha? Where are you? Where is your brother? The first is about existence, the second about responsibility. Where are you? Meaning: Who are you? What are you all about? From the existential we move to encounter: Are you there for others? The answer to both is: “*Hineini*, I am here.”

To get to this answer takes effort. There is a pathway to a life of being present to ourselves and others. That path is a way of being, of acknowledging what we have. It is path through cultivating a sense of gratitude.

When we are grateful, we live with appreciation of who we are and what we have, and that enables us to reach out to others.

When Leah, wife of the patriarch Jacob, had her fourth child, she named him “*Yehudah*,” which means “I am grateful,” to reflect her gratitude to God for the gift of another son. Our people's name, Jews, comes from *Yehudah*, revealing a direct tie between Judaism and gratitude.

As Americans, we are told in the Declaration that we have a right, endowed by our Creator, to the pursuit of happiness. To actualize this happiness is impossible without gratitude. Dennis Prager writes in his book *Happiness is a Serious Problem*: “One cannot be a good person without gratitude, and one cannot be a happy person without gratitude....Consequently, even if you are more interested in being happy than in being good, you will still have to cultivate the most important ingredient to both qualities. By becoming more grateful in order to be happy, you will also become a better person because gratitude will make you better.”

In Hebrew, this quality is called *hakarat hatov*, literally “recognizing the good.” When we see what is possible with what we have and what we have been given, we are acknowledging the good in our life. It does not mean seeing the world through rose colored glasses. It does mean finding meaning in what you have, not what you don’t have. This is the context behind the wise Talmudic proverb which asks, “Who is rich?” and then answers, “Those who rejoice in their own lot.” (Avot 4:1)

For the opposite of gratitude is entitlement. When we feel we deserve what we have, we start losing touch of *where we are* and begin to close ourselves off to our *brother and sister*.

איפה אתה? איפה אחיך? *Ayeka? Ay Hevel Achicha? Where are you? Where is your brother?*

It is easy to say, “Be grateful”, not always so easy to live it. Let’s face it. Life can be tough, challenging, even awful. How can you feel gratitude in the midst of loss? We can manage our expectations. That is important. But beyond the platitudes of counting one’s blessings and looking for the silver lining, how can we truly expect anything of gratitude in grief? We certainly cannot expect, but it is possible to prepare for loss by creating a context for the valleys along with the mountaintops in our lives. We all face loss.

The traditional blessing we say when one a loved one dies, or at a loss of a job, or a marriage, or a pregnancy, or a dream is, “*Baruch Dayan haemet*. Praised is the Judge of Truth.” In the moment of loss, these words can be hard to say, but what it means is that even in my personal pain, I respond with an awareness of the truth that there is both the good and the bad in life. The word for “truth” as in the “Judge of Truth” is *emet*, which means in the Torah, “loyal”. When we say, *Praised is the Judge of Truth*, we are saying to ourselves: I will try to remain loyal or authentic to my values, my relationships with people and God, even in a time that can feel so devastating.

Rabbi Sharon Brous tells this story:

A nineteen year old Israeli soldier was on his way home to see his family in the summer of 1994 when he was kidnapped by members of Hamas. For several days his family and the country held their breath as they searched for him, desperate for a sign that he was alive. Finally, in the middle of the night, there was a knock at the family’s door. The soldier’s father opened the door and saw three generals standing before him, the requisite number for a *beit din* – a Jewish legal court. He immediately knew what this meant. But before they could even tell him that they had found the body of his beloved son, his “tall blue-eyed, golden-haired son who was always smiling with the innocence of a child and the understanding of an adult,” he had the following thought: *thank you, God, for blessing me with nineteen years with this angel on Earth*. His beloved son was murdered by terrorists, and his first thought was an expression of gratitude for the blessing of his life.

Years later, the father explained: “I understood in that instant why I had been praying three times a day my whole life. It was all preparation for that moment.”

Over the course of a lifetime he had built a consciousness that allowed him to grieve with gratitude. He had cultivated a humble awareness of the gift of life, of the majesty of the world, of the presence and possibility of love. It doesn’t mean that loss isn’t excruciating, it means that a life of humble gratitude places loss in a context of meaning. It means that even in the darkest and busiest moments, our hearts are open to beauty and possibility.

Developing our sense of gratitude is in fact like fashioning a work of art. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, "The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude."

A film from many years ago by Isak Dinesen is called *Babette's Feast*. It is set in a dim, impoverished fishing village on the coast of Denmark where the villagers worshiped in an austere manner and lived in a way that rejected any worldly pleasure. Babette arrives from France to escape persecution after personal tragedy, losing her husband and son in the civil war. She becomes a cook for two older, unmarried sisters. The film then unfolds in a peaceful, slow moving way with little dialogue. After twelve years of being in the village, Babette receives a letter which informs her that she had won the lottery in France. A friend had entered her numbers every year. Babette's fortunes had turned for the good. She asks the sisters for her first favor in the twelve years. She wants to cook them a French dinner. They reluctantly relent, seeing as they had never given her anything. Babette sends orders to Paris for the supplies for the meal. The night of the feast, an unexpected guest arrives on the dark December eve, a relative of a villager who was a well-travelled army officer. The meal is decadent, lasting hours. The villagers planned stoicism about the richness of the meal slowly melts away as course after course comes paired with Champaign and wines. At the end of the night, the gloom of the village has lifted into a miraculous lightness of being. They prepare to say goodbye to Babette but she says she will not be leaving. She had spent her entire winnings on that meal. The army officer, the guest, stands and says:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite....But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.

The goal of a religious life is to move from gratitude to gift. This is a teaching of Rabbi Arthur Green. Babette's gift of the meal transformed the very character of the small Danish village. Rabbi Green suggests that moving from gratitude to gift is a natural state of being if we are open to it. It is as simple as breathing. We breathe in, taking, accepting, grateful for life, and we breathe out, giving away our spirit. If we reflect on our breath in with gratitude, we become aware of our potential gift. We realize that we are obliged to return the favor.

Our prayers reinforce this idea. In the central prayers of the Amidah, one of the 19 benedictions is called the *Hoda'ah*, the prayer of giving thanks. In a traditional setting, this is the only prayer that the prayer leader cannot say on your behalf. No messenger will do. Amen will not suffice. Each worshiper prays in her or his own voice, "We are thankful for...." *Modim anachnu lach*. According to Jewish tradition, in the time of the Messianic Age, only one prayer will remain, this prayer of gratitude. *Modim anachnu lach*. Modim, in singular, *modeh*, comes from the same root as *today*, thank you, and conveys two ideas, both gratitude and acknowledgement.

The Mussar Institute, a Center for Jewish Ethics, teaches how to actually do *hakarot hatov*, recognize the good in life. On their blog, a woman wrote: "My 13-year-old daughter was having a tough time with insomnia/anxiety, and I was with her for four hours last night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. At about 1 a.m., I started to get mad, and I let her know. I became aware that my heart was racing and I was fuming. Then I remembered the teaching from the Mussar Institute, and the thought of "gratitude" came into my mind, and I asked myself: "What can I find to be grateful for in this situation right now?" Almost immediately, my heart softened as I thought of my daughter,

knowing that she was not a demon child keeping me awake, but my dear, sweet girl. I was grateful that I was entrusted with a sacred task of being a parent, and could be with her late in the dark cold night, and be there to help her as she struggles."

איפה? איפה? איפה? *Ayeka? Ay Hevel achicha?* I am here, right now, and here for my brother, my sister, my child, my friend, my partner, my parent. And it is not only in the more intimate of relationships. It can be with acquaintances and strangers too.

For this is not only a matter of *being* grateful, it is a matter of *doing* grateful. When we take the time to appreciate what another person has done for us and actually say something, or better, write an old-fashioned card, or a new-fashioned comment on a Facebook wall, or creatively find a way to express your gratitude, you are changing the world. It is so important not only for the recipient but even more so for the giver, because it inculcates a way of life that leads to happiness. Teaching kids to say thank you is not only polite, it is enabling them to enjoy life. Taking time to write out a thank you card to teachers, friends, anyone who -- even in their jobs -- does something for you. The more specific the appreciation the better, the more time taken to say it the better. In our busier lives, this is becoming a lost art.

So too in daily prayers. When we stop before putting food into our mouths and acknowledge appreciation for the farmer, the earth, the many steps of producing that morsel of food on our fork through the simple *motzi*, we are in essence saying, *Hineini*, I am present in my world, in my self, in my outreach to others.

In this holy moment of Kol Nidre, I invite you to feel grateful.

If you begin with a basic awareness of your breathing, if you notice your breaths in and out, if you acknowledge what your breath represents... You may relax your face, whatever expression it might be holding... Now, lift up the corners of your mouth into a slight smile... It is amazing how the physical sensation of a smile can lighten our heart... See if you can settle in a little more comfortably into the seat. ... Let your eyes feel relaxed, perhaps closed ... Notice your breathing. However you are breathing is fine. Allow the breath to come and go and see if you can be aware of the process of breathing as it occurs in your body.... Think of something good in your life, something for which you are grateful. Whatever it is, large or small, feel that goodness, don't judge it, just take some time with this appreciation. We will sit silently for a few moments... (one minute). Now gradually return. For some of us, this was too long, for others, too short. Try in whatever way, to be ok with this moment, to hold a sense of goodness in your body.

Hakarat hatov, gratitude, is a profound religious emotion. In a few days we will sit in a fragile sukkah and will be grateful for whatever is stable in our lives. As Rav teaches in the Talmud, we should give thanks for the ability to give thanks. The very first words of prayer we are taught to say in the morning are "*modeh ani*" — I am grateful to You.

מודה אני לפניך, מלך חי וקים, שהחזרת בי נשמת...
Modeh ani lefanecha melech chai vekayam she'hechezarta bi nishmati. – I acknowledge and am grateful to God for returning my breath, my soul, to me.

איפה? איפה? איפה? *Ayeka? Ay Hevel achicha?* Where are you? Where is your brother? I am right here, right now. If I am not for others, what am I? I am grateful.