

Cultivating Gratitude: Psalm 92

A Thanksgiving joke: A man buys a parrot, only to have it constantly insult him. He tries everything to make the parrot stop, but nothing works. Frustrated, the man puts the parrot in the freezer. After a few minutes the insults stop. The man thinks, "Uh oh, I might have killed the parrot!" So he opens the freezer and takes the parrot out. The parrot is shivering. It stammers, "S-s-sorry for being r-r-rude. Please f-f-forgive me." Then, after a moment, the parrot softly asks, "I'm just wondering . . . w-w-what exactly d-d-did the turkey do?"

The parrot poses a reasonable question. After all, from where the Turkey sits, he doesn't see a whole lot to be grateful for on Thanksgiving. And, truth be told, sometimes we feel the same way, that our troubles outweigh our blessings. Indeed, even when things are good, most of us take it for granted: or, even worse, we believe the plenty in our lives to be our right --that we deserve it: that God or the universe owe us.

If fact, gratitude isn't an emotion most of us cultivate. Even on Thanksgiving, we are more likely to concentrate on the turkey or the television than on giving thanks. But perhaps we would think differently about thankfulness if we realized its extra-ordinary power to improve our lives.

I'm not talking simply about the civilizing benefits of good manners. Of course it is admirable to express gratitude. Nothing rankles more than showing kindness or generosity to someone who doesn't appreciate it; that is why parents constantly coax their young children to say "please" and "thank you." But the value in giving thanks goes far beyond mere politeness. Gratitude is nothing less than the key to happiness, to contentment and peace.

¹In his book, *Happiness is a Serious Problem*, Dennis Prager writes: "There is a 'secret to happiness,' and it is gratitude. All happy people are grateful; and ungrateful people cannot be happy. We tend to think that it is being unhappy that leads people to complain, but it is truer to say that it is complaining that leads to people becoming unhappy. Become grateful and you will become a much happier person."

It is a keen observation, and it helps explain why our Judeo-Christian tradition places such emphasis on thanking God. Our liturgies are filled with expressions of gratitude. As we heard minutes ago, King David wrote in *Psalm 92*: 'It is good to give thanks to the Lord.' Why? Not because God needs our gratitude, but because we need it."

Learning to be thankful, whether to God or to other people, is the best vaccination against taking good fortune for granted. And the less we take for granted, the more pleasure and joy life brings us. If we never give a moment's thought to the fact that our health is good; that our children are well-fed; that we make a decent living; that our home is comfortable; that our nation is at peace; if we assume that the good things in our life are "normal," are our right, and are to be expected; we diminish the happiness they can bring us. By contrast, if we train yourself to reflect on how much worse off we could be; if we develop the custom of counting our blessings and being grateful for them; we will fill our life with joy, but also with the peace that comes from contentment with what we have.

Yet sometimes this is easier said than done. Life isn't always trouble-free and some of our worries overwhelm us; or we simply get caught up on the hamster wheel of living and never take time to reflect and appreciate, let alone to give thanks. Yet this holiday of Thanksgiving comes to remind us that no matter how bad things may seem, or how fast we

are running, we need to pause; we need to express that something within each of us which enables us to acknowledge how much plenty and blessing there is in our lives.

In Judaism, this concept is called *Hakarat Hatov*.ⁱⁱ It literally means "recognition of the good" – in more direct terms we might call it, seeing what is good when it is staring you right in the face. And we are asked to incorporate *Hakarat Hatov*, *recognizing good*, into our consciousness; not only to recognize the good and blessings before our very eyes, but also to train ourselves to see it – to make the effort, in all of our encounters, to appreciate and to praise. That is a great challenge; it demands constant, even vigilant, attention, so that each moment of every day becomes an occasion for recognition, appreciation and thanksgiving for our countless blessings.

ⁱⁱⁱOne woman tells of how it took an extended period of time in an orphanage in Calcutta to grasp the difference between how these poor children lived and the abundance in her life. She writes: Although it was my second extended period there, I still marveled at the standard of living of the girls. Growing up, I had had my own room; these girls didn't even have their own beds. They slept on thin mattresses spread on the floor, two girls to a mattress, sharing a blanket and a mosquito net. During the day the mattresses were piled up in a corner, and the room was used for play and doing homework.

Their only private space amounted to a box the size of a large shoe box. In this box each girl kept all her worldly possessions: the one of her two cotton frocks she was not currently wearing, two pencils, and a copy book. About 25 of the girls owned a pair of sandals, which they trotted out on special occasions. About a dozen girls owned a pretty dress, a gift from an impoverished grandmother. That was it. No other garments. No toothbrush. No crayons. Not one girl owned enough to fill her box. Yet they were the most cheerful and loving group of people I knew. I adored them.

The girls prevailed on me to teach them English. One day we were on the lesson in our book about opposites: tall-short, thin-fat, rich-poor. After explaining the words in simple English, I would have one girl stand in front of the class and ask, "Is Bhavani thin, fat, or medium?" The girls would raise their hands, and the one I picked would answer: "Bhavanai is thin." The girls were smart and highly motivated. The lesson was proceeding well until I summoned Lakshmi to stand in front of the class. Pointing to the scrawny, barefoot girl in her plain white frock, I asked, "Is Lakshmi rich, poor, or medium?" Two-dozen hands flew up. I called on one girl. In loud and perfect English she answered: "Lakshmi is medium." Obviously she didn't understand the words. Lakshmi, like all the girls, was abjectly destitute, a reality they all accepted with cheerful fortitude. I called on another girl. Eagerly, she replied, "Lakshmi is medium." I again explained the meaning of the words "rich" and "poor," this time using their Bengali translations so there would be no further misunderstanding. Then I asked the whole class: "Is Lakshmi rich, poor, or medium?" In joyful unison they all cried out: "Lakshmi is medium." I was confounded. By what mental gyrations did these girls consider Lakshmi - and by extension themselves - as anything other than poor?

After the class, I repaired to my room (my own private room) and tried to figure it out. After all, the girls knew that most children, even in poverty-stricken Calcutta, had more than they did. They attended school with "normal" girls - girls who had parents and shoes and pretty colored ribbons in their hair. Carefully I analyzed what exactly they did have. I came up with a list of just four items: a *rudimentary* level of shelter, food, education, and friends. That was it.

And then it struck me: Gratitude is a function not of how much we have, but rather of how much we have relative to how much we feel we deserve. In our own lives, consider this example: When we have worked hard at our job, we usually do not feel flooded with gratitude when we pick up our paycheck. Even a holiday bonus may come to be expected as our just desserts and not elicit a great surge of gratitude - unless it is a far bigger sum than we feel we deserve. The opposite of gratitude is a feeling of entitlement. The attitude of "I deserve it" turns every gift into a paycheck.

That is why the Hebrew term for gratitude is "*hakarat hatov*," "recognizing the good." The secret embedded in the Hebrew is that gratitude depends not on getting something good, but on recognizing the good that is already yours. Thus, gratitude is totally a feat of consciousness. It requires a "back to basics" mentality, becoming cognizant of all the rudimentary things we usually take for granted.

No matter what our circumstances in life, how much we struggle or what difficult times we are passing through, every one of us can find a myriad of things to be grateful for:

If you've lost money in the stock market, but you still have your family, you can be grateful.

If you've lost your job, but you still have your health, you can be grateful.

If you can't move your legs, but you can move your arms, you can be grateful.

If you've lost one you loved dearly, but you can still get out of bed each day and honor his or her memory with your very life, you can be grateful.

The Indian orphans understood all this. Feeling that they deserved nothing, they experienced the little that they had as a pure gift. No wonder they couldn't define themselves as poor. They intuited that gratitude (or thanksgiving) is too precious to be reserved for one day a year. It is something to be conscious of and indebted for every day.

So as we sit here, on Thanksgiving morning, we take pause from our frantic world and find joy in all that is good and possible in our lives. We seek to approach this day with an open heart because, even though we do suffer hardships, life is not to be lamented, but to be celebrated. Faith in God is not to be relegated to times of struggle, but also should be exalted amidst our blessings and bounty. On this Thanksgiving Day and every day of our precious and blessed lives, we should embrace life fully, choosing to see the good in ourselves and others in times of plenty and in times of want; in times of sickness and in times of health; in times of joy and in times of sorrow; in times of failure and in times of triumph.

So enjoy your turkey and your television, your family who can be with you and the extended family of friends and community assembled at your table. Take it all in and be thankful. Don't take the gifts in your life for granted. Remember that we are impoverished without each other, and without God. Whoever and wherever we are this Thanksgiving, the good in our lives outweighs the bad. If that doesn't deserve our gratitude, what does?

Happy Thanksgiving!

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ⁱ Jeff Jacoby, Why were the Pilgrims thankful?, *The Boston Globe*, November 23, 2000.

ii Rabbi Janet Marder, "Introduction to the Machzor," *CCAR Convention*, San Francisco, March, 2010

iii Sara Yoheved Rigler, "Beyond Just Desserts: A Recipe for Thanksgiving," *aish.com*.