



YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

WEEKLY PARASHA

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As Thanksgiving draws near, we will begin to see articles on the web and in print on the theme of thankfulness – what are the things we should be thankful for and how to cultivate thankfulness in ourselves. Feeling grateful for all that we have received is not only morally and religiously correct, it also has tremendous benefits. As John Tierney wrote in *The New York Times* about two years ago this time:

Cultivating an “attitude of gratitude” has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, higher long-term satisfaction with life and kinder behavior toward others, including romantic partners.

The theme of gratitude appears front and center in this week’s *parasha* as well. Yaakov, fearing his impending encounter with Esav, turns to God in prayer, and begins by acknowledging all that God has given him:

I am not worthy of the least of all the kindnesses, and of all the faithfulness which You have shown Your servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two camps. (Breishit 32:10-11)

We understand why Yaakov prays to be saved from Esav, but what is the point of beginning this with an expression of gratitude? The answer is in the opening words: *Katonti*, “I am not worthy.” Yaakov has a choice how to approach God. He can come with a claim or he can come with a request. He can say: “God, you made a promise to protect me. I’ve been Your faithful servant. You must save me – I deserve it; I am entitled to it.” Or, he could say: “God, I am not worthy of all that I have received from You or of the promise You have made me. But You in Your kindness have chosen to bless me and to make this promise. Although I am undeserving, please continue to bestow your kindness upon me.”

Yaakov, of course, chooses the second approach, he chooses to approach God with gratitude rather than entitlement, and his prayers are answered.

There is a theological underpinning to this approach. How can anything we, as imperfect, created beings, ever be deserving of God’s blessing? How can we ever truly live up to our obligations? And how can we “deserve” anything from God, when all that we have – our lives, our food, our clothes, the

very air that we breathe – has been given to us by God? But theological issues aside, there is also a key lesson here about gratitude. Gratitude is possible when we forgo our sense of entitlement, and embrace a sense of unworthiness for all that is good in our lives. Unworthiness not in the sense of low self-esteem, which is never good, but a profound sense of awe: “what did I do to deserve all this?” Gratitude is possible when we stop focusing on what we don’t have, and begin to appreciate how blessed we are for what we do have.

How was Yaakov able to feel this way? Sefat Emet points to the second part of the verse: “For with my staff alone I passed over this Jordan.” That was twenty years ago, but it is still fresh in Yaakov’s mind. “It is no small thing,” says Sefat Emet, “that a successful person will remember what little he had twenty years prior.” By focusing not on what we don’t have, but on what we didn’t have in the past, or on what others don’t have but we have now, we will truly experience all that we have as a blessing.

Is what we have a blessing from God? If we perceive it to be so, then it truly will become so.

How do we cultivate this way of perceiving in our own lives? Experts suggest developing a number of habits, including: make gentle reminders to ourselves about what we are grateful for; start with our senses – experience and savor the smells, tastes, and sounds of the world; keep a gratitude journal to record each day, even very briefly, the things that happened that day for which you are grateful.

Interestingly, all of these are embedded in our religious practices. Sefat Emet notes that our daily mentioning of the Exodus from Egypt should translate for us as a daily reminder of our own Exodus moments, of times in our lives when we too started “just with a staff,” when we started with nothing in Lavan’s house and then emerged into a better place. And our Shmoneh Esrei that follows this recitation is nothing if not an acknowledgement of all that God has given and continues to give us.

Throughout the day, we give ourselves gentle reminders, and we stop to appreciate what we are eating, what we are smelling, what we are seeing. We make blessings before we

eat, we make blessings before we smell, we make blessings when we see beautiful things.

Of course, as we know, it doesn't really work that way. We have to over-halakhicised these acts. We have given so much attention to all the technical details of saying Shema, of Prayer, of blessings, that the only value we inculcate is that of obedience and rule following. If we can add God back to these acts, we can make them religious acts, we can make them moments of *katonti*. They will be moments of transforming all we have in the world, all we are in the world, into a gift, into a blessing.

But Yaakov's gratitude to God is only half the story. Yaakov was able to say *katonti* to God, to acknowledge his sense of his own shortcomings, his dependency, even his fear – "lest he come and kill me, mother and children." But Yaakov was not able to say such things to anyone else.

Yaakov, unloved by his father, driven away from his home and homeland at an early age, was a loner. He always had to do everything, and he would do it alone. Yaakov never learns to reach out to others for help. Sure, he calls Rachel and Leah to the field. But he didn't consult with them. He just needed them to acquiesce to a decision he had already made.

Yaakov never lets anyone see his vulnerabilities. He has cloaked himself in Esav's clothes – the clothes of the strong, independent, fearless hunter - so that no one can see the Yaakov, the not-always strong, not always confident, herder of sheep who lies underneath.

Consider his unfeeling response to Rachel when she complains to him about her barrenness: "Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Breishit 30:2). The Rabbis were rightfully shocked: "Is this how you respond to those in distress?!" (Breishit Rabbah). But what made him respond this way? It was his inability to be present for another person when she was weak, when she was feeling vulnerable. He could never expose this part of himself, so he could not relate when others exposed themselves this way to him. "You have to be strong. If you have any issues –talk to God like I do – don't turn to others for help."

To project such strength is great when everything works out, like it does in the beginning of our *parasha* – it is Yaakov's strategy, Yaakov's coordinating, his actions and no one else's that saves them from Esav. But what about the times when he can't handle it all himself? At those times, he is unable to turn to others and he is paralyzed.

His daughter is raped by Shechem – he does nothing. He hears, and he is silent. He waits for his sons to return – not to consult with them, but because he is paralyzed. They then take over and tragedy ensues. And all he can then do is lash out. Where was his voice earlier when it was needed?

Reuven sleeps with Bilhah after Rachel dies. What does the verse say: "And Israel heard." And then nothing. He is not able to handle this alone. Does he turn to anyone for help? No. Just silence and paralysis.

Yosef is presumed to be dead, and his whole family attempts to console him. But they have nothing to offer him. He is committed to being alone in his suffering. Better to suffer alone than to let people see you weak, to let people see that you need them.

This was Yaakov. *Va'yivater Yaakov livado*. At the end of the day, with all his wives, children, and sheep, he is left alone. He has chosen to be alone. He must be strong. He must do it all himself.

Perhaps this was the lesson of the struggle with the mysterious man and the wounding of the sciatic nerve. You can't overcome all struggles alone, Yaakov is being told. You have shortcomings, as do we all. You also have your Achilles' heel, your *gid ha'nashe*. If you can acknowledge when you need help, and turn to others when you need them, if you can allow your limp to show and to be a part of you, then you can truly become complete. You will not have to be a Yaakov in Esav's clothing. You can be a Yisrael.

We must all work to learn the lesson of *katonti*. To accept that we are not expected to do everything on our own. We must not only accept gifts from God; we must allow ourselves to accept gifts from others, to ask others for help. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of maturity. It is what will allow us to succeed. It is what can turn a culture of competition into a culture of collaboration.

If we can do this, we will live each day in a state of gratitude. Gratitude for what God has given us, and gratitude for what we receive every day from others in our lives: our spouses, our parents, our children, our friends, and our co-workers. If we can do this, we will turn our life into a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom!

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