

Grace and Gratitude

(Deut. 8:7-18, Genesis 32: 25-31, 33:1, 8-18)

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a Stanford student who planned to become a doctor. Like many of his classmates, he was exceedingly driven, though he tried hard not to show it. His transcript was so impressive at the end of his sophomore year, that his proud parents rewarded him with a summer trip to the Far East. While there, he met a guru who rocked his world. “Don’t you see how you are poisoning your soul with this success oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole, but to win the girl that everyone else wants...Give it up; come join us in an atmosphere where we all love each other.” The young man signed on. He called his bewildered parents from Tokyo and told them he wasn’t coming home. He was dropping out of school to live in an ashram.

Six months later, his parents received a letter from him: “Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren’t happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you how happy it is has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal, and we all share. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I’ve become the number two disciple in the entire ashram, and I think I can be number one by June!” (Who Needs God, Harold Kushner, p. 97)

Oy! This story makes us laugh because we recognize ourselves in this young man’s pride and predicament. At this time of year, during Thanksgiving, we stop, at least for a day, for a meal, and ask ourselves, “What are we striving for? Are we satisfied with what we have? What do we value? What are we grateful for?” While we celebrate Thanksgiving as a national and not a religious holiday, the questions that arise in its celebration are inevitably questions of values, and therefore questions of religion broadly construed. And clearly, religious traditions offer us much guidance in discerning what we might be thankful for.

In the Jacob story we just read, there is a line that captures the attention of the rabbis. “And Jacob came in peace, shalem, to the city of Shechem.” (Gen. 33:18) Now we know that Jacob’s life was scarcely untroubled. He bought his brother Esau’s birthright; he deceived his father Issac to obtain the blessing; he fled his home to avoid Esau’s wrath and retribution; he worked seven years for his cunning uncle for the woman of his dreams, only to be on the receiving end of another family deception when he discovered it was Leah, not his beloved Rachel, that he married. He worked another seven years for Rachel; he mediated the rivalry between the sisters caused by Leah’s prolific progeny and Rachel’s barrenness; He ran away from his uncle; And he anticipated seeing his brother Esau after years apart.... And it is after this reunion with Esau, the reunion which is preceded by his famous wrestling match, that we read, “And

Jacob came in peace to the town of Shechem”. The Hebrew word here is “shalem”--a root we are familiar with as shalom, peace, completeness. Jacob came complete. The Babylonian sage Rav asked, “What were the ingredients of Jacob’s completeness?” The answer, “Jacob was complete in three matters: his body, his wealth, and his Torah-- his spiritual teaching and modeling. (“bgufo, bmamono, btorato” --Talmud Shabbat 33b) According to Rav, a complete person is one with a healthy body, sufficient material support and a life lived consonant with the Holy.

The first two ingredients Jacob desires early on in his journey. After his first famous night on the road, after he dreamt the dream of angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven, he asks God to provide him with “lechem leechol v’begeg l’ilbosh”, with “bread to eat and clothes to wear” on his journey. As a young man, Jacob readily understands that he requires food and clothing for physical health and means enough to enable him to continue. In his uncle’s home, he acquires such wealth that, when he is once again on the road, he is capable of offering lavish gifts to his brother Esau. It is no longer only bread he eats or only functional clothes he wears. Jacob has become a wealthy man. He has achieved robust health and wealth. But we know from his second famous night, the night of his struggle-- with the angel or a man or his conscience or the patron of his brother--that by now, Jacob wants something more. For when his opponent says, “Let me go for dawn is breaking!”, Jacob answers, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” What kind of blessing is he asking for? Doesn’t Jacob already have the lion’s share of blessings?

This is Jacob, who left his father’s home with a blessing. Remember that Isaac blessed him when Jacob brought him game prepared by his mother before his brother Esau returned from the hunt. That blessing, he obtained by deceit. Jacob now seeks a blessing achieved by his life, by his values. He needs a blessing which confirms that through all his troubles, he has gained wisdom, he has won divine favor. Jacob receives this blessing, along with a new name- Yisrael-one who struggles with God. Paradoxically, Jacob entered the wrestling match with wholeness of body. But by the end, that very wholeness eludes him. He leaves limping, limping, yet blessed. For just a few verses later, we are told, “Jacob came complete to the town of Shechem.” And Rav teaches “Jacob was complete in three matters: his body, his wealth, and his Torah” Rav understands Jacob’s wholeness to include completeness in body. The completeness in his body is not perfection—rather, Jacob incorporates into his being the experience of struggle. Similarly the completeness in his Torah is not having been a diligent student with a charmed life, but rather having learned much through a life of conflict and struggle. And the completeness of his wealth is not its accumulation; rather it follows Jacob’s determination to give much of it away.

So what does this teach us about gratitude? Wholeness, completeness is accepting struggle and learning from it. Wholeness and completeness is sharing prosperity with others, reconciling with what one most fears, seeking blessing and reflecting on what is worth blessing, embodying and teaching the lessons learned in a life of struggle. Jacob is complete in his body, in his means and in his Torah. This is what is worth being grateful for.

As we reflect on our Thanksgiving tables this week, another text comes to mind. Thanksgiving is an American holiday, reflecting the gratitude the Pilgrims experienced in coming to a rich and beautiful land. In the Christian lectionary, the text taught on Thanksgiving comes from Deuteronomy--the description of the good land to which the Eternal brought Israel. Indeed, in Yiddish, America was referred to as the “goldena medina”, the golden country, the first land to approximate the land of Israel. In Deuteronomy 8, describing the fertile and verdant land of Israel, “a land of olives, oil and honey,--a land in which you will never eat bread in poverty, you will not lack for anything in it,” we read, “when you eat, and you are satisfied, you are to bless the Eternal your God for the good land that God has given you.” These three words in Hebrew, “v’achalta, v’savata u’veracha”--“you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless” form the basis for the Jewish tradition of grace following meals, a blessing known as birkat hamazon, the blessing of food. As in many traditions, there is a blessing before eating, but the blessing following eating comes from this understanding--it is easy to be grateful in anticipation of enjoyment. It is harder to remember, once one has partaken, that gratitude to the One who provides for us should follow. How many of us regard the means to provide a festive meal to be of our own making? Or that the meal was created only by the cook who lavished time and attention in preparing it? This blessing reminds us that it all begins with God, that the sustenance we have received is to strengthen us to do God’s work in the world, to teach God’s Torah.

There are many ways to school ourselves to be grateful for gifts of completeness we are given--gifts of food and clothing, of a good land, of health, of wealth, of studying God’s ways. But I’d like to share with you one of my favorite teachings about gratitude. The Hafetz Hayim, a nineteenth century Lithuanian rabbi who took the name “One who Delights in Life” from the Psalms (34:13) after his title of his most famous book, teaches that we can learn about gratitude from the example of the loyalty a dog shows for its caretaker. The Hafetz Hayim notes that a dog is so full of gratitude that the dog feels the pain and shares the happiness of its caretaker. Considering this, he interprets the “mark of Cain” which we usually think of as punishment but was given by God to protect Cain, not as a mark, but as a sign. And the Hafetz Hayim’s interpretation of the sign of Cain is that God gave Cain a dog.

The Hafetz Hayim explains his association this way-- initially Abel was stronger than Cain, and he overpowered him. Cain pleaded with Abel not to kill him, and Abel headed his plea for mercy. However, when their roles were reversed, and Abel pleaded with Cain, “Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.”(Gen. 4:8) The Hafetz Hayim teaches that Cain shut himself to the kindness his brother had shown him. Cain was ungrateful. Therefore God gave Cain a dog as a sign of gratitude--to accompany him in his fugitive wanderings, to remind him to be grateful to those who did him kindness, gratitude which--had he felt it earlier, would have prevented him from committing murder.

If even the murderer Cain learns gratitude from a dog, he reasons, how much more so should we be grateful for all the kindness of the Holy One in our lives. The

Hafetz Hayim interrogates himself, “Yisrael Me’ir, are you properly grateful to the Holy One for the great kindness God has shown you? God endowed you with the understanding and sense to write a book, which people study and appreciate. Do you cherish the immense privilege God gave you, to enjoy honor among your people, to hear them quoting your teachings? I tell you, Yisrael Meir, if you haven’t yet inculcated this trait of gratitude in yourself, you haven’t acquired the good quality that a dog has!”

Last weekend I was at the home of my mother-in-law, a dog lover. On her refrigerator is a magnet with the reminder, “help me to become the person my dog thinks I am.”

On this Thanksgiving weekend, amidst the decorations and the aromas which return to our homes every year, amidst the reunions with our extended family and friends, amidst the festivity and good food, let us fill our tables with grace and gratitude, the sign of the dog and the appreciation of what is worth being thankful for. This Thanksgiving weekend, may we be complete and whole--in body, in means and in sacred teachings. May we, this Thanksgiving weekend and at every meal, appreciate the struggles in our lives and find sustenance to continue to live by sacred teachings. Happy Thanksgiving. May you enjoy the holiday grateful for God’s blessing.