

WORDS OF GRATITUDE



- A COLLECTION OF SOURCES FOR STUDY -

LOOKING AT THE JEWISH TRAIT OF GRATITUDE

Discuss what you think about the following statements, especially whether you agree with them!

1. Saying thank you to someone who has done a favour for you is important – they need recognition
2. When we thank someone we pay them back for their favour
3. Gratitude is not an isolated action. It creates a personality and life perspective. It's a way of life.
4. In Judaism some mitzvot are interpersonal, others are between man and God. But some are about our own self-development. Which category does gratitude fall into?



Take a look at the following quotes regarding gratitude. What do you think each one is teaching us about gratitude?

“There are two ways to live. You can live as if nothing is a miracle. Or you can live as if everything is a miracle” *Albert Einstein*

In Grateful Brain, author Alex Korb explains that our brains are conditioned to function in repetitive patterns. He suggests that the mind cannot focus on both positive and negative information at the same time. Gratitude focuses on the positive and rewires the brain to set up a pattern of repetitive positivity.

Dr. Gordon's study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology explores the role of gratitude and appreciation in maintaining long and healthy relationships. In the study, 50 committed couples were given a week to fill out appreciation journals. On days when one partner reported feeling more appreciated, he or she tended to appreciate his or her partner more the next day.

A study conducted by Wichita State University found that the top 5 of 65 motivating factors in the workplace were “praise related”. Asked why they quit their jobs and many employees – up to 79% in one study – cite a lack of appreciation.

“Grateful living is possible only when we realize that other people and agents do things for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Gratitude emerges from two stages of information processing—affirmation and recognition.” *Robert Emmons, psychology professor*

"We are genetically predisposed to pay more attention to the bad than the good. For sound biological reasons we are hyper-alert to potential threats and dangers." It takes focused attention to become aware of how much we have to be grateful for. That, in different ways, is the logic of prayer, of making blessings, of Shabbat, and many other elements of Jewish life” *Rabbi Lord Sacks z”l*



1) CENTRALITY OF GRATITUDE IN OUR DAILY LIVES

The first word we say in the morning as Jews is modeh (as in Modeh Ani) – we thank Hashem for a new day. In this section we shall see how important gratitude is and the lengths we go to be loyal to it.

DEVARIM 23:4-5 AND 23:8

(ד) לֹא־יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקֶהֱל הַגָּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי לֹא־יָבֹא לָהֶם בְּקֶהֱל הָעֵד־עוֹלָם

(ה) עַל־דִּבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־קִדְּמוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּלַחֵם וּבַמִּים בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאֲשֶׁר שָׂכַר עַלְיֶךָ אֶת־בִּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעֹר מִפְּתוֹר אֲרָם נְהַרְיָם לְקַלְלֶךָ

Member of the nations of Amon and Moav shall not enter the congregation of Hashem, even the 10th generation shall not enter. This is because, when you left Egypt, they did not greet you with bread and water and they hired Bilam to curse you.

לֹא־תִתְּעֹב מִצְרִי בִּיְגַר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרְצוֹ

Do not reject an Egyptian for you sojourned in their lands

Why does the Torah push away the Adomite and Amonite yet we are to be nicer to the Egyptians – they made us slaves!?

RAMBAN COMMENTARY:

וְהִנֵּרְאָה אֵלַי כִּי הַכְּתוּב הִרְחִיק שְׁנֵי הָאֲחִים הָאֵלֶּה שֶׁהָיוּ גִמּוּלֵי חֶסֶד מֵאַבְרָהָם, שֶׁהֲצִיל אֲבִיהֶם וְאִמָּם מִן הַחֶרֶב וְהַשָּׂבִי (בְּרֵאשִׁית יד טז), וּבִזְכוּתוֹ שֶׁלָּחֵם הַשֵּׁם מִתּוֹךְ הַהֶפְכָּה (שָׁם יט כט). וְהָיוּ חַיְבִין לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְהָיוּ עֹשִׂי עֲמָהֶם רָעָה. הָאֶחָד שָׁכַר עָלָיו בְּלָעַם בֶּן בְּעוֹר וְהָאֶחָד לֹא קָדַם אוֹתוֹ בְּלָחֶם וּבְמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר קָרְבוּ לְמוֹלֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתוּב (לְעִיל ב יח יט) אֶתְּהָ עֲבֹר הַיּוֹם אֶת גְּבוּל מוֹאָב אֶת עַר וְקִרְבַּת מוֹל בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן. וְהִנֵּה הַכְּתוּב הִזְהִירָם (שָׁם פָּסוּק יט) אַל תִּצָּרֶם וְאַל תִּתְגַּר בָּם, וְהָיוּ לֹא קִדְמוֹ אוֹתָם כָּלָל, כִּי הָיָה הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר "כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לִי בְנֵי עַמּוֹ בְּהָמוֹתֵי", אֲבָל לֹא הִזְכִּיר עַמּוֹן, שֶׁלֹּא קִדְמוֹ אוֹתָם:

Hashem has distanced the nations of Amon and Moav from entering the nation of Israel. These two nations received kindness from our forefather Avraham. Avraham saved their ancestors from captivity, and because of Avraham their ancestors were saved from Sodom. Therefore it was incumbent upon them to do kindness to the Children of Israel. Instead they were wicked to the Children of Israel therefore they can never enter this holy nation. Egyptian converts are limited for three generations because of the evil that they did to the Jews. But never reject them completely; for your ancestors were guests in their land, they provided food for your ancestors during famine, and they gave honour to your ancestors (at the time of Yosef).

- We see that we must even express gratitude to Egypt for the kindness that they initially showed to us. Whilst Amon and Moav are rejected from our nation because they failed to show gratitude.

Why is gratitude so central?



2) GRATITUDE TO INANIMATE OBJECTS



In analysing the trait of gratitude we see something fascinating. We find examples of gratitude even to inanimate objects! Why?

RASHI SHEMOS 7:19 AND 8:12:

לְפִי שְׁהִיגֹן הַיָּאֹר עַל מֹשֶׁה בְּשִׁנְשָׁלְךָ לְתוֹכּוֹ, לְפִיכֹךְ לֹא לָקָה עַל יְדּוֹ לֹא בַדָּם וְלֹא בַצִּפְרָדִּים, וְלָקָה עַל יְדֵי אַהֲרֹן

Why was Aharon the one who hit the water and the ground for the plagues of blood, frogs and lice? Because Hashem said to Moshe, "The water protected you when you were thrown into the Nile, and the ground saved you when you killed the Egyptian and the ground covered the body. Therefore, the water and the land should not be hit by you, rather Aharon will hit them and bring the plagues."

- בִּירָא דְשִׁתִּית מִיָּנִיָּה לֹא תִשְׁדִּי בִּיה קְלָא - Into a well from which one drinks do not throw a stone - *Talmud B. Kama 92b*

Shitah Mekubetzes Commentary: A student of the Rav Yosef ibn Megash wrote (transl. for Arabic) - the Rif fell ill and went to the bathhouse to aid his recovery. Sometime later the owner of the bathhouse became poor and had to sell his bathhouse to his debtors. The Rif refused to be involved in the court estimation of the value of the bathhouse (nor aid its sale) for he had derived benefit from it.

Why would there exist a notion of gratitude to inanimate objects? What does this imply about what gratitude is/is not?

- **Rabbi Dessler:** The characteristics of every person are not only affected by their intellect but also by their emotions. For example, if someone would be ungrateful to an animal or even to an object that had helped him, this would negatively affect his character and diminish his sense of gratitude

Gratitude is supposed to be a perspective-developer. Once we act with gratitude we are opened up to a whole new perspective on life. What are these perspectives?

3) WHAT DOES GRATITUDE ACHIEVE?

A. NOTICING THE GOOD

"We are genetically predisposed to pay more attention to the bad than the good. For sound biological reasons we are hyper-alert to potential threats and dangers." It takes focused attention to become aware of how much we have to be grateful for. That, in different ways, is the logic of prayer, of making blessings, of Shabbat, and many other elements of Jewish life"

Rabbi Lord Sacks z'l

- One who does something for someone else - the latter owes the former their life (*Talmudic saying*)
- *Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel*: People are used to thinking that the reciprocal act of kindness one performs to pay someone back for their kind deed to you must match the initial kindness...However, the truth is that there is no upper boundary limit to the amount one can repay someone for their kindness - for the performer of kindness has emulated the trait of G-d.

Bestselling author A J Jacobs went on a remarkable gratitude journey in his book, Thanks a Thousand. He traced his cup of coffee, on a mission to thank everyone who was involved in producing the 'simple cup of caffeine.' He thanked the person serving the coffee behind the counter, he located and thanked the truck driver that brought the coffee to the store (and the music star whose music the truck drivers were listening to in order to keep them awake during their early-morning mammoth drives), he even flew to the factory that produced the coffee beans to thank them! A thousand thank yous for his cup of coffee! In his own words:

Yes, it was weird and awkward at times. The reactions were mixed, because I was thanking people out of the blue. I called or emailed or visited them in person. Sometimes people were very suspicious. They'd be like, "Is this a pyramid scheme? What are you trying to sell me?" But I will say, the good part is the majority, the vast majority, were very receptive once they got used to the idea. I mention in the book, that scene where I call the woman who does pest control for the warehouse where my coffee is stored. And I said to her, "I know this is weird, but I want to thank you for keeping the insects out of my coffee." And she said, "Yes, that is weird but I really appreciate it." I compared it to an anti-prank phone call, like I was paying penance for the obnoxious calls I made in high school.





B. REALISING THAT YOU CAN'T DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF

- The word hoda'ah has two definitions in the Jewish language. 1) offering thanks 2) admitting to the truth - *Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980): Pachad Yitzchak Chanuka 2:2*

The Chovas Halevavos writes the key line that gratitude obligates a person. Gratitude is a responsibility no less than one must pay for an item that one purchased. When a person goes into a shop and picks up an item (to purchase) they must pay for it. When someone does something for you, gratitude obligates us. Gratitude underpins commerce, it underpins relationships, it underpins our connection to Hashem too: Hashem is the Eternal Giver, our treasured obligation to play our part in the relationship comes through gratitude for all He does for us.

Now we know how important gratitude is, what does the Torah teach about expressing gratitude? We've listed one below. Using different tefillos, mitzvos or chagim that revolve around gratitude can you think of more?

- The Dayenu prayer on Seder Night shows us that gratitude should be itemised and not kept as 'general.'

We thank you, for you are Hashem, God of our forefathers. You created us and the world. Blessings and thanks are due to Your great and holy name. For you have sustained us and kept us alive. So too may You continue to sustain us and give us life, gather our exiles to Your holy court to observe Your decrees and perform Your will, so we can serve You wholeheartedly. Thank You for inspiring us to thank You. Blessed is the God of thanks.

Modim prayer

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FEBRUARY 2025



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