

## Essentials

### Judah Kerbel ~ Queens Jewish Center ~ Vayeitzei 5781

When shelter-in-place orders were issued last spring as COVID-19 began to make waves into our world, we were told not to leave home except for “essentials.” Many of us have had the discussions in our lives about what our “wants” versus “needs” are, but the middle class of the Western world at large may not have been forced to practically define “needs” until this point. What are the essentials of life? As far as COVID-19 was concerned, [Wikipedia](#) lists the top examples of essential services as: banks, gas stations, grocery stores, medical offices, pharmacies, and restaurants (without dining in). Based on this, our essentials in life can be understood to be money, a means for travel, food, and health. According to [Maslow’s hierarchy of needs](#), we might truly “need” things that are beyond the essentials, but advanced needs are predicated upon the successful attainment of the most essential needs. Therefore, physiological needs like food, warmth, rest are the most essential; followed by safety and security (including shelter); followed by belongingness (friends and family); followed by the need for prestige, success, and accomplishment; and finally, self-actualization and outlets for creativity. Most of our essentials during COVID-19 have centered around the bottom two layers of the pyramid that are defined as basic needs: the physiological and safety needs.

Yaakov Avinu was especially in tune with the concept of essential needs. He finds himself on a journey, not as a vacation from his parents, but because of an essential need itself: the preservation of life. After Esav threatened at the end of last week’s *parasha* to kill Yaakov, he must run for his life. His journey, then, is itself about the most basic form of survival. But Yaakov was not able to drive away in a Tesla with a road trip playlist and a stash of snacks from a 7-Eleven. As he describes on his return back to Canaan, “ki v’makli avarti et ha-Yarden ha-zeh, v’ata hayiti lishnei machanot.” Yaakov left with nothing at all – except for God’s protection. Soon after Yaakov’s departure, he finds a place to sleep for the night and dreams. What is the substance of Yaakov’s dream? God’s promise of protection. Upon awakening, Yaakov suddenly “realizes” that God is present. Did Yaakov not think that God was the ruler of the universe and omnipresent? Yet, he awoke to God’s *protection*, that God could protect him outside of his home. It is at this point that Yaakov takes a vow and promises a relationship with God if God will provide for him. What does Yaakov yearn for? The bar would seem to be low:

אם יהיה אלקים עמדי ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך ונתן לי לחם לאכול ובגד ללבש...

If the Lord God be with me and guard me on this way that I am going and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear... (Gen. 28:20, trans. Robert Alter)

Yaakov Avinu, in his vulnerable moment fleeing a vengeful family member, understands what essentials are: food and clothing. If he is able to sustain himself physically and meet his most basic needs, that will be enough to maintain his relationship with God and praise God. But Rav Zalman Sorotzkin asks in *Oznayim La-Torah*, why does the Torah say “bread *to eat* and clothing *to wear*?” Why could it not just say “give me food

and clothing?” He explains that having food and clothing itself is not of much help because if he is ill and cannot eat, what good will bread do? What good will clothing do if he is lying and cannot move? The three most essential needs from Yaakov’s perspective are food, clothing and health. *Midrash Aggadah*, in fact, learns from here that people who are *tzaddikim* only ask for essentials. Not only is that enough for Yaakov to survive, that is also enough for him to be prepared to *thank* God. The important insight here is not just to identify what I really need in life, but what is sufficient for me to thank God.

As much as it seems Yaakov provides an important paradigm of gratitude for essentials, his wife Leah is the first true exemplar in the whole Torah, according to Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. Leah expressly thanks God after the birth of her son, Yehuda, which comes from the root מודה, to thank:

...וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר הַפַּעַם אֹדָה אֶת יְקֹוֹק עַל כֵּן קָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה...

And [she] bore a son, and she said ‘This time I sing praise to the Lord,’ therefore she called his name Judah... (Gen. 29:35)

Of course, it should be noted, Yaakov was not yet in a position to thank God; he had not yet completed his journey, so his vow is still in the conditional stage. But Leah’s gratitude comes following the fulfillment of her needs. What also perhaps differentiates the expressions of Yaakov from Leah is that Yaakov just focuses on meeting the minimum needs. Leah, however, names her gratitude specifically after the birth of not her first child, which would seem to be enough reason for gratitude, but her *fourth* child. Why does she wait until the fourth child to praise God? Many commentators note that logically, if Yaakov was assumed by prophecy to have twelve children from four women, each woman would give birth to three of them. It is at this point, with the birth of a fourth child, that Leah exceeded the supposed quota of three. Ibn Ezra explains the significance: once she received just a little more than she needed, she stopped there. She was not going to ask God for more. She was not going to compete with the other women, despite her rivalry with Rachel or perhaps a potential superiority complex over the concubines, but she realizes that she has received sufficient blessing from God. Here, too, it is of worthy note that Leah’s aspirations were not extreme wealth, despite her experience living in her father’s home. But if we were to add an essential, it is that of family. For Leah, having family, having relationships, was of the greatest importance.

What Yaakov and Leah both understand is where their essentials begin and end, and at that point, they unequivocally recognize their blessing from God. Yaakov articulates this more as an aspiration. Leah, the first to outwardly thank God, exemplifies this having received just slightly more than she needed or expected. But there is nothing wrong with effectively receiving blessing beyond one’s minimal need. The commonality between Yaakov and Leah is that they recognize the distinction between “need” and “want.” Rabbenu Bachaye writes that Yaakov did not ask for more than the bare minimum because of the great disturbance we encounter when we chase after the extras. Rather, a person should suffice with what they have, not pursue more, and focus on their fear of Heaven. Both Yaakov and Leah excel in this regard. If our

expectations are far beyond our needs and means, we will not come to be thankful of God. But if we realize the true miracle to be found in just having our essentials – food, clothing, health, and family – we can at least be thankful for that. Furthermore, when we *do* receive more, we recognize the even more profound requirement to thank God. Whatever that extra is, הַפְּעַם אֲוֹדָה אֶת ה' – we know it is really time to thank God. This is the message of Dayeinu that we say on Pesach (not too soon!) – it would have been enough to praise God *even if we did not progress to the next stage*. And once we did, all the more so we must sufficiently show our recognition of the good we have received.

When we take the opportunity to reflect on the things for which we are thankful on Thanksgiving each year, we may have many things in mind that are specific to our unique circumstances and personal lives. But this year, I think many of us who are here realize just how lucky we are to be alive and the beneficiaries of God's ongoing protection. When I attended a virtual interfaith panel on gratitude earlier this week, the very first question was “what are you thankful for this year,” and the first answer was life. The discussion also devoted some time towards exploring what “essentials” are. We are not always accustomed to having those conversations, but we know this year it is especially relevant. While we sheltered at home, we knew that with the tremendous stress of traumatic life change, our biggest concerns were protecting our own lives and the lives of others. Health was the #1 essential. Those who had to venture out into a dangerous world were those who provided healthcare to those who needed it, and we heard this applause every night at 7:00 PM. We also saluted the people at every link in the chain who ensured that we had food throughout. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, and before/after Pesach, many were extremely concerned if we would have enough food. People hoarded from the shelves. We had to think carefully about how we would receive food safely. It only spoke to the most essential function that having sustenance fulfills. Furthermore, it must be noted that due to the rise of unemployment, achieving essential items like food has not been easy for many. But interestingly, the second answer to “what are you thankful for this year” was technology. Technology is often a culprit of excessive consumerism in our society today, but that does not minimize how essential it really can be, and that is because it facilitates relationships. We cannot fathom what it would be like to stay at home for months on end without technology, whether it was the phone or Zoom. While health and safety, according to Maslow's hierarchy, come before psychological and relational needs, and therefore in-person gatherings have been limited, relational needs are still needs. While there are real challenges in the limitations that last to this day, just like Leah saw relationships as essential, so too are our connections essential, whether to family or friends.

I feel it is important to note the recent Supreme Court ruling regarding religious gatherings. Without getting bogged down in the details of the ruling, the premise for many behind the injustice of the limited gatherings in houses of worship had to do with the conception of *minyanim* as “essential,” or at least as essential as other secular activities. My position has been consistent throughout - in ordinary times, shul and *tefillah b'tzibbur* are deeply essential. Inasmuch as they are safe at this moment, I have seen how meaningful and spiritually elevating it has been to be able to participate in a

*minyan*. But our eye must be on the prize - life and survival are the most essential of anything. Not to mention, God truly can be found anywhere - אכן, יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי - לא ידעתי - there is God here and I did not know! I did not know I can find God in my own home, that my living room can be a Beit Keneset! But so long it can be, it must be if that is how God will be most able to protect us.

I hope that we will think back to essentials next Thanksgiving and the Thanksgivings that come after that. Many Americans, including Jewish Americans, are especially blessed with abundance. Sometimes, our concerns are picking out a new car, upgrading a phone, giving our home a facelift or expansion due to a perceived need, and of course this is a legitimate part of life. But hopefully, luxury will never be the bar of satisfaction, the key to our happiness and ability to thank God. While many were disappointed with curtailed *semachot*, missed graduations, and canceled vacations, we grew the resiliency to accept these losses. Because so long as we have life and basic survival needs, we owe our gratitude to God - ערב ובוקר וצהריים - evening, morning and day.

May we always have the wisdom and strength to show our gratitude to God like Yaakov and Leah when we meet the most basic of our needs, and may our gratitude overflow when we receive abundance beyond our essential needs.