



GRATITUDE: A CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE

Fundamentally, Chanukah is a holiday of thanksgiving and praise. While the menorah and candle lighting get much of our attention, the argument can be made that it is actually Hallel and *hodaah*, thanking and praising God for the miracle of our salvation, that are most central to our observance of Chanukah. The Gemara in *Masechet Shabbat* 21b states, “A miracle happened and the oil lasted eight days, so the next year they established these eight days as a holiday with Hallel and *hodaah*, praise and thanksgiving.” This requirement to somehow perform Hallel and *hodaah* is mentioned in the Al HaNissim prayer as well. We say, *v’kavu shemonat yemei Chanukah eilu l’hodot ul’hallel l’shimcha hagadol* — They established these eight days of Chanukah in order to give thanks

and praise Your holy name. It may seem surprising that neither of these fundamental texts on Chanukah refer to a ritual lighting of candles. Instead, it seems that the crux of our observance of Chanukah is our obligation to praise and express our thanks to God. Because when given the miracle of our salvation, the proper response is to turn to God, acknowledge the miracle He has done for us, and praise Him.

It appears that the lighting of the candles was given to us as a conduit for the main purposes of Hallel and *hodaah*, in which the candles are the tangible expression of our gratitude.

In recent years, researchers have studied our experience of gratitude, looking at the parameters of gratitude and the ways in which it is distinct from other positive emotions such

as optimism and hope. In order to experience gratitude, researchers explain that we need two things. First, we must affirm that there are good things in our life. Second, we must recognize that those good things have come from someone or something other than us.

In the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Dr. Robert Emmons notes that gratitude has a dual meaning; a worldly meaning and a transcendent meaning. In a worldly context, we experience gratitude when we acknowledge that we have received something of value from another person. This is the interpersonal component of gratitude. We recognize that our emotional state is only possible due to a positive engagement with another person. Transcendent gratitude can be a religious spiritual

experience, but it is also experienced even by those who aren't religious. We label these forces as acts of God and others may label it as fate. What we have in common is that we recognize that we are graced with the goodness in our lives. This appreciation motivates us to turn outward, to reflect back into the world the goodness that we have received. In this way, gratitude is the complete opposite of a narcissistic outlook, wherein one believes that he is owed or entitled to all the blessings he has been given.

Moshe delivered this message to the Jewish people upon their impending exit from the desert. He cautioned them,

הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ ... פֶּן הָאָכַל וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבָתִּים טוֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבַּעְתָּ ... וְרָם לְבָבְךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ ... וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ כִּי יָעֲצָם יְדֵי עֲשָׂה לִי אֶת הַחֵיִל הַזֶּה.

“When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses... and your silver and gold is multiplied... beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God... do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’”

Devarim, 8:11-17

Gratitude is the very opposite of “My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth,” for we can only truly experience gratitude when we recognize that the goodness we have has come not by the strength of our own hands, but has been bestowed upon us by another. This aspect of gratitude makes it interpersonal and/or spiritual in a way that sets it apart from other positive emotions that lack this relational component.

In his book on morality, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states that above all else, it is the quality of our

relationships that give us a sense of meaning and fulfillment. In particular, it is our ability to recognize and care about others that lifts us out of our exclusive focus on ourselves, and redeems us from our solitude. The absence of gratitude is ego. When we fail to appreciate the gratitude we owe to others and to God, all that is left is self-congratulation and entitlement. But the opposite is within reach. Herein lies the power of gratitude. When we are truly grateful, we seek out ways to engage with the world that has bestowed upon us so much goodness. We are better off when we turn outward.

Researchers also note that a person experiencing gratitude typically believes that the benefit he received was more than he sought after or deserved. He believes that the giver went above and beyond, giving him more than he expected or earned. We see nods to this aspect of gratitude in the Biblical story of Leah and Yehuda. The Gemara in *Brachot* 7b states that from the time of creation, no one had expressed gratitude to God until Leah did upon the birth of Yehuda. However, the Torah does in fact list several instances where various people did express thanks to God before Leah did. From this we can infer that there must have been something different about Leah's thanks to God that made it a unique act of gratitude, and set it apart from all earlier examples.

Indeed, looking more closely at Leah's response to the birth of each of her sons, a lesson does emerge. When Leah was pregnant with her first three sons, she asked God to give her children so that her husband would recognize and love her. When she had her first son she said, “God has seen (*ra'ah*) my affliction,” and she called

him Reuven. She called her second son Shimon, saying, “God has heard (*shama*) that I was unloved.” When she gave birth to her third son Leah said, “This time my husband will become attached (*yilaveh*) to me, because I have borne him three sons.” In these three instances Leah felt thankful to God for giving her these sons, because she believed they would help bring her what she needed, which was attention and love from her husband.

With Yehuda, Leah's perception and expression was different. Upon giving birth to Yehuda, Leah said, “*HaPaam odeh et Hashem*,” “This time I will thank God.” Yehuda felt like a bonus, a gift that was above and beyond what Leah needed to be recognized. Having given birth to four out of Yaakov's twelve sons, Leah was able to experience Yehuda's birth as a gift in itself, as opposed to something she needed to further another goal. It was not a means to an end, but a gift in its own right. This is what true gratitude entails. Being present in the moment, not focused on what is next, able to recognize the miracle of the gift that is before us. The *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeitzei* no. 6, states that because Leah expressed true gratitude, her offspring did as well. Yehuda was praised by his brothers (*Bereishit* 49:8), and David too praised God (*Tehillim* 118:1). Gratitude is a muscle that must be exercised and can be taught. Leah initiated true gratitude, and generations after her carried it forward. Today, so many generations later, we remain “Yehudim.” It is our task and our inheritance to be people of gratitude.

Benefits of gratitude

Looking at the empirical research, as well as our own anecdotal experience, the benefits of gratitude are clear.

Gratitude is linked to positive outcomes in mental health and life satisfaction, even more so than other positive personality traits such as optimism, hope, and compassion. Researchers have found that grateful people are more joyful, optimistic, enthusiastic, and experience more love and happiness than people who are less grateful. This is true not only because gratitude spurs these positive emotions, but also because the experience of gratitude is protective. Feeling grateful acts as a preventive agent against negative emotions such as envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness. As a result, grateful people are better equipped to cope with everyday stressors and are more resilient when faced with trauma.

In reality, the backdrop of pain often provides fertile ground for the emergence of gratitude. Pain is often, hopefully, followed by healing. From suffering grows meaning, when we can recognize the sparks of goodness that still exist even amidst our pain. When we are able to contrast difficult times we have endured in the past with the relief we feel when they are behind us, our overall sense of well-being increases and we are grateful for our present state. Researchers are increasingly attuned to what has been termed “post traumatic growth,” or the psychological benefit some people experience after overcoming a trauma. It seems that for some, gratitude is integral to their process of recovery. These individuals describe themselves post trauma as having a greater sense of well-being than before, valuing each day more, and having a greater

appreciation for their family and friends (Wood, et al. 2010).

It is important to note that gratitude is not meant to deny the pain that one has experienced, or is still enduring. On the contrary, gratitude is an emotional state that is meant to be experienced alongside the pain, not in place of it. In fact, our emotional states are not black and white, or all or nothing. We can hold seemingly contradictory feelings simultaneously, recognizing beauty amid pain and meaning within loss. In the context of gratitude, this may mean acknowledging the pain that one is experiencing while affirming the glimmers of goodness, the hope of future happiness, that remain. True gratitude is not a Pollyannish state that can only exist when one is blinded to the cruelties of life. Instead, true gratitude is an affirmation of the reality that there are opportunities for thanksgiving even in the wake of heartbreak.

What is key is that gratitude is not dependent on one’s particular life circumstances. They need not be “good” by any objective measure. Gratitude can be cultivated in any life, when we train ourselves to seek it. Of course, this is challenging work. And herein lies what Emmons refers to as the “paradox of gratitude.” While the evidence is clear that cultivating an attitude of gratitude makes us happier and healthier, doing so can feel like a difficult and even tedious process.

How to Grow Gratitude

The first step in cultivating an attitude of gratitude is to train ourselves to notice and attend to the good things in our lives that we would otherwise tend to take for granted. These can

be as “ordinary” as a job we love, friends in our lives, or a clean bill of health. Though of course these things and others like them are far from ordinary for some, those of us who are lucky enough to enjoy the mundane pleasures of life can fall into the habit of not seeing them for what they are — true gifts. Intentionally focusing on such things not only increases our experience of gratefulness, it serves the dual function of impeding thoughts that are antithetical to gratitude, such as entitlement or bitterness.

How, then, do we focus our thoughts in this way? Research has shown that writing thoughts down has greater impact than simply thinking them. Doing this in a systematic way produces even more consistent and longer lasting rewards.

In research studies on gratitude, participants are randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group is asked to keep written gratitude journals, while the other is told to complete a similar but neutral task. Time and again studies have found that participants who keep gratitude journals benefit from a wide range of positive outcomes. To name a few, the journaling participants have been shown to exercise more frequently, get more sleep, report fewer physical ailments, express more optimism about the future, and feel more positive about their lives as a whole (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). The task of journaling forces us out of our narrow focus, which often is consumed with what we do not yet have and what we need. Seeking gratitude necessitates turning outward, and searching for the good.

When a similar study was done with young adults, the findings

were similarly encouraging. The young adults who kept gratitude journals reported greater enthusiasm, determination, and energy as compared to those who were not assigned the gratitude journaling task. Furthermore, researchers identified an interpersonal benefit to the gratitude exercise. Participants who journaled their gratitude daily were more likely to have helped a friend with a problem or provided someone else emotional support than the non-journaling group (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). This is a prime example of gratitude motivating us to turn outward, to spread the benefit of our good feelings to those around us.

It is interesting to note that these benefits were not only identified by self-report, as is often a limitation in such research. In the study of gratitude, researchers have found that family and friends of those who practice gratitude regularly note that they are happier, more helpful, and more pleasant to be around than control group participants. (McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang, 2002)

In another study, participants were instructed to go on a “gratitude visit,” on which they wrote a letter to someone who had given them a meaningful gift and then read that letter of thanks aloud to the benefactor in person. Individuals who went on the gratitude visit reported more happiness and less depression than members of a comparison control group (Wood, et al. 2010). Here, the interpersonal component to the experience of gratitude is clear. Not only did these participants affirm that they had been given a gift, they recognized that it was the work of another person who was deserving of

their thanks. While no further data was reported from the study, one wonders if these participants were more likely than others to want to “pay it forward,” extending the benefits that they had been given to others.

When attempting any gratitude-building intervention, stimulating gratitude in the short term is not the same as transforming oneself into a person who feels grateful on a consistent basis. While situational or occasional gratitude no doubt has its benefits, developing an innate predisposition to see opportunities for gratitude everywhere is transformational, with more far-reaching effects.

If the central obligation of Chanukah is Hallel and *hodaah*, and lighting the Chanukah candles is one behavioral conduit for this expression, we must wonder, what it is about the lighting of the candles that helps us discharge this obligation? At a basic level, lighting candles and watching them burn over the eight days of Chanukah is a physical reminder of the oil that miraculously burned for eight days when there should have only been enough for one. And perhaps this alone is sufficient to trigger our desire to praise God, and our gratitude toward Him. Indeed, the burning of the oil for eight days was a benefit above and beyond what we would have expected or felt entitled to, based upon the observation that there was only enough oil left for one day. I would like to suggest that there is another lesson to be found in the way that we light the menorah today. The element of *pirsumei nissa*, publicizing the miracle, is key to the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles. Unlike other areas of observance that take place in the confines of our own

homes, to be viewed by only ourselves or our families, on Chanukah we turn the candles outward. When we light our candles, we are reminded of the miracle that allowed for our victory in the days of Chanukah, as well as our very existence today. And then with that gratitude, we turn outward. We strive to achieve the truest form of Hallel and *hodaah*; one that propels us to connect with others and spread goodness to those around us. May this Chanukah be one of abundant blessings, and may the gratitude they inspire spread some light out into the world.

Citations

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